

World Future Skills: Adapting the Next Generation to Succeed in the Workplace

Insights and Best Practices for Leaders in Higher Education





Executive Summary

Higher education across the MENA region is navigating one of the fastest shifts in its modern history.

Institutions are preparing students for a world where employability is now defined by skills, not credentials. Degrees still matter, but they no longer guarantee workplace readiness on their own. What increasingly matters more is whether graduates can adapt, learn continuously, and contribute meaningfully in industries that are being reshaped by automation, digital transformation, and global competition.

As a result, there's a sense of urgency and opportunity to create future-ready graduates across the region. This trend is underscored by MENA's shifting demographic profile, where a rapidly expanding youth population is entering a labor market that rewards agility, problem-solving, and digital fluency. Institutions can no longer rely on traditional curriculum models or legacy approaches to measuring student success.

To build these capabilities, organizations and institutions must embed them intentionally into academic programs, feedback processes, assessments, and strategy. As employers prioritize proven skills, artificial intelligence (AI) is playing a transformative role in enabling adaptive learning, skills mapping, and early support for students. Universities, employers, and other governing bodies must collaborate to ease that shift to outcome-based metrics like job readiness.

This eBook provides a structured roadmap for leaders ready to accelerate their institution's shift and support the next generation of graduates in unlocking meaningful opportunities across the region.

All insights are taken from a roundtable discussion with higher education leaders at the most recent Explorance MENA Summit, which took place in Dubai, UAE in November 2025. You can find participant information in the "Contributors" section of this eBook.

Why This Student Success Shift Matters in MENA

According to roundtable participants, undergraduate degrees have become far more common across the GCC, so many graduates now enter the workforce across the MENA region with similar, if not identical, academic qualifications.

As a result, employers are looking for other differentiators, especially demonstrable ability, adaptability, and real-world experience in specific domains, instead of relying solely on a candidate's degree. The panel noted that this shift is particularly evident as micro-credentials and proof of specific competencies to gain traction, with hiring teams highlighting their importance for remaining competitive.

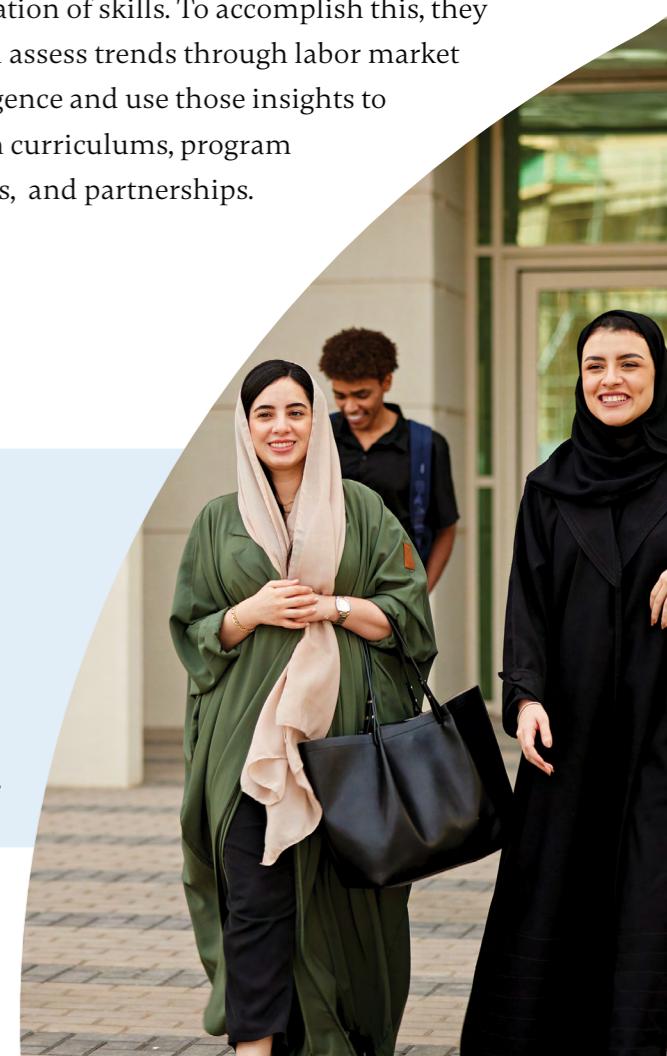
Economic diversification is another driving force in this shift. MENA countries are investing in advanced forms of manufacturing, fintech, renewable energy, and logistics.

Recommendation

Publish an annual or semi-annual report that summarizes top in-demand skills across national or regional labor markets. Share it with faculty, program leads, and advisory boards, so curriculum decisions stay relevant to emerging workforce needs.

These sectors demand not only technical proficiency, but also analytical reasoning, cross-cultural communication, and digital literacy. As several panelists noted, institutions that can align with these emerging needs will support stronger long-term graduate outcomes.

Micro-credentials are gaining traction, enabling students to quickly prove mastery and acquire skills needed for evolving job markets. Institutions must proactively rethink curricula, assessment models, and verification of skills. To accomplish this, they should assess trends through labor market intelligence and use those insights to inform curriculums, program reviews, and partnerships.



Today's Learner and the Future-Ready Graduate

Today's learners are entering a world shaped by fast-changing technologies and greater workforce uncertainty. Panelists reflected that graduates can no longer expect a straightforward or predictable career path. Instead, adaptability, learning agility, and the ability to navigate re-skilling cycles have become necessary traits.

As one speaker noted, it is no longer enough for a graduate to simply hold an undergraduate degree and expect the best possible employment outcome. Graduates must adopt a mindset that prioritizes continuous learning and skill growth to adapt to job market shifts. The panel also observed that MENA's predominantly young workforce must remain resilient as they will likely move across multiple industries and roles throughout their careers.

Institutions across the MENA region and around the world are responding by rethinking their mission. It must go beyond just preparing students for a first job and emphasize the value of creative problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and lifelong curiosity.

A future-ready graduate, as described by the roundtable, is:

- Listen and communicate effectively and with empathy
- Agile and able to stay flexible through many transitions
- Passionate, open-minded, and motivated to learn new skills
- Capable of making quick, meaningful contributions in varied settings

To support this graduate profile, universities should intentionally embed mindset development into curricula. Co-curricular activities like mentorship, innovation labs, and reflective learning further help students develop these traits.

Recommendation

Create a “Graduate Mindset Profile” identifying six to eight core traits every graduate should demonstrate. Use this profile during curriculum reviews, assessment mapping, and broader student development initiatives to ensure a holistic approach.

Embedding Skills into Institutional Strategy

Embedding skills into institutional strategy demands more than updated language in program brochures. It requires a holistic, campus-wide effort where institutions map future-ready skills to every course and program outcome. If it's executed correctly, stakeholders will benefit from a more cohesive and impactful student learning journey.

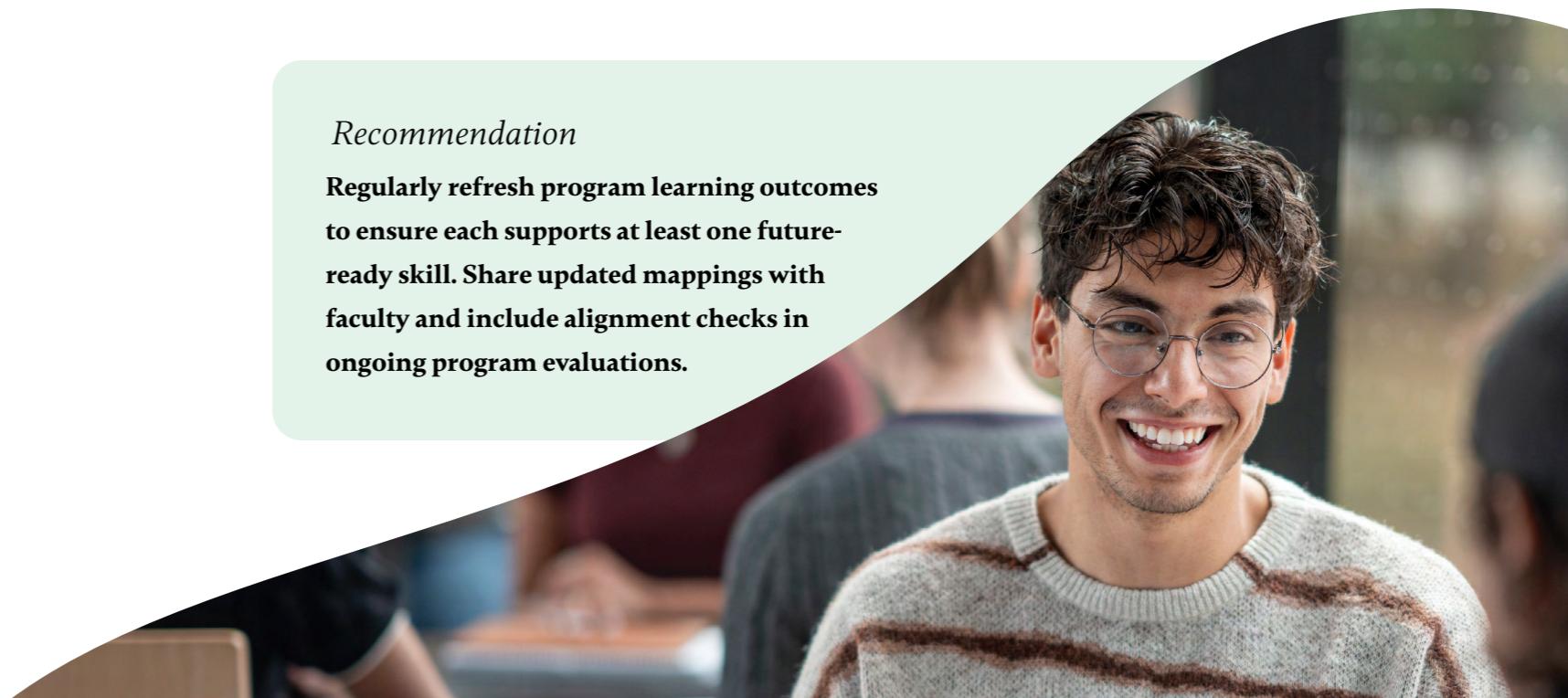
Panelists emphasized that true transformation involves aligning curriculum structures and assessment design with real competencies, all guided by feedback from students, alumni, and employers. However, they also agreed that the transition from solely awareness of future-ready skills to full integration across the academic strategy is where many institutions still have work to do.

Recommendation

Regularly refresh program learning outcomes to ensure each supports at least one future-ready skill. Share updated mappings with faculty and include alignment checks in ongoing program evaluations.

According to several contributors, skills frameworks only work when faculty understand them, learning outcomes reflect them, and students prove mastery through real-world assessments. Institutions must look beyond basic metrics, using narrative feedback from students, alumni, and employers to pinpoint strengths and address gaps. These insights drive ongoing improvement and more meaningful learning outcomes.

To make skill integration sustainable, institutions must connect skill development to key performance indicators (KPIs) that measure employment outcomes, graduate readiness, and employer satisfaction. Those measurement tools provide clearer indication of impact than graduation rates alone.



The Power of Feedback and Data in Student Success

Continuous feedback is a critical lever for facilitating a student's progress and ultimate success in achieving workforce readiness, regardless of the sector or role they're targeting with their studies. Because of this, traditional course evaluation systems aren't enough.

Panelists noted that institutions that rely on outdated or superficial metrics consistently fail to drive meaningful improvement at the student success level. Faculty tend to review feedback only during annual cycles or for individual promotion, which can significantly delay timely action and lessen its impact on teaching strategies.

Participants also pointed out that data silos create additional challenges. With academic performance data, course evaluations, and employer feedback frequently stored in separate systems, institutions struggle to

connect the dots between curricula and workforce outcomes. This fragmented approach limits the ability to spot risk factors or identify improvement opportunities.

Contributors to the roundtable discussion emphasized that true progress comes from standardizing how feedback is gathered, interpreted, and applied across an institution, not just in one department or function. Faculty need support to understand what students are saying and why they're saying it. Tools like Explorance MLY, with purpose-built AI technology for comment and sentiment analysis, are increasingly valuable for such initiatives.

Once that is accomplished, it's much more straightforward to turn this information into actionable insights that lead to meaningful change across courses and programs.

Recommendation

Implement a “Feedback Interpretation Guide” for faculty. This guide should offer practical steps for reading, contextualizing, and acting on student feedback in a consistent and effective manner.

AI, Intelligent Systems, and Responsible Adoption

AI is rapidly transforming workforce development from a higher education perspective. The digital transformation will continue to evolve and mature at an accelerated rate, which means how institutions leverage AI to the benefits of their feedback process and student success will be even more critical in the coming years.

The roundtable panel reflected that AI empowers institutions to map student skills, spot learning gaps early, and deliver tailored support, all of which boost employability. By enabling personalized pathways aligned with students' strengths, AI simplifies complex data analysis and reduces admin workload. Universities can then increase engagement and better prepare students for evolving workplace demands.

However, contributors noted that responsible AI adoption is fundamental to growing and scaling institutional usage in an ethical manner. Stakeholders must put the proper safeguards in place to protect data privacy, ensure transparency, and avoid overdependence on automated processes.

Participants agreed that human oversight, targeted faculty training, and clear governance policies are essential to ensure AI augments expertise instead of replacing it. A best practice here is to build a culture where faculty feel supported, not intimidated, by new technologies. Training programs, peer learning communities, and cross-campus working groups can help ease adoption and encourage engagement.

Recommendation

Establish an interdisciplinary task force to evaluate AI tools, share adoption strategies, and monitor data privacy practices. This ensures responsible and effective integration of intelligent systems across the institution.

Implementation Roadmap for MENA Institutions

A successful shift to a future skills-first model doesn't require a complete structural overhaul at the outset. Instead, as the roundtable participants discussed, a successful implementation roadmap can be broken into more specific phases, each one with its own purpose and KPIs.

Contributors agreed that the first ninety days should focus on targeted pilots, strategic alignment, and active communication to build shared purpose among faculty, employers, and students. These early pilot programs, especially those in partnership with an institution's internal transformation evangelists, can help ease a rollout that lasts beyond this initial timeframe.

Another topic that came up during this part of the conversation was the importance of forming cross-functional focus groups that bring together faculty, quality assurance personnel, career services, and employer partners.

Recommendation

Host monthly “Skills-First Roundtables” with diverse stakeholders to review pilot progress, exchange lessons learned and co-create the next steps for broader institutional transformation.

These groups can work together to define key skills, update learning outcomes, redesign assessments, and collect higher-quality feedback through different types of interviews. The resulting insights will be far richer than trying to assess feedback in individual silos.

Benchmarking against peers can also add value to the implementation. Institutions are encouraged to compare performance, especially in collaborative forums like Explorance's Higher Education Benchmarking Consortium, on key metrics like feedback response rates, graduate employment outcomes, and employer satisfaction.

As panelists reflected, the first ninety days are about building momentum, strengthening alignment, and laying the groundwork for deeper transformation. The focus should be on progress, not perfection, and fostering a culture of transparency, and shared responsibility.

Contributors



**Prof. Sh. Fay Abdulla
Mohammed Alkhaila**

Director of Quality Assurance and Accreditation



Dr. Rehab Shaarawy
Institutional Research Manager



Dr. Norah Almusharraf
Acting Dean, Deanship of Quality Assurance and Development



Dr. Junaid Siddiqui
Director of Learning Technology Center



Dr. Ahmed Al Rahl
Accreditation Director



Prof. Jerry Tomberlin
Former Provost and Vice-President Academic and Current Academic Director of International Partnerships



Rashed AlShamsi
Acting Director Student Careers and Alumni Department



Dr. Bradley Tucker
Vice Provost and University Registrar



Mr. Adam Finkelstein
Associate Director, Learning Environments, Teaching and Learning Services



Anastasia Tsimiklis
Chief Marketing Officer



Nompumelelo Mazibuko
Evaluation Specialist





www.explorance.com



@explorance