

9.4 Graduate employability: a lost generation?

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Graduate Employability in the Middle East and North Africa: Post-Arab Spring



MENA Graduate Employability Research – A ‘qualitative snapshot’

Aim: To listen to the stakeholder groups most affected by graduate employability issues: **(i) students, (ii) institutions, (iii) employers**

- Research done in: **Morocco, Tunisia, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia and the UAE**

- **Timing:** immediately following a time of social and political change; an unknown landscape around education and how best to address graduate employability in MENA



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Participants

- **The ‘youth voice’** – 24 focus groups (185 final year students and recent graduates)
- **Employers** – 17 in-depth interviews with representatives from business and industry
- **Institutions** – 19 in-depth interviews in 9 universities and 9 vocational institutions
- **Desk research** to contextualise the field work and provide a framework; comprehensive overview of international and regional literature on employability
- **Employability:** *‘A set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen profession, to the benefit of the workforce, the community and the economy.’*

What did Students and Employers tell us?

Students: were (unsurprisingly) very worried about their prospects of being employed. They often discussed the issue daily.

Students believed that the main cause for unemployment is that what they are being taught is *not in line with the labour market and does not equip them for the workplace.*

Employers: new graduates lack the theory *and* the practice of their discipline; also lack confidence

Employers: value a positive attitude, soft-skills, inter-personal skills. Find gaps in language, communication, problem-solving and the soft and self-management skills.



What is the situation in institutions?

Although governments state the importance of developing a knowledge-based economy, formal employability policies in MENA institutions seem to be largely absent.

Challenges include:

- Resistance from faculty members
- Competing priorities
- Capacity issues – including funding and human resources
- Cultural and structural barriers
- A lack of institutional autonomy
- Employability – the responsibility of the careers office; not a key strategy .



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Employer engagement across MENA

- Employers (and students) believe it is the *responsibility of the formal education system* to develop student's employability skills
- There are significant differences in the levels of employer engagement across the region
- Employers: want to work with students and institutions more. They would welcome greater representation and the opportunity to share their needs with the education community.
- Agreement on the need to develop a more industry-focussed education system.



Less theory, more practice

- The rote-learning style generally practised across the region, does not effectively facilitate skills-development
- Regionally, few examples of soft-skills being developed either through or alongside the curriculum
- Students and employers see great value in work placements as a way to develop technical and employability skills; and confidence
- Work placements - more common in the Gulf than in N. Africa; more likely in vocational than in higher education. Not always well practiced
- Better career-development learning should support career goals and provide information about market prospects of study options
- Extensive reforms and the re-training of teachers will be needed to introduce a more skills-based curriculum.

Key success factors

1. Support from senior management
2. A push for innovative practice that engages all sectors: requires creativity, strategic thinking and careful management
3. A shared institutional culture – a sense of shared responsibility and collaboration - that promotes the development of student's employability skills
4. Dedicated posts to engage with employability
 - *Active student representation*
 - *Government and policy support*
 - *Significant engagement with; and the involvement of employers*
 - *Initiatives to bridge gender inequalities and develop the skills of women*

In the words of Dr Ahmed Mohamed Ali –
President of the Islamic Development Bank:

***“We must act jointly, we must act now. The
future of the region depends on it.”***



A lot can be done *independently* to develop the skills to prepare young people for the workplace (we don't need to wait!)