

GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY AND EDUCATIONAL SECTOR IN GCC COUNTRIES: A MACRO LEVEL STUDY

Reji D. Nair

Faculty Member, Department of Business, Higher College of Technology,
Women's College, Al Ain, UAE

rejidnair2000@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Present paper discusses the employability of graduates in GCC countries and the role of various stakeholders in promoting skills development. Paper states that lack of alignment between government economic policies, private sector industry and the educational institutions is the reason behind worsening of employability. Paper remind that youth unemployment is the fundamental seed of Arab Spring and accordingly it highlight the relevance of this issue in the present context. Paper emphasize that smooth school to work transition requires equipping young graduates for the workplace before they become job seekers. Employability of youth concerns an array of stakeholders including the public and private sector, educational institutions, government and other companies. Paper conclude that GCC governments are required to create and environment wherein the skills and attributes of graduates match the requirements in labor market so that ambition of youth matches the vision of the economic diversification plans.

Keywords: Employability, GCC countries, Job-search, School to work transition, Skill development, Work experience

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions worldwide are working hard to prepare youth for the workplace amidst a dynamic and challenging environment with high technology, global economy and social diversity. Students leaving education are required to achieve career readiness skills, including academic, technical and social skills. Graduate employability means that graduates have developed the capacity to get work through their knowledge and skills that are acquired with the support of employers and institutions (Knight and Yorke, 2004). However, employers are struggling to find the suitable candidates having the right skills they need at the entry level in the job market. At the same time, fresh graduates from schools and colleges are equally unclear about the skills required for their entry into the labor market to build up a career. Even education institutions and teachers are unsure about the requirements of graduate success in the labor market.

The oil meltdown has started affecting hiring activity in GCC countries in recent times. A good number of companies are restructuring the operations or outsourcing to reduce cost and the governments are taking severe measures to promote nationalization. Continued efforts of GCC governments to diversify the economy has created the necessity for abundant skill formation among the youth. Accordingly, the governments have acknowledged the relevance

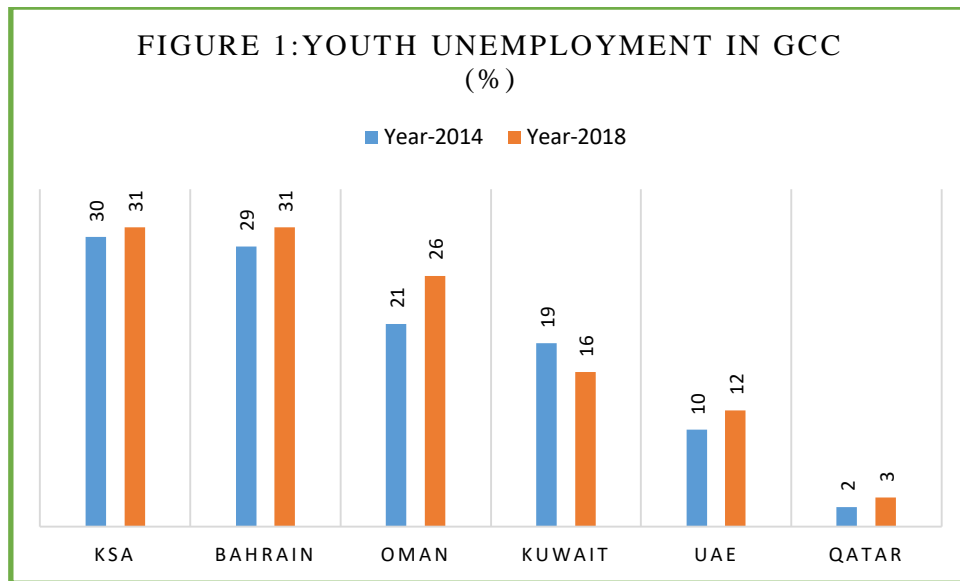
of skill development among youth in recent years. Employability of youth is a challenge in the 21st century labor market and international experts and organizations such as ILO have advised policy makers in the region to take necessary measures (Evers, et.al, 1998). As a result, GCC governments are investing heavily in education and skill development in schools, colleges and universities.

Present paper review the employability of graduates in GCC countries and the role of various stakeholders in promoting skills development. The main objective of the paper is to identify major factors affecting employability of youth in the labor market in GCC countries. Published reports and online resources are used as source of secondary data used in the paper. Paper consists of seven sections including introduction and conclusion. Section two discusses the status of youth employability in GCC countries and the required strategies for sustainable development. Major drivers of change are reviewed in Section three and the overall GCC education scenario in Section four. Status of skill development in GCC is briefed in Section five; and required school to work transition strategies in GCC is explained in Section six. It includes aligning curricula with employers' needs, provision for suitable work experience and training, need for job search, and the relevance of a culture of employment, innovation and entrepreneurship.

YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY

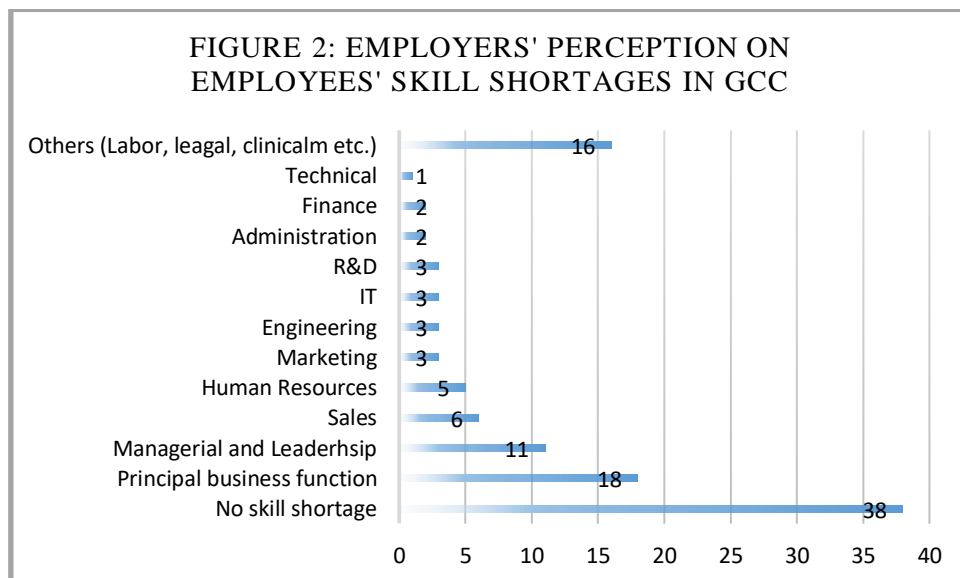
Employability of graduates in the past was comparatively less of an issue as the governments in GCC countries acted as employer of first and last resort options (Mellahi, 2007). However, things have changed in recent years due to several factors and one of the most important is oil market meltdown. The prime goal of GCC governments in recent years is economic diversification due to grim situation in international oil market. As shown in Appendix Figure: 1, GDP growth in 2016 has slowed down in almost all GCC countries. In Saudi Arabia, the GDP growth fell from 3.6% in 2014 to 1.1% in 2016. The corresponding figures in UAE are 4.6% and 2.1% respectively. Education is seen as inadequate in producing employable graduates and the graduates even lack the required soft skills. Studies show that there is a significant positive correlation of youth employability in GCC countries with compensation, education and training, and negative correlation with lack of motivation (Emirates Foundation, 2012).

Policy makers and governments in GCC countries are developing suitable strategies and goals through perspective plans, vision documents, alternative economic plans and so on. All these initiatives target a sustainable development plan where in private sector is strengthened to take up the growth momentum with the support of public sector infrastructure support. One of the primary aims of this economic diversification is generation of sufficient jobs for the growing population in GCC countries, especially for the nationals. International Labor Organization warned countries the challenges of emerging labor market typifying high youth unemployment rates along with lack of required skills among graduates. Among the GCC countries, youth unemployment was highest in Saudi Arabia at 30%, whereas in UAE it was only 10% in 2014 but is on increase. The policy makers foresee a bright future in the private sector to tackle youth unemployment among nationals. Presently expatriates from around the world fill up a good proportion of skilled jobs in the private sector and it warrant the relevance of skill formation and development among youth in the GCC countries.



Source: EY (2015)

When national youth do not have the required skills required in the private sector labor market, expatriate employees will occupy such jobs and continues to be the attractive option for private sector employers. As shown in Figure: 2, 62% of employees in GCC lack skill in different areas of the work-life. Skills shortage range from principal business operations to management, and technical to administration. Governments in GCC countries realize the importance of maintaining competitiveness in the labor market and it needs large-scale investment in education and training (Fasano, U, et. Al, 2004). Sustainable development of national labor force in the region needs innovative skill development among youth at the supply side and correspondingly rewarding careers at the demand side.



Source: HAYS (2015)

In the globalized world as knowledge economies demand advanced competencies the skills gap will accentuate youth unemployment. Joint effort of governments, policy makers,

investors, business, educators, employers and youth themselves is critical in this regard. The major issue in the region is lack of alignment between economic policies, industry and the educational institutions, which resulted in worsening of employability issues (DIAC, 2012). Sustainable growth of the region requires an integrated approach as shown in Figure 3.

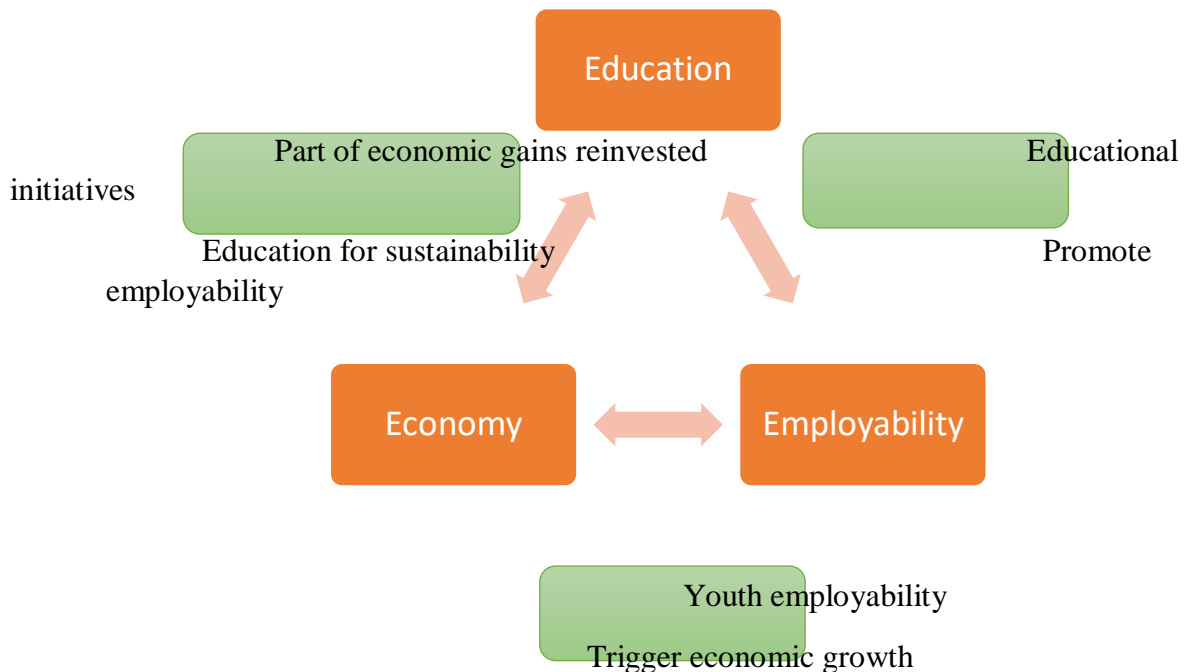
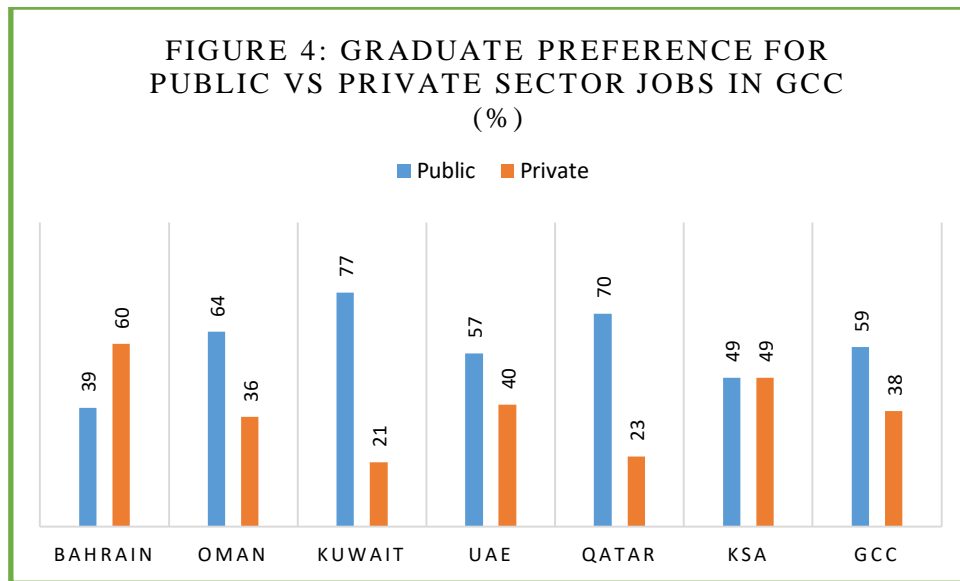


FIGURE 3. EDUCATION STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The school to work transition in GCC countries is not smooth even after the economic boom of the last four decades. Major obstacle in this transition is the qualitative mismatch between the requirements in the labor market, both supply and demand. Interventions are required from all stakeholders to ensure youth employability through sufficient educational investment, equipping graduates for employment, and creating public awareness about opportunities and requirements in the labor market (Hinchliffe, et. al, 2011). The economic diversification initiatives should address skill development of youth to meet the needs of employers, with the involvement at all levels of the education system.

DRIVERS OF CHANGE

One of the common features of economic diversification models developed by GCC countries to face falling oil prices is strengthening of the private sector. To commensurate this strategy, it is mandatory for GCC countries to get more nationals working in the private sector. High-paying government jobs is no longer sustainable as the government budgets are strained, and even the expats dominated private sector is no longer sustainable. Studies show that in countries such as UAE and Qatar only one percent of the private sector workforce is made up of nationals, whereas these figures are as high as 18% in Saudi Arabia (Grant, et.al, 2007). The growing population and emerging demographic transition warrant growing number of jobs to be created for the nationals in the private sector.



Source: EY (2015)

The prevailing government incentives in social and financial front in GCC countries to get secure and well-paying public sector jobs have hampered the enthusiasm and motivation of nationals for further upgradation of skills. Studies shows that GCC youth in general show an overwhelming preference for public sector jobs. As shown in Figure: 4, graduate preferences for public sector jobs is as high as 77% in Kuwait to a low of 39% in Bahrain. Bahrain is the only GCC country, where the youth prefer private sector as their preferred job (60%). In GCC as a whole, 59% of youth prefer public sector jobs.

The IMF study shows that by 2018, 1.6 million nationals could enter the labor market in GCC countries, but the private sector jobs generated will be 600,000 jobs, with a lower share of nationals in the private sector (EY, 2015). It is important to recall that youth unemployment is the fundamental seed of Arab Spring and related political and economic unrest in the region.

As part of economic diversification packages, GCC governments already enforced measures to reorient young nationals toward private sector employment such as quota-driven nationalization initiatives (Nitaqat in Saudi Arabia) and strategic investment in the education-to-employment ecosystem. The priority is on smooth school to work transition by equipping young graduates for the workplace before they become job seekers (Morris, 2015). Proper alignment between education and employers' needs is the focus of this strategy.

GCC employers such as private sector business and industries have to play the role of job enablers in this regard by providing opportunities for national youth rather than job creators for expats. The challenge of skills gap is a global phenomenon; and there are best practices to combat it available in many countries that GCC countries can adapt. These best practices are designed to ensure constructive private sector involvement in education systems and thereby smoothening the school to work transition of youth. Along with the government, both public and private sector employers need to play a significant role in constructing the knowledge and skills of future workforce it needs by defining and supporting the education system, including delivery of training.

GCC EDUCATION SCENARIO

It is scientifically proved that performance in education is an important stimulus to economic growth as it trigger competitiveness in production and service sectors. Studies in OECD countries show that 50% of the economic growth in developed countries is contributed through higher education standards and resultant improvement in skill formation (EY, 2015). Empirical studies also proved higher positive correlation between higher performance of students in science and mathematics and annual per capita GDP growth rate.

As discussed earlier, it is a positive sign that GCC governments invest heavily in the education sector; reports shows a further US\$24 billion by 2017 (Morris, 2015). Saudi Arabia is the leader in this front with a human capital investment matching quarter of total government spending, one of the highest in the world. The initiatives of GCC countries in this regard will definitely improve the preparedness to compete in the knowledge economy. As a result, number of education institutions including those at the higher education sector has increased and student enrollment doubled. Development of infrastructure, private sector participation and improved accreditation and regulations have helped to improve the quality and education standards in the region (Harry, 2007).

However, studies show that higher education spending in the region does not match with the graduate performance levels. GCC students' performance in general in mathematics, science and reading are comparatively weaker as exemplified by the comparative studies such as the Program for International Student Assessments (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (Gulf Talent, 2016).

GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have invested heavily in education infrastructure and now it is the time to focus more on improving teaching methodologies through training the teachers and improved students' skill formation by ensuring work experience. Other GCC countries do need to invest more in education, as the present share of spending is comparatively lower.

STATUS OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Even though education is important, how societies priorities it does matter and the prioritization vary from country to country. Human capital is an investment for future and returns usually flow sometime after decades (Zinser, 2003). How countries use their budgetary resources, either for immediate consumption or for future consumption makes big difference in its long-term growth. This has lot of relevance in GCC countries where population growth is high and the emerging working age population is much younger. The prioritization of education sector is reflected in wide spectrum of fields ranging from budgetary allocation for education infrastructure to the payment for teachers compared to other careers (Ludden, 1998). Whether the parents will mold their children to become teachers or the perception of media on education as a career for the youth, and all have its consequences.

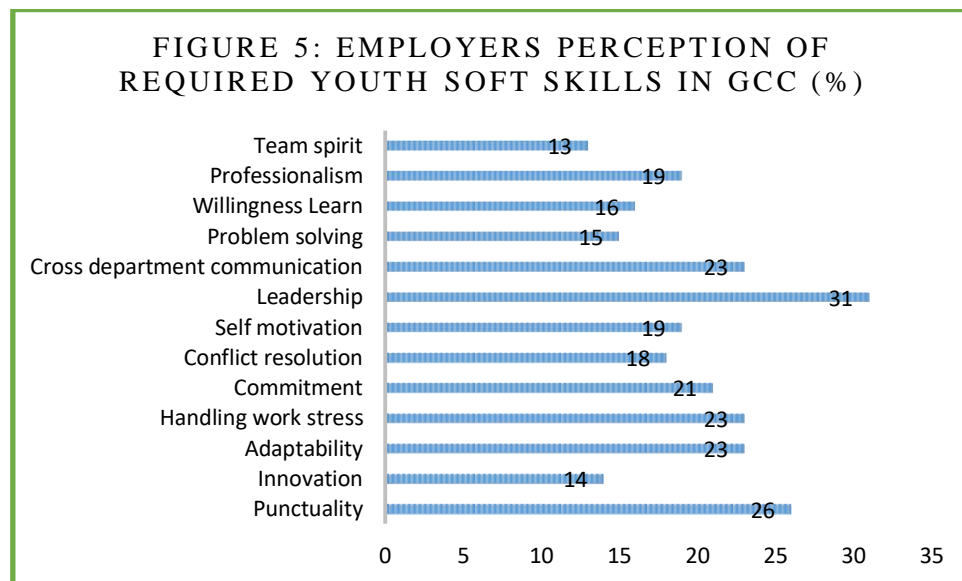
Human resource managers these days seek the soft skills such as strong interpersonal/communication attributes, strategic thinking, and leadership abilities from young talents than technical skills. Employers in the region usually have the opinion that educational institutions does to equip the graduates with the necessary skills warranted in the modern workplace

mainly due to poor work placement facilities (Morris, 2015). As shown in Figure: 5, employers' perception on required soft skills for youth including leadership, communication, stress management, adaptability, etc. Employers' view on new recruit in the region revolve around the following two attributes.

- i. Candidates with global outlook with a perception on global business.
- ii. Understanding of the local business environment including cultural soft skills.

Social context of self-motivation and the nature of hard work also reflect in the attitude of youth in their studies and career plan.

Learning process is the product of curriculum, teaching and course delivery, adoption of technology, motivation of students, and so on (State of Michigan, 1989). Selection, retention and training of teachers play a vital role in the upgradation of learning process. Studies show that in western countries the educational systems pay great attention to the training of their staff to make innovations in pedagogy and to pursue professional development that leads to stronger educational practice. Top school systems around the world recognize the importance of ordinary students having extraordinary talents and they pursue a personalized educational path with higher standards (Michigan Department of Education, 1998). These institutions maintain set standards and quality across the entire spectrum of action so that students benefit from the learning process. Studies in GCC show that key influences for career preferences and decisions are mainly family and friends, but sources of career advice include counselors and teachers along with family members (DIAC, 2012).



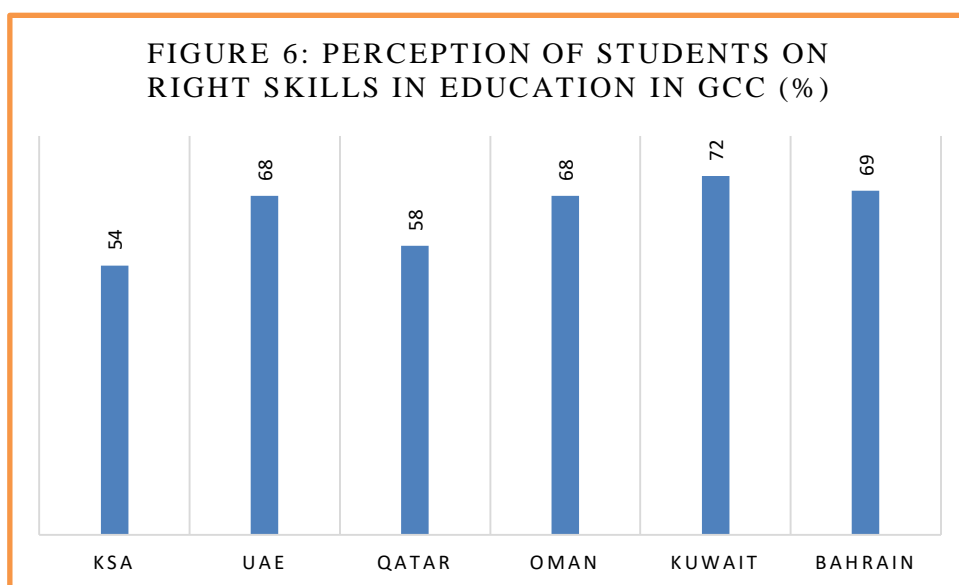
Source: EY (2015)

SCHOOL TO WORK TRANSITION STRATEGY

Universally accepted framework for career and employability skills comprises three broad areas of required skills including academic, personal management and teamwork skills. The ten content standards of smooth school to work transition model for education are the following (Michigan State, 1989).

- i. Applied Academic Skills: Apply Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and communication skills in work related situations.
- ii. Career Planning: Identify and to pursue career goals by acquire, organize, interpret, and evaluate information from career awareness and exploration activities, career assessment, and work based experiences.
- iii. Presentation of information: Combine ideas in new ways and present them in formats such as symbols, pictures, schematics, charts, and graphs.
- iv. Solving Problems: Solve problems through linking goals, identifying resources and by generating alternatives and evaluating results.
- v. Personal management: Demonstrating personal qualities such as self-respect and management, responsibility and ethical behaviors.
- vi. Organizational skills: Efficient and effective use of resources through organizing and planning.
- vii. Teamwork: Work cooperatively with people of diverse background and abilities and contribute to a group process with ideas and suggestions.
- viii. Negotiation skills: Communicating ideas to negotiate and resolve divergent interests.
- ix. Understanding systems: Understand complex systems and work smoothly with diverse technologies.
- x. Using employability skills: Prepare for obtaining, maintaining, advancing, and changing employment.

Employability of youth concerns an array of stakeholders including the public and private sector, educational institutions, government and other companies. Several studies in the region reported that there is a fundamental misalignment between the expectations of employers and that of youth job seekers in the labor market (Zinser, 2003). As given in Figure: 6, 72% of students in Kuwait feel that they could acquire necessary skills for employment. But, these figures are as low as 54% in Saudi Arabia and 58% in Qatar. Early exposure of students to reality of job market through internships and work placement will help them later to adapt to the work environment.



Source: EY (2015)

Private business and companies are able to tap significant benefits while employing young nationals due to the local knowledge, connections and networking opportunities.

However, the youth entering the job market lack the required skills and attitude that would enable them to build fruitful careers in the private sector (Fallows, et.al, 2000). One of the biggest challenge the private companies face in GCC countries is the high salary expectations of young nationals that they receive in the public sector. Studies show that 70% of GCC private sector employers report that young nationals are mostly tempted away by the attractive public sector salaries and remuneration (Hays, 2015). The retention of young nationals is thus a big challenge in GCC countries. Studies further show that lack of work experience and behavioral factors are important issues in the retention of youth, especially in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Behavioral factors include communication skills, discipline, commitment and attitudes toward employment. Even the youth career progression is hampered by shortage of technical training.

Many studies in the region show that salary income, job security, job location and work-life balance are the important elements that influence youth career choice. Studies proved that 30% of GCC graduates placed salary at the top of the preference list followed by job security (Hays, 2015).

Concerted efforts from all stakeholders including governments, educational institutions, private business and industries, students, media and society are largely required to solve issues related to school-to-work transition in GCC countries. It need a strategy having four attributes as shown in Figure: 7. These strategies are targeted to solve not only the skills gap but also for the smooth economic diversification.

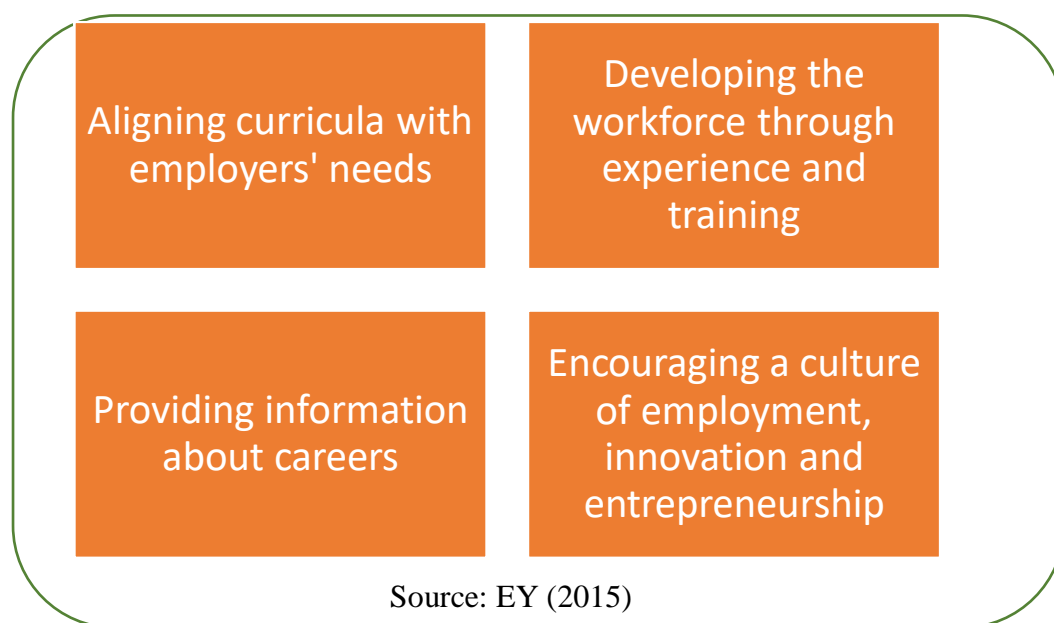


FIGURE 7: EMPLOYABILITY ATTRIBUTES

Aligning curricula with employers' needs

Alignment of curriculum with the employers' requirement is an ultimate method to stimulate employability of graduates. Studies reveal that only 29% of employers reported that the education system in GCC prepares graduates with the right job skills (Morris, 2015). As

discussed earlier the only solution to deal this scenario is to involve private business and industries in the curriculum development of schools, colleges and universities so that specific requirements of industries are addressed in developing workforce of tomorrow.

Even after tremendous improvements in curricular content of GCC educational institutions there are still scope for further improvements especially in technical learning and attitude of youth towards work life. Studies show that only 16% of private sector employers believe that existing curricula in educational institutions meet their skill requirements; with the lowest levels of satisfaction in Oman and Qatar, whereas in UAE it is far better (EY, 2015). The hurdles of smooth school-to-work transition in the region is reflected in the attitude of students and in their poor confidence levels.

The economic diversification models that GCC countries are working on these days target private sector intensive growth strategies. Unless educationists in GCC countries address the graduate employability issue properly the demand-supply skill requirements gap will widen further. Evidences show that only 6% of employers in GCC countries feel that currently they are in liaison with educational institutions in developing curricula. Around 16% of employers feel that the required skills for their job requirements are taught at educational institutions in GCC countries and it demonstrates the relevance of employer involvement in vocational training (Gulf Talent, 2016b). Vocational education provides immense scope for employers' involvement in education including practical and content taught.

Strategic partnership and collaboration are required between industry and educational institutions to fill the gap between demand and supply of skills in the labor market. Offering of industry specific courses, improvement of standard of teaching and learning, and graduate career guidance are all part of the program (Gow, et.al, 2000). It will facilitate mutual win-win situation for both employers and graduate job seekers. In GCC countries, such collaboration is not common, but such partnerships exist in big companies such as Saudi Aramco, Abu Dhabi Mubadala and so on, wherein a top-down approach is followed and program are tailored to the requirements of the industry. A bottom up approach is also viable in GCC countries to meet the requirements of smaller companies. There are well-documented examples wherein companies used to reach out to colleges and universities by providing intellectual resources and work experience to the potential graduates (Packer and Brainard, 2000). For instance, Canadian rare metals developer Avalon has invested considerable time to build relationships with educational institutions, students and teachers to shape and attract talented graduates.

As part of promoting reputation and recognition, colleges and universities even seek the support of potential employers in designing curricula. International recognition and ranking of a university is determined by many factors and one of the important element is graduate employability. Young people usually prefer those educational institutions for their studies, where the graduate employability are higher (Holmes, 2013). Birmingham City University in UK began employer engagement in 2008 with the aim of enhancing students' employability. Job placements, internships and student mentoring were all part of the strategy. The Learning Experience Project, called as RoLEX, invited employers to involve in developing the curriculum in partnership with external examiners and senior academics (EY, 2015). They are allowed to involve in content delivery and even in students' assessment. The long-term relationship the university has forged with employers helped largely in student placements, internships and graduate employment.

The graduate employability strategies of higher learning institutions can be summarized as in Table: 1, which are classified under four categories including provision for student work

experience, realignment of curriculum, and engagement of employers and graduate alumni in the learning process.

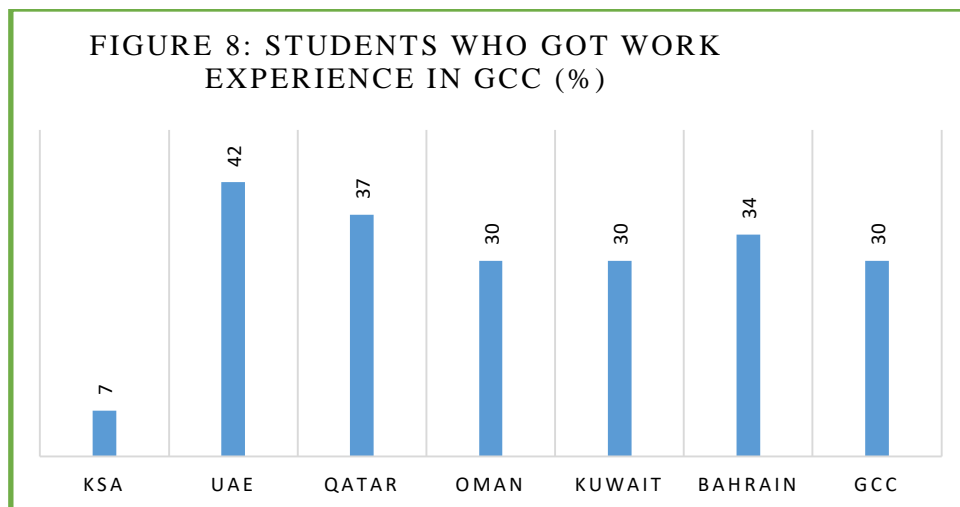
Table 1. Graduate Employability Strategies for Higher Educational Institutions

Strategy	Approach
1. Provision for student work experience	1.1 Ensure sufficient opportunity for students' work placements, internships and work experiences. 1.2 Explicit training of students for employability
2. Realignment of curriculum	2.1 Public awareness of each disciplines' career options and explicit career pathways 3.1 Articulate the relevant graduate employability skills in the learning outcomes of every course
3. Engagement of Employers	3.2 Design assessment activities aligned with real industry practices and standards 4.1 Make the learning experiences in knowledge, skills and attributes
4. Graduate Alumni engagement	4.2 Invite employers as guest speakers and panelists 4.3 Review of curriculum and assessment with employers 4.4 Use of employer linked case studies in learning 4.5 Sharing of alumni experience directly to the students

Source: Bond University (2015)

Work Experience and Training

One of the basic requisites for the smooth functioning of School to work transition is workplace experience. Along with hands on training, work experience will promote graduate's interest in career development, and inculcate professional attitudes and soft skills (Hollenbeck, 1994). However, studies show that only a quarter of employers in the GCC countries are providing internship programs to students. Around 42% of students in UAE are reported to agree that they got work experience, whereas in Saudi Arabia the corresponding figure was only 7% (See Figure 8).

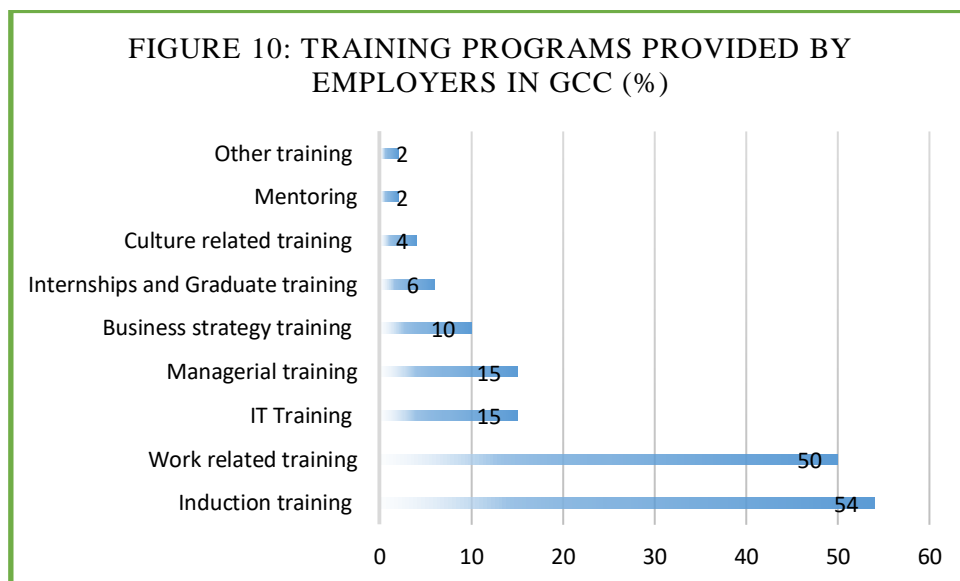


Source: EY (2015)

Industry warranted work experience, including internships, vocational training and apprenticeships, are basic requisite for graduate employability. Exposure of private sector work experience provide extra mileage to youth in their attitude and behavior in addition to developing technical and knowledge skills (Lynch, 2000). Some of these include punctuality, innovation, adaptability, stress and time management, and so on. Unfortunately, youth are not exposed to these important soft skills as the existing curriculum and teaching methods do not encourage it as requisites.

The profile, demand and expectations of employees change in the new millennium. Youth entering the job market are anticipate facing complex challenges that all requires above-mentioned soft skills. To compete in the regional and global job market, GCC students should develop these soft skills and equip themselves. It needs urgent interference from all stakeholders in the region to identify the gap in the existing teaching-learning methods by analyzing the requirements.

Vocational training is an ideal option for youth employability and is practiced successfully in many countries such as in Switzerland. Vocational education and training will lay foundation for employability by preparing the students through theoretical and practical exposure (Lynch, 2000). It can reduce youth unemployment and at least by reducing school to work transition period. As given in Figure: 9, employability training acquired by students in UAE ranged from 49% for presentation skills to 19% for interview preparation. Initiatives are required to engage private sector employers across multiple sectors by providing meaningful work experience.



Source: EY (2015)

Maintenance of human resources development requires continuous investment in skill formation and development. If workforce are to remain competitive, companies need to develop their workforce continuously through structured training and professional development. Studies show that 20% of GCC companies does not offer any training to new hires, and only 6% have graduate training programs. Figure: 10 provides a detailed account of training programs provided by employees in GCC. More than 50% of companies provided induction and work related training; but most of the companies neglected areas of skill development.

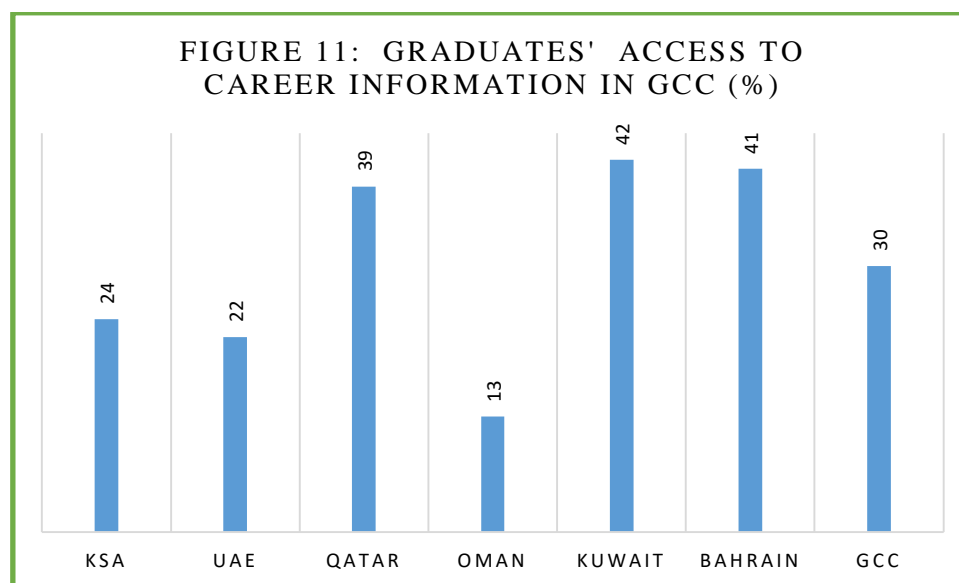
The opportunity of creating corporate university in-house training has immense scope in this regard in GCC countries (Toledo, 2006). It will enable large corporate houses to adapt the company-wide program to local needs and helps employees to gain transferable skills.

Multinational companies based in GCC region are running career development programs for their new recruits. However, most of the local companies are incapable of offering such career development programs, as they are family oriented companies grown from small businesses. Such companies can focus on offering apprenticeships through industry-specific training.

Job Hunting and Search

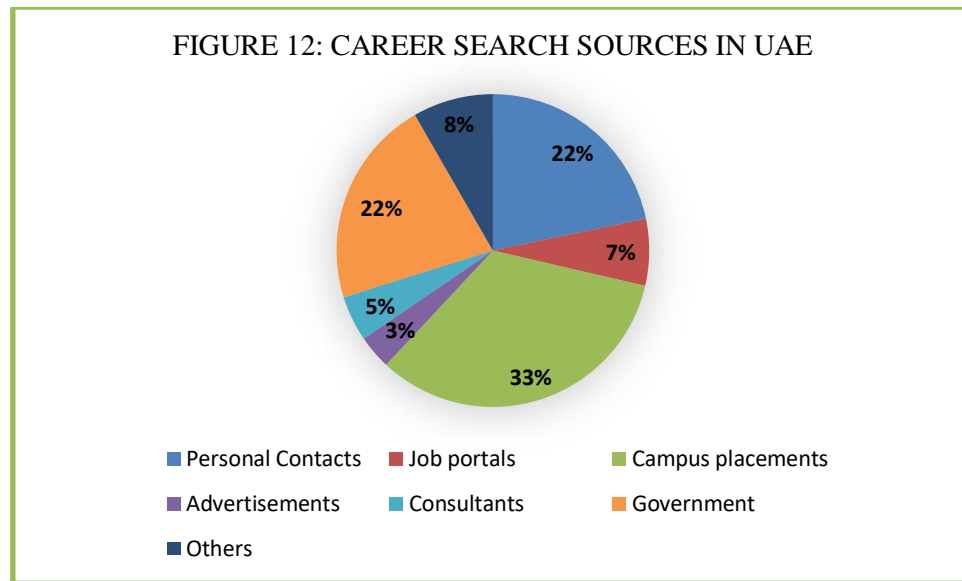
Job hunting and different methods and strategies of job search are as important as skill development. One of the important determinants of employability is knowledge on job openings and application processes. In the world of digital age, online job searching is an important way to promote employability. CareerNet of South Korea is an excellent example in this regard and it provides access to high-quality career information by blending information with virtual support from career coaches¹. In GCC countries, it is vital for all stakeholders to work in close collaboration in this ground, but studies show that less than 30% of students have sufficient knowledge in this regard (See Figure: 11).

Along with online platforms, direct interaction is required at schools and family to promote career guidance for young people. Teachers are the best resource persons in career guidance as they know the strength and weakness of their students and even they can take action towards students' career goals through mentoring. As shown in Figure: 12, 33% of job seekers in UAE depends on campus placements followed by personal contacts (22%) and government services (22%) for job hunting.



Source: EY (2015)

The Graduation Alliance in US is another example in this arena and they provide a number of innovative programs such as online platforms that link a student's skills and values to the educational requirements for many occupations. Interactive, individualized university guides show students how their capability compare with potential applicants.



Source: DIAC (2012)

Encouraging a culture of employment, innovation and entrepreneurship

The success of smooth school to work transition depends on the motivation of youth towards job search whereby it should be developed as a culture. Studies show that 47% of GCC youth think that it is very important to search for a job within one year of leaving schools/ colleges (EY, 2015). These figures will vary, for instance in Bahrain, around 69% are searching for an immediate job whereas in Saudi Arabia it is only 12%. Among the students who search for immediate jobs, their focus is, mainly government jobs where the salary levels are high, and benefits and security are strong.

One of the pre-requisite for a vibrant private sector career promotion is the inculcation of the habit of facing challenges among youth and that really lack in the education front in GCC countries (Holmes, 2013). The most evidenced reflection of this lacuna is observed in the entrepreneurial front among graduates in GCC, excluding Bahrain (where 70% of graduates like to start their own business). Cultural stigma, fear of failure, limited access to funding; poor start-up promotions and all drag the youth involvement in entrepreneurial activities.

Entrepreneurs are not born, but are made and it need cultural support and educational revamping that get graduates testing their ideas and setting up businesses as part of the curriculum. Importance of entrepreneurship and innovation should come from the top to the youth with the support of teachers and family members. Studies show that promotion of entrepreneurial skill is an ideal solution to tackle unemployment among youth. It has twin benefits, as some will start up their own business, whereas entrepreneurial mindset makes youth more engaged by taking challenges in a responsible way (Bond University, 2015).

Supportive ecosystem for pro-entrepreneurial mindset can be developed by promoting Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) in the educational system; because they provide the foundation for innovative business (Gulf Talent, 2016b). There are a number of examples from around the world². In the GCC countries, government funding would enable fair access to this type of model among small and medium-sized companies.

To eradicate the skills gap, GCC governments have started investing heavily in education and research. Mutual alignment of expectations of graduates and companies in the job front requires concerted actions from all stakeholders. Collaboration and innovative efforts of

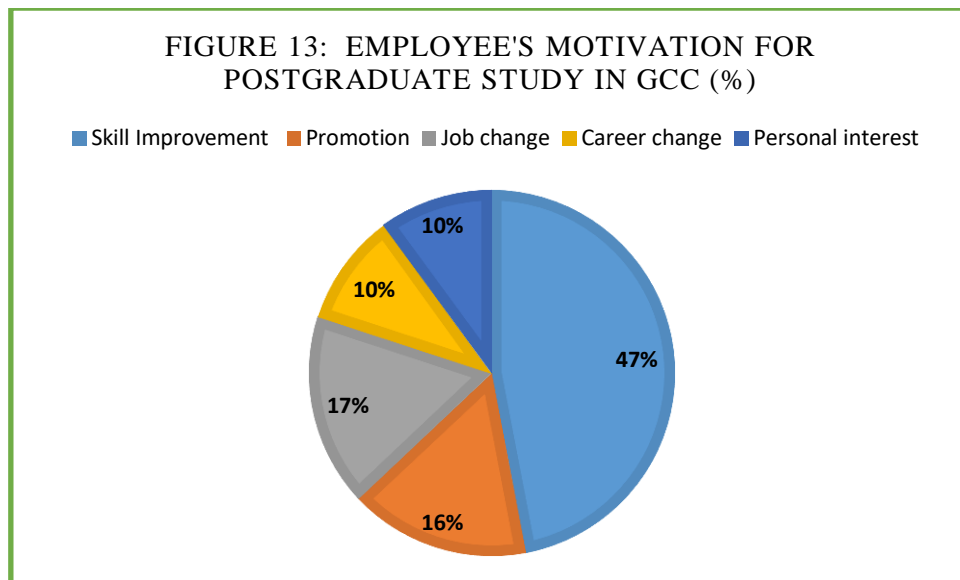
government with the involvement of private sector and educational institutions is the need of the hour in this front.

Postgraduate Study and Skill Improvement

Studies show that employees and executives in GCC are showing interest in postgraduate studies. Oil market slowdown and the resultant reflection in the job market has accelerated this trend among the young professionals in GCC countries. As shown in Figure: 13, 47% of employees' motivation for post graduate studies is skill improvement, where as 17% for job change and another 16% for promotion.

Along with present job, most professionals want to continue their studies in part time and earn a living. However, some of the professionals want to study abroad on fulltime, preferably English speaking western countries. The factors that influenced the country preferences include work opportunities, university's reputation, cost of living, language, maintenance of family contact and travel opportunities.

The challenge of managing time and expenses are the critical factors in postgraduate study plan of the professionals. Accordingly, online courses got popularity in the region due to the flexibility of these programs along with the accreditation by international institutions.



Source: Gulf Talent (2016b)

CONCLUSION

GCC governments are required to create the skills and attributes needed to match the requirements in labor market where in ambition of the youth matches the vision of the economic diversification plans. The GCC countries' vision in this front need special attention at promoting role of the private sector, and encouraging entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized businesses. Realignments are required accordingly to meet the needs and expectations of all stakeholders especially the youth. Concrete initiatives are required from the education institutions in their development of curricula and in the delivery of teaching and learning to ensure that young graduates are equipped and motivated enough to compete in the competitive labor market, especially in the private sector.

In this regard following recommendations are offered:

- 1) Private sector business to be involved in developing school and college curricula and work experience schemes (job training, work placements and internships) to have the required technical and soft skills as well as the attitude for the graduates. Companies should include fresh graduates in their hiring strategy for sustainability in the long run. They should also collaborate with higher educational institutions by offering curriculum advices and visible campus interaction to attract young talents.
- 2) The educational infrastructure are redesigned to fit the emerging job profile by adapting curricula that maintain a balance between practical skills and knowledge with the integration of proper work experience. Innovative teacher training, student curricular and extra-curricular activities, engagement of parents in youth career decisions are all part of the program. Higher education institutions should play a proactive role to students by providing job information, career counselling, exposure to the private sector work life through internships, etc.
- 3) Government should initiate strategies with the involvement of the private sector and academic institutions by ensuring employability of all graduates through apprenticeships and graduate training programs. Promotion of youth entrepreneurship programs are also important in this regard.

NOTES

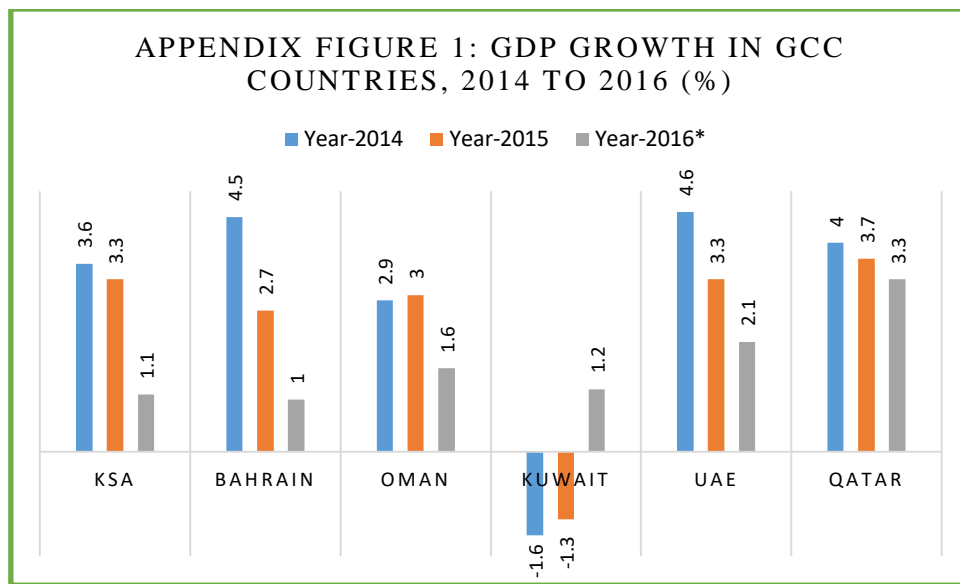
1. Estimates show that more than 60% of all secondary school students in Korea have visited the site. The site offer a vocational aptitude test and then identify a range of possible fields, select a specific occupation, understand the necessary qualifications and, finally, discover relevant opportunities for either training, education or employment.
2. Tribal Planet is the best example that is developing a digital ecosystem-using mobile and tablet technology for all stakeholders that aims to encourage learning in STEM (most demanded by 21st-century employers). Under this partnership, a relationship is built up between students and employers, where students know the required knowledge for the job and thereby simplifying the job matching process (EY, 2015).

REFERENCES

- [1] Bond University. (2015). *Eight ways to enhance your students' graduate employability*. Retrieved from <https://bond.edu.au/files/627/8%20ways%20to%20enhance%20your%20students%20graduate%20employability.pdf>.
- [2] Dubai International Academic City. (2012). *Understanding the workforce of future in UAE: Findings from the Qudurat student survey*. Retrieved from <http://tecomgroup.ae/wp-content/uploads/knowledge-library/DIAC-Understanding-the-Workforce-of-the-Future-in-the-UAE.pdf>.
- [3] Emirates Foundation. (2012). *Factors influencing national graduates' employability in transitional gulf economies*. Dubai: Research and Advocacy Department.
- [4] Evers, F., Rush, J., & Berdrow, I. (1998). *The bases of competencies: Skills for lifelong learning and employability*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- [5] EY. (2015). *How will the GCC close the skills gap*. Retrieved from [http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-gcc-education-report-how-will-the-gcc-close-the-skills-gap/\\$FILE/GCC%20Education%20report%20FINAL%20AU3093.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-gcc-education-report-how-will-the-gcc-close-the-skills-gap/$FILE/GCC%20Education%20report%20FINAL%20AU3093.pdf).
- [6] Fallows, S., & Steven, C. (2000). Building employability skills into the higher education curriculum: A university-wide initiative. *Education Plus Training*, 42 (1).
- [7] Fasano, U., & Goyal, R. (2004). *Emerging strains in GCC labor markets*. Washington, D.C, International Monetary Fund.
- [8] Gow, K., & McDonald, P. (2000). Attributes required for Graduates for the Future Workplace. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 52 (3).
- [9] Grant, J. (2007). The UAE: Twenty first century beckons. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, 49.
- [10] Gulf Talent. (2016a). *Employment trends and salary trends in the Gulf*. Retrieved from [file:///C:/Users/rnair/Downloads/Employment%20and%20Salary%20Trends%20in%20the%20Gulf%202016%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/rnair/Downloads/Employment%20and%20Salary%20Trends%20in%20the%20Gulf%202016%20(1).pdf).
- [11] Gulf Talent. (2016b). *Job slowdown drives up demand for postgraduate study*. Retrieved from <https://www.gulftalent.com/resources/employment-news/jobs-slowdown-drives-up-demand-for-postgraduate-study-65>.
- [12] Harry, W. (2007). Employment creation and localization: The crucial human resources issues for the GCC. *International Journal of Human Resources Management*, 18.
- [13] Hays. (2015). *Salary and employment report 2015*. Retrieved from http://www.hays.ae/cs/groups/hays_common/@ae/@content/documents/digitalasset/hays_1313021.pdf.
- [14] Hinchliffe, G.W., & Jolly, A. (2011). Graduate identity and employability. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37 (4).

- [15] Hollenbeck, K. (1994). *The workplace knowhow skills needed to be productive*. USA: Upjohn Institute of Employment Research.
- [16] Holmes, L. (2013). Competing perspectives on graduate employability: Possession, position or process? *Studies in Higher Education*, 38 (4).
- [17] Knight, P., & Yorke, M. (2004). *Learning, curriculum and employability in higher education*, London: Routledge.
- [18] Ludden, L. (1998). *Job savvy: How to be a success at work*. Indianapolis: JIST Publishing.
- [19] Lynch, R. (2000). *New directions for high school career and technical education in the 21st century*. USA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education.
- [20] Mellahi, K. (2007). The effect of regulation on HRM: Private sector firms in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Human Resources Management*, 18 (1).
- [21] Michigan Department of Education. (1998). *Career and employability skills: Content standards and benchmarks*. Lansing: Michigan Department of Education.
- [22] Morris, M. (2015). *The graduate and the GCC: Business education report*. Retrieved from Gulfbusiness.com.
- [23] Packer, A., & Brainard, S. (2000). *Teaching workplace competencies*. Alexandria: Association for Career and Technical Education.
- [24] State of Michigan. (1989). *Employability skills taskforce progress report*. Lansing: State of Michigan.
- [25] Toledo, H. (2006). *The problems and prospects of emiratization: Immigration in an imperfect labor market*. Dubai: Dubai Economic Research Awards.
- [26] Zinser, R. (2003). Developing career and employability skills: A US case study. *Education and Training*, 45.

APPENDIX



Source: Gulf Talent (2016a)

Appendix Table : Youth Employability Initiatives and Stakeholders

Stakeholders	Initiatives
1. Students	1.1 Participate in work experience, placements and internships 1.2 Involve in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities (clubs, societies, sporting, etc.) 1.3 Maintenance of contact with the career development center
2. Graduates	2.1 Continuous pledging of the application to prospective employers. 2.2 Articulate personal employability brand 2.3 Careful proof reading and editing of application forms 2.4 Attendance in industry graduate initiatives
3. Higher Education Institutions	3.1 Provision for students' work experience, placements and internships 3.2 Articulation of the graduate employability skills 3.3 Realignment of assessment activities with work-related industry practices and standards 3.4 Be explicit about career pathways in each discipline
4. Employers	4.1 Offer student work placements and internships 4.2 Maintain transparent relationship with local higher educational institutions. 4.3 Provisions for facilitating smooth school to work transition of youth. 4.4 Provision for innovation and entrepreneurship 4.5 Support for new employees
5. Government	5.1 Employability schemes targeting youth 5.2 Financial support for higher education institutions and employers (mainly small and medium) for work placements and internships.

Source: Bond University (2015)