SHEIKH SAUD BIN SAQR AL QASIMI FOUNDATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH
مؤسسة الشيخ سعود بن صقر القاسمي لبحوث السياسة العامة

Policy Paper 74 July 2024

# Employment Pathways or Empty Promises? Student Perceptions of University and Career Center Support in Facilitating Employment in the UAE

Seungah Lee, Janaan Farhat, and Bianca Mandapat

## Executive Summary

This paper examines the role and value of universities and career development centers (CDCs) in facilitating education-to-employment pathways for national and non-national students based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Reflecting on interviews with students across 20 higher education institutions in the UAE, this qualitative study provides insights into student perceptions of career resources and opportunities provided by their universities and illuminates which networks and resources students and recent graduates utilize to support their employment endeavors. Findings suggest that while university and CDC resources proved helpful, university courses and CDC activities generally do not provide sufficient "real-world" experience to support a smooth transition into the labor market. Key issues identified include lack of alignment with existing career opportunities and more general or non-tailored counseling offered by CDCs. The most helpful resources identified by students include supportive faculty, helpful older peers, and alumni who served as informal mentors. The study further provides recommendations to universities and CDCs, including formalizing mentorship networks, establishing stronger collaborations with industries, and establishing feedback mechanisms to support interventions aimed to support youths' education-to-employment transition.

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as one of the most competitive states in the world (Institute for Management Development, 2024). Driven by its long-standing commitment to becoming a knowledge economy outlined in "We the UAE 2031" vision and the UAE Centennial Plan 2071, the UAE has placed great importance upon the development of both local and international talent to serve its economy (We the UAE 2031, n.d.; UAE Cabinet, n.d.). Integral to this effort is the establishment of leading universities to facilitate this mission, with the support of the public and private sectors (Snellman, 2015; Ashour, 2019). In fact, with over 30 international branch campuses (IBCs), the majority of which were established in under 15 years, the UAE currently has the highest concentration and second highest number of IBCs in the world (Mackie, 2019).

While establishing universities has expanded access and choice in higher education, universities in the UAE and elsewhere are facing pressure to adopt a "third mission" (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). Commonly

defined as a social or economic contribution, the third mission of universities more broadly refers to the evolving role of universities to engage with industries, society, and the public sector (Giuri et al., 2019; Taieb, 2024). Beyond universities' first mission of supporting education through teaching, and second mission of producing knowledge through research, the third mission provides an alternative evaluative framework to measure universities' contributions to "economic development, innovation, and social well-being" (Taieb, 2024). This "third mission," coupled with increasing marketization of and competition within higher education (Marginson, 2006; Hudzik, 2011), has increasingly pressured universities to facilitate students' post-graduation career pathways and increase their employability (Terán-Bustamante et al., 2021; Nabaho et al., 2022).

In response, universities across the world are increasingly establishing CDCs (Schlesinger et al., 2021) that play a crucial role in providing valuable resources to students in choosing a major, learning about different career paths, and securing internships and jobs (Schaub, 2012). Despite serving as key institutions that connect students with industry and society, few sources examine CDCs or university employability programs within the context of universities' third mission. Even fewer examine students' perspectives toward the impact and services provided by CDCs in the Gulf states, including in the UAE.

Accordingly, in light of universities' third mission and the UAE's broader policy aims of developing into a knowledge economy, this policy paper seeks to examine the role and value of universities and CDCs – more specifically – in facilitating the school-to-work transition for youth in the UAE. In what follows, we provide an overview of the role of universities and CDCs in the UAE, before discussing student perspectives on employment as outlined in existing studies. Then, based upon our interviews with students enrolled at 20 higher education institutions in the UAE, we aim to shed light on the resources offered by CDCs, as well as what resources and networks students found most helpful in supporting their employability. Lastly, we provide recommendations for how universities and CDCs in the UAE can bolster existing education-to-employment pathways and better achieve their third mission.

# Background

## University as "Skills" Broker: Employment Programs and Career Centers

Similar to other contexts, universities play an important role in preparing youth to enter the labor force in the UAE (Al-Waqfi et al., 2023). Universities have created dedicated employment programs, such as Zayed University's "On-Campus Employment Program (ONCE)," to equip students with work experience and facilitate this transition from education to employment (Zayed University, n.d.). Another example is the University of Sharjah's "Student Employment Program," which facilitates on-campus hires for students (University of Sharjah, n.d.). The success of such programs has been documented in a few studies. For example, in one quantitative case study, participants in an employability program in a public university were over five times more likely to be employed than non-participants after graduation, especially Information Systems graduates (El-Temtamy et al., 2016). Although the study's generalizability is limited due to its focus on one university, it nonetheless demonstrates the tangible benefits of enrolling students in tertiary-level employability programs in the UAE.

More generally, university career centers and counseling advisors play important roles in facilitating students' transition from education to employment (see, for example, NYUAD, n.d.; Zayed University, n.d.; Khalifa University, n.d.). Across the Arab world, studies have documented how career guidance resources can be leveraged to support both high school and university students to make more informed career decisions (Sultana, 2017; Al Rasbi, 2019; Elia, 2021). In the UAE specifically, Alhawasin (2010) explores the role that career training programs play in preparing final-year students to enter the labor market, noting how tertiary programs are helpful but require significant improvement, such as through the cultivation of partnerships between companies and universities. More interestingly, students in the study also reflected on some mismatches between their work placement and major, as well as the oftentimes more beneficial learning gained from the training program in contrast

to their classes. Accordingly, while some studies reflect on the value of career employment programs in the UAE, very few have addressed or questioned the key role played by CDCs across public and private universities in facilitating youth employment.

## Undergraduate Student Perspectives: Perceptions, Experiences, and Struggles

Al-Waqfi et al. (2023) further explore the importance of career adaptability and readiness in predicting the employability of post-graduate youth in the UAE. They suggest that career adaptability is a negative predictor for the use of social connections to obtain work and that graduates may be more willing to work in the private sector if they are confident in their employability. At the same time, however, studies also point to the positive value of career adaptability in widening the net of employment possibilities for youth in the UAE (El-Temtamy et al., 2016; Al-Waqfi et al., 2023). This is particularly important because students in the UAE often struggle to acquire gainful work experience while studying in the UAE, as it is not conventional for students to work part-time while studying (Kemp & McLoughlin, 2021) and has only been lawful since October 2016 (PwC, 2016).

Accordingly, one case study of a university in the UAE revealed that much of students' experiences and insights gained into work were through their coursework, interactions with professors, and internships, as opposed to guidance obtained from career advisors (Kemp & McLoughlin, 2021). Other studies examining Emirati final-year students from two private universities suggest the need to better equip students with skills associated with problem-solving, innovation, adaptability, and complex decision-making (Khalid & Ahmad, 2021; Sakamoto & Sung, 2018). This is deemed particularly important for the UAE, considering its aims to emerge as a global economic hub and knowledge economy that is driven by a competitive higher education sector (U.ae, 2024; Portnoi et al., 2010). Therefore, a better understanding of the role that universities play in serving as "skills brokers" between students and employers is critical for the UAE, as it continues to pursue and fund youth development and leadership opportunities (Karolak, 2021; Nous Group, 2023).

While some studies have explored students' employability in the UAE, there is a dearth of literature on students' perspectives toward CDCs, in particular, and the roles of universities, more broadly, in facilitating their employment. Moreover, most studies on employment programs and resources focus on one university and either expatriates or citizens. This study seeks to contribute to the academic literature by exploring both national and non-national students' engagement with university resources and CDCs across several universities in the UAE.

# Data

The study draws upon semi-structured interviews with 52 individuals aged 18–35 in the UAE (see Table 1) who studied at a UAE-based university.[1] The interviews asked about the participants' university experiences in relation to their career aspirations, what university resources they engaged with while they were students, and how they prepared for and navigated the job market. Interview participants were recruited from a pool of people who had responded to a call for interviews on social media networks and university platforms and through snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted between May and August 2023.

In this policy paper, we focus on young people's university experiences and the ways that their universities influenced and facilitated their career exploration and job search process. We pay particular attention to young people's perceptions and experiences with university resources and CDCs in facilitating their entry into the job market. Overall, interviews did not reveal a significant difference in student university experiences across different types of universities in the UAE, i.e., public, private, and IBCs. However, we found that students' nationality and major played a role in influencing students' perceptions of university career support services and their engagement.

[1] We recognize that the experiences and perceptions of young people regarding work and the work environment vary across the ages between 18 and 35. However, we looked at this age range as this is the range that the UAE defines for youth.

**Table 1:** Distribution of Interview Participants by Major Discipline

| | Business | Humanities & Social Science | Science | Engineering | *Total* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Emirati** | 6 | 5 | 2 | 8 | 21 |
| **Non-Emirati** | 6 | 10 | 6 | 9 | 31 |
| ***Total*** | 12 | 15 | 8 | 17 | 52 |

# Findings

## Student Expectations and Engagement with University Resources and Support

Of the various purposes and functions of higher education (Stevens et al., 2008), interviews reveal that students are most concerned with how the university will prepare and equip them with transferrable skills for employment in the labor market. However, students across nationalities and majors frequently expressed how they felt that the university courses do not adequately prepare them for the "real world," as most of the courses taught in universities focus on theoretical or general knowledge that is not highly applied or practical. Although more individuals in non-STEM fields expressed this sentiment more frequently, it was also the case for students in STEM fields. As one student expressed,

> "I believe that what they [the university] just equipped us with is the general and broad knowledge about things we may or may not use. It's very general. No specific things. I mean, if there is, it's just like one course. If you want to go deep into computer science and make sure that you achieve what you want to become, you need to put a lot of self-learning into that. You need to research a lot. You need to spend a good amount just working on projects by yourself, and, you know, ones that are not just imposed on you by the university. [Filipino Male, Computer Science]"

Similarly, another student from a different university expressed that university courses are limited in helping students develop the skills required in fields where they may want to work in the future but that some project-based and research-based courses can be helpful:

> "The university slightly failed in that what they teach you is still not like what things are really like or what will be used. But usually, toward the end of the third and fourth year, you have a choice of what you want to do exactly because it's usually research-based and project-based. So, I feel like the recent research project helped me develop ideas...and critical thinking skills that are required in the field that you're going to work in. [British Male, Robotics]"

In fact, interviews revealed that most of the coursework, despite student expectations for what they would learn in the classroom, is largely theoretical and not highly relevant to the real world. Interviews also suggested that students had difficulty translating the knowledge and skills they gained in the classroom into employable skills. These sentiments were particularly salient among non-STEM students who found many of their course assignments to have little applicability or relevance to the local UAE context or the kinds of careers they could pursue with their degrees. These students, especially non-Emirati students, were also more likely to look to alumni within their respective cohorts to obtain an idea of the kinds of jobs that fresh graduates obtain, noting that older peers often pivoted away from working in their field of study.

The limited relevant learning in the classroom, coupled with the need to develop knowledge and skills to translate the university learning experience to employability, leads students to seek out resources and opportunities. Interviews revealed that students are, indeed, aware of and engage with CDCs and other relevant university resources. This is especially true for non-national students who lack local social networks and have more limited employment opportunities compared to national students.

## Engagement with CDCs: Opportunities and Limitations

Interviewed students revealed that the resources and opportunities provided by CDCs throughout UAE universities are no different than what one may expect to find in any university. Like most CDCs found in universities around the world, CDCs in the UAE provide various programming and activities to facilitate college-to-career transitions, such as resume/CV support, interviewing skills workshops, job boards, career fairs, career networking sessions, and job informational sessions, among others (Arnold, 2018; Donald et al., 2018; Schaub, 2012). Interviewed students expressed that the CDCs are helpful in communicating various volunteering, networking, internship, and job opportunities, in addition to providing resources and support for writing CVs or cover letters and offering workshops, such as on "life after graduation," to help students envision various career and graduate school pathways (Emirati Female, Marketing and Entrepreneurship; Kazakh Female, Psychology). National students across STEM and non-STEM majors commented on the value of workshops and career fairs in connecting them with internships and potential employers. In the words of one recent graduate,

> "I feel like the Career Center did its job, in my opinion, because they have been collaborating with students, they have been talking to students, calling them, checking in [to see] if they got offers or not. I feel like it's a great aspect of graduating from X University is that they do care about their students – they do care about their alumni. [Emirati Female, Archival Sciences and Records Management]"

However, non-national students from non-STEM majors, in particular, noted how CDC events informed them of potential post-graduation pathways. This included facilitating students' connections with employers through available job opportunities. As one fourth-year student noted,

> "The Career Center does connect you and follow-up with alumni as well as students to let you know about opportunities and share links with you. They also try to give you a heads up and let you know that "so-and-so company is looking for this and that. Are you interested?" I found that there is a sort of communication and following up with both alumni and current students. [South Sudani Male, Business Administration]"

At the same time, however, interviews revealed that the expressed sentiment around the CDC, on average, is that it is largely limited in its ability to be a bridge for students in transitioning from school to work. This sentiment was stronger for non-nationals compared to nationals who are much more embedded in Emirati society and largely rely on social networks rather than university resources. More specifically, interviews revealed that there are broadly two different ways in which the CDCs are limited in providing student and alumni support: 1) limited or mismatch of career opportunities for students who want to remain in the UAE and 2) the lack of specificity and tailoring of resources and opportunities to student majors and interests.

Interviews with those who actively sought out or engaged with CDCs as students or alumni revealed that events such as career fairs, which are meant to be recruitment and networking opportunities for employers and students, are often limited or are mismatched with student needs. Students attend such events in the hopes that they will learn about job opportunities and connect with potential employers. However, interviews revealed that CDC events such as career fairs highlight internships or student exchange opportunities more than jobs. Perhaps due to the international body of students throughout universities in the UAE, interviews also suggested that many of the opportunities are not in the UAE. According to one STEM graduate from a public university,

> "They also host a conference every year... [but] it's rarely for job opportunities. It is for internships... that platform is basically if you want to land a job interview overseas, not in the UAE...They also have their own platform for the undergrads... that platform provides the students exchange program, which I used once. [Emirati Male, Electrical Engineering]"

Similarly, non-STEM graduates shared similar sentiments and further suggested that the CDC, despite what it does, is limited in providing specific resources, leading them to consult with friends, upper-division students, or alumni who are able to provide more specific, tailored guidance within a particular major field or industry.

> "The CDC here on campus, occasionally they do some stuff or like those employer events, or the career fair, I think that's like a big thing. Just being able to like to choose, like, the different options available, and check it out. Other than that, I don't think there's any, like specific... resources for finding any jobs or anything like that. [Singaporean Male, Social Research and Public Policy]"

The lack of perceived benefits of CDCs and other relevant university resources may influence the lack of engagement or underutilization of existing resources. In fact, interviews revealed that students, especially those in the humanities and social sciences, do not engage with the CDC as much as expected. This was especially true for nationals who find other channels outside the university to gain and develop knowledge and skills deemed important for future careers. For example, one student in the humanities stated,

> "Honestly, I haven't again, like I haven't been really engaged... Maybe like, that's why I don't really see such opportunities. Yeah. I just... I just don't find it to be as engaging... I've been spending my time like watching YouTube videos, I don't know if you know [the channel] "My incubator"... [and I've been] ...watching a lot of their videos, and they give... really like, good advice. I'll see... I'm also using my dad's network to learn as well." [Emirati Female, Psychology]"

Another student too noted that she did not seek out or benefit as much from resources offered at her university,

> "I don't think I have utilized the resources in my school as much. But most of the skills I gained, I gained before I started like my course...[the] majority of my skills, I have learned them outside of school. [Kenyan Female, Architecture]"

It is important to note that these sentiments do not necessarily imply that the CDCs are ineffective or irrelevant. Compared to non-STEM students and graduates who identified gaps in university CDC resources in their limited ability to provide tailored, specific guidance for how to navigate the job market, interviews demonstrated that STEM students and graduates found university resources and support more helpful for their skills and career development compared to their counterparts. In the words of an Emirati graduate from a public university,

> "The university has always provided us with courses and encouraged us to participate in competitions like hackathons. They also provided us with free software like Matlab – and it's high in demand in the lab I'm working in now – and they also offer free courses on how to use software because I'm a student. There are a list of courses that I took to take the internship – which pertained to career development – and they offer a lot of workshops on critical thinking, CV writing – and every year there is a career fair, and if you get a recommendation from the university or professors, a company might hire you. [Emirati Male, Electrical Engineering]"

## Informal Channels: The Source of the Most Valuable Networks, Resources, and Advice

As noted above, university career resources offered include career fairs, job portals, assistance with job and internship application materials, and networking opportunities for students with professionals in industry. However, in general, participants expressed that what they found to be most helpful were not the formalized events and activities but rather the informal connections and opportunities that provided

more tailored advice and guidance. In fact, interviews revealed that professors were most helpful. This was a sentiment repeatedly expressed by both national and non-national interviewees across majors and genders:

> "At the university, Professor X... basically offers different students internships based on you know, what they might want in the future... And so what he does is try his best and provide an internship at a place that could possibly employ you [Emirati Male, Mechanical Engineering]"

Moreover, for some students, professors came to be viewed as role models to be emulated:

> "My role model is my professor...he's a really good person. Like, he supports all of his students. So, when we find like some job offers that might match our qualifications or if we need him to send us something to help us apply for a position, he is someone that I can go to if I need any help with my work or major. [Palestinian Female, Digital Media]"

Another non-Emirati male student discussed the relevance of guidance received from faculty:

> "I don't believe it was systemic or institutional resources. Instead, it was informal advice given by professors, for example, some professors would give us advice on the form of when you enter the civil engineering labor market you should do one, two, three. So, the resources were in the form of informal mentoring from academics who have more experience in the field. [Syrian Male, Civil Engineering]"

## "We are on our own:" Reliance on Peers and Networks in Navigating the Job Market

Beyond professors, interviews revealed that students and recent graduates in the UAE, like many other young people around the world (Mishra, 2020; Wanberg et al., 2019), primarily rely on peers and personal networks for career opportunities and advice. We found that non-national students rely on peers and alumni from their university networks much more than nationals who rely on family networks. These networks formed within and outside the university become critical avenues and resources that fill the gaps and make up for the areas where the CDC has fallen short:

> "The career development center has career counselors, and then you'd like go to them for like advice and stuff. But they weren't like, super helpful. With my CV and my cover letter writing and stuff, I would usually consult with friends or like upperclassmen. [South Korean Female, Middle Eastern Studies]"

Not only so, but interviews also revealed that students take proactive steps to create channels to share opportunities and resources with each other, for example, through student-led Facebook pages, where students and recent graduates post various jobs and internships and share "what has worked" to help each other out:

> "To be honest, the CDC hasn't been super helpful in like finding things or helping throughout the like application process for different opportunities... I mean, the Facebook page is great because people will post jobs and internships and things they come across just to help other people. And, so, a lot of my friends have found things through there as well. People will talk about things that they found like always being helpful, sharing things that they've come across. All of my friends will ask questions about like various internships, grants and research grants that this school offers, and everyone else helps them through that. People have done it before, and people will help other people when they're interviewing for a certain type of position. [Canadian Female, Political Science]"

Unlike non-nationals, the primary avenue through which Emirati nationals seek out job opportunities and gain career information is the family:

> "Other than the emails I get from university, I have like my family around me, they informed me of like, there's a company that's looking for someone in your major. And where some people are now, they're posting job spots for people on their Instagram or Snapchat. Like, I know a few people, I have posts which say "we're looking for an HR" or "we're looking for any other major" and

> they just added and I see it, sometimes I send it to my friends that are in that specific major just to help them out. [Emirati Female, Marketing and Entrepreneurship]"

The pronounced reliance on family networks for the Emiratis is unsurprising given the importance of social networks and personal relationships in Emirati culture and society. This also explains why Emiratis, compared to non-Emiratis in our participant sample, do not appear to engage extensively with CDCs or other university career support resources and opportunities. In fact, it appears that the family and personal networks are a more effective resource for Emiratis than resources provided by the university CDCs, which are mostly staffed by expatriate professional student affairs and administrative staff.

## Discussion and Practical Implications

Employability is becoming increasingly important to universities' mission and function, spurred by marketization demands (McCowan, 2015). Studies of university career support services in developed economies have suggested that these activities, including university-industry linkages and skills development activities, can help stimulate students' employability (Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Succi & Canovi, 2019). Such evidence has called upon CDCs and other university student services to meet the rising demands and needs of students and society for the university to better prepare students for a rapidly changing global economy.

Despite these increasing demands from students, interviews revealed that the university is limited in facilitating the school-to-work transition for their students for various reasons. This includes the lack of relevant, practical learning in university courses and the limited ability of dedicated support services such as CDCs to effectively provide resources, opportunities, and tailored guidance for its students and alumni in navigating the labor market. These limitations have largely led students to resort to personal networks, create their own networks, and proactively seek resources and opportunities themselves instead of looking to or taking advantage of existing university resources dedicated to career development. Further research is needed to understand the motivating drivers for why and how university students and alumni engage or disengage with the CDC. However, the findings point to the importance of facilitating the role of the university in effectively supporting education-to-employment transitions, including through customized guidance based on context, field of study, and available opportunities. Thus, we offer the following recommendations to universities and career centers:

1. **Enhance career services by strengthening local industry partnerships and providing more personalized career counseling**

Previous studies have suggested that a skills-based approach to student career development is narrow and does not fully capture the complexity of student work readiness (Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017; Winterton & Turner, 2019). Pre-professional identity formation, which involves sufficient opportunities for students to explore various career paths, have been found to be important in increasing young people's self-efficacy, resilience, and broader employability (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Accordingly, universities would benefit significantly from moving beyond employer engagement events toward establishing collaborations and partnerships with companies. Building a stronger relationship with both local and international companies can play a significant role in creating a pipeline of employable students and recent graduates ready to accept internships, job placements, and industry projects.

Moreover, such partnerships with companies can also facilitate the integration of work into coursework, thereby enabling students to obtain hands-on, practical experience in the workforce while earning course credits over an extended period (Dixon and Gordon, 2022). For example, the integration of career development into the curriculum can manifest through capstone projects formulated in collaboration with industry partners, requiring students to incorporate practical, real-world problem-solving into their research. Co-op programs and structured internship programs during the academic year and in summer months can also provide a pathway for employment to

students as well as recent graduates, allowing youth to acquire the requisite skills and experience needed to enter the job market.

Beyond strengthening local partnerships with companies, universities and CDCs can benefit from providing personalized career counseling services tailored to individual student needs and aspirations (Carvalho et al., 2023). Such guidance can help students understand and explore options beyond what they know while further sharing with them job opportunities based on their preferences, skill sets, and qualifications. Career services may be further enhanced through the use of artificial intelligence (AI) or augmented reality, where career simulations and AI-powered career coaching can be used to analyze students' profiles and suggest career paths tailored to their respective skills and interests. Such technologies, if used ethically and responsibly, may serve as useful tools that can be leveraged by counselors to support employment post-graduation (Duan and Wu, 2024).

2. **Increase cultural and regional relevance by providing more localized career support**

Universities' effective facilitation of education-to-employment pathways requires the tailoring of career support to the cultural and economic context of the UAE. This includes ensuring that students and prospective graduates have a solid understanding of available opportunities within the labor market and the nuances of navigating employment within the UAE. This extends to greater knowledgeability about industry trends, in-demand specializations, and which fields may align with specific majors to allow students and graduates to explore a wide range of employment options. It is also imperative for prospective jobseekers to be familiar with the UAE's legal and regulatory environment, such as in relation to starting a business or obtaining gainful employment.

This can be bolstered through CDCs' offering of regional networking and local employer engagement events that can facilitate student interaction with employers on-the-ground, enabling students to understand the specific expectations and unique requirements of the UAE's job market. Particularly pertinent for non-nationals who seek to continue to reside and work in the country, universities may further equip their international students to enter the labor market through the provision of language and cultural training, which can better prepare students to integrate into the labor market. In fact, studies suggest that expatriates in the UAE who receive cross-cultural training more readily integrate into their respective workforce than those who do not receive any training (Tahir & Ertek, 2017; Tahir, 2018).

3. **Strengthen mentorship programs at the peer, alumni, and faculty levels**

As demonstrated in our study, students rely heavily on informal, personal connections among their peers, alumni, and faculty to obtain support and advice in relation to their careers. The establishment or strengthening of mentorship programs at the peer level can enable universities to leverage existing supportive networks, thereby formalizing a process that is already taking place in practice. Through university involvement, students without direct access to older peers can rely on formal networks to obtain guidance and support from upperclassmen. In addition to peer mentorship programs, connecting students with alumni mentors can serve as a valuable form of guidance for prospective jobseekers, especially for students on the cusp of graduation. Lastly, universities can play an important role in incentivizing senior faculty members to take on advisory roles for graduating students as part of their service requirements. Moreover, universities may rely on existing faculty connections to industry partners or work toward incentivizing faculty to establish such collaborations, thereby positioning their staff as a bridge for students to engage in real-world projects, internships, and co-op programs.

4. **Bolster follow-up and feedback mechanisms for CDC programs and activities through research**

To continue to improve upon the activities and support offered by CDCs, follow-up and feedback mechanisms must be established or enhanced to ensure that the support provided to students is helpful and relevant. In fact, more broadly, conducting more research on the expectations of students for CDCs and the effectiveness of their program activities could better inform practice for facilitating university-to-career transitions. This can involve conducting longitudinal studies on career outcomes to examine how alumni careers progress

in the years after having graduated. More generally, however, CDCs can measure student satisfaction and elicit anonymous feedback to better evaluate their career counseling and guidance activities. Similarly, employer satisfaction surveys can be distributed to partners with the university to gauge their satisfaction with student performance, thereby hearing the industry perspective on how universities can better prepare students for entry into the workforce. CDCs can also conduct additional research on barriers that students face in securing employment, such as in the form of mismatches, lack of experience, or inadequate career guidance, which can aid CDCs in developing targeted interventions and programs.

## Conclusion

This paper examined national and non-national students' expectations for and engagement with CDCs and university resources to gain insight into how they navigate the transition from education to employment in the UAE. It further provided insight into the resources and networks that students and recent graduates relied on most extensively during their studies. Consistent with the academic literature, our study suggests that students have benefited from available university resources and support to an extent. However, students across nationalities, majors, and institutions, in particular those from non-STEM backgrounds, often feel that their university courses and CDC activities have not provided them with sufficient practical or "real-world" experience to enter the labor market. The limited support offered by CDCs can be attributed to few or non-aligned career opportunities for students who wish to stay in the UAE, and the absence of customized counseling and resources tailored to students' backgrounds and majors. Accordingly, students and prospective graduates instead turned to informal resources and networks to obtain guidance and support on suitable employment opportunities, including professors and instructors, alumni, and upper-division peers. Taking these insights into account, universities and CDCs would benefit greatly from providing students with more localized, tailored support, fostering greater industry partnerships, establishing formalized mentorship programs, and gathering data and feedback to improve upon existing interventions. Taking such measures can help better position universities to support youth as they navigate the transition toward life as full-fledged, working professionals.

# References


Alhawasin, M. A. (2010). *Exploring the characteristics of a current career training program at the United Arab Emirates University: A study of current senior students and local employers* [Doctoral dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, The Graduate School, Department of Learning and Performance Systems]. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED556366

Al Rasbi, S. A. (2019). *Effectiveness of career guidance and counselling: A study among higher education Emirati female students in Northern Emirates* [Doctoral thesis, The British University in Dubai]. https://bspace.buid.ac.ae/bitstream/1234/1615/3/2014121140.pdf

Al-Waqfi, M. A., Tlaiss, H., & Ghoudi, K. (2023). Career adaptability as a predictor of job search intentions and career readiness of young adults in the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Career Development, 50*(5), 1076–1096. https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453231157759

Arnold, W. W. (2018). Strengthening college support services to improve student transition to careers. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning 15*(1), 5–26.

Ashour, S. (2019). How technology has shaped university students' perceptions and expectations around higher education: an exploratory study of the United Arab Emirates. Studies in Higher Education, *45*(12), 2513–2525. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1617683

Carvalho, L., Mourão, L., & Freitas, C. (2023) Career counseling for college students: Assessment of an online and group intervention. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 140*, 103820.

Compagnucci, L., & Spigarelli, F. (2020). The Third Mission of the university: A systematic literature review on potentials and constraints. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change/Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 161*, 120284. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120284

Dixon, J., & Gordon, N. (2022). Improving graduate futures and employability through embedded industrial experience. *New Directions in the Teaching of Physical Sciences*, 17(1), 1–11.

Donald, W. E., Ashleigh, M. J., & Baruch, Y. (2018). Students' perceptions of education and employability: Facilitating career transition from higher education into the labor market. *Career Development International 23*(5), 513–540. https://doi.org/10.1108/cdi-09-2017-0171

Duan, J., & Wu, S. (2024). Beyond Traditional pathways: Leveraging generative AI for dynamic career planning in vocational education. International Journal of New Developments in Education, 6(2), 24–31. DOI: 10.25236/IJNDE.2024.060205

El-Temtamy, O., O'Neill, K. K., & Midraj, S. (2016). Undergraduate employability training and employment: A UAE study. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning, 6*(1), 100–115. https://doi.org/10.1108/heswbl-02-2015-0006

Elia, M. (2021). *Effectiveness of career services on students transition from university to work in Egypt* [Master›s Thesis, the American University in Cairo]. AUC Knowledge Fountain. https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/1678

Giuri, P., Munari, F., Scandura, A., & Toschi, L. (2019). The strategic orientation of universities in knowledge transfer activities. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change/Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 138*, 261–278. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2018.09.030

Hudzik, J. (2011). *Comprehensive internationalisation: From concept to action*. Washington, D.C.: NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

Institute for Management Development. (2024). *UAE: Competitiveness trends – overall.* https://imd.widen.net/content/zfxullm2dk/pdf/AE1page_WCY_2024.pdf

Ishengoma, E., & Vaaland, T. I. (2016) Can university-industry linkages stimulate student employability? *Education and Training, 58*, 18–44. https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-11-2014-0137

Jackson, D. (2016). Re-conceptualising graduate employability: the importance of pre-professional identity. *Higher Education Research & Development, 35*(5), 925–939. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1139551

Jackson, D., & Tomlinson, M. (2020). Investigating the relationship between career planning, proactivity and employability perceptions among higher education students in uncertain labour market conditions. *Higher Education, 80*(3), 435–455. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00490-5

Karolak, M. (2021). Youth and leadership: Future human capital in the United Arab Emirates in the making. *Journal of Arabian Studies, 11*(1), 100–117. https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2021.1953252

Kemp, L. J., & McLoughlin, L. (2021). Influences on the career intentions of millennials; a view from the United Arab Emirates. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning, 12*(2), 193–209. https://doi.org/10.1108/heswbl-06-2020-0131

Khalid, K., & Ahmad, A. M. (2021). The relationship between employability skills and career adaptability: A case of undergraduate students of the United Arab Emirates. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning, 11*(5), 1035–1054. https://doi.org/10.1108/heswbl-08-2020-0175

Khalifa University. (n.d.). *Career Services Department*. Retrieved June 6, 2024, from https://www.ku.ac.ae/student-life/career-and-alumni-services

Mackie, C. (2019, June 13). *International branch campuses part two: China and the United Arab Emirates*. WENR. https://wenr.wes.org/2019/06/international-branch-campuses-part-two-china-and-the-united-arab-emirates

Marginson, Simon (2006). Dynamics of national and global competition in higher education. *Higher Education, 52*, 1–39.

McCowan, T. (2015). Should universities promote employability? *Theory and Research in Education, 13*(3), 267–285. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878515598060

Mishra, S. (2020). Social networks, social capital, social support and academic success in higher education: A systemic review with a special focus on 'underrepresented' students. *Education Research Review, 29*, 100307. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100307

Nabaho, L., Turyasingura, W., Twinomuhwezi, I., & Nabukenya, M. (2022). The third mission of universities on the African continent: Conceptualisation and operationalisation. *Higher Learning Research Communications, 12*(1). https://doi.org/10.18870/hlrc.2022.12.1.1298

NYUAD. (n.d.). *Career Development*. Retrieved June 6, 2024, from https://nyuad.nyu.edu/en/academics/undergraduate/career-development.html

Portnoi, L. M., Rust, V. D., & Bagley, S. S. (Eds.). (2010). *Higher Education, Policy, and the Global Competition Phenomenon*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230106130

PwC. (2016). Introduction of part-time student work permits in the UAE. Retrieved June 10, 2024, from https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/tax/documents/2016/uae-introduce-part-time-student-work-permits-november-2016.pdf

Sakamoto, A., & Sung, J. (2018). Building an inclusive future through skills development: an agenda for Asia and the Pacific. In A. Sakamoto & J. Sung (Eds.), *Skills and The Future of Work: Strategies for Inclusive Growth in Asia and the Pacific* (pp. 1–21). International Labour Organization.

Schaub, M. (2012). The profession of college career services delivery: What college counselors should know about career centers. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy 26*(3), 201–215. https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2012.685854

Schlesinger, J., O'Shea, C., & Blesso, J. (2021). Undergraduate student career development and career center services: Faculty perspectives. *The Career Development Quarterly, 69*(2), 145–157. https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12255

Sindakis, S., & Aggarwal, S. (2022). Exploring youth entrepreneurship in the United Arab Emirates. In S. Sindakis & S. Aggarwal (Eds.), *Entrepreneurial Rise in the Middle East and North Africa: The Influence of Quadruple Helix on Technological Innovation* (pp. 93–108). Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds.

Snellman, C. L. (2015). University in knowledge society: Role and challenges. *Journal of System and Management Sciences, 5*(4), 84–113.

Succi, C., & Canovi, M. (2019). Soft skills to enhance graduate employability: comparing students and employers' perceptions. *Studies in Higher Education, 45*(9), 1834–1847. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1585420

Sultana, R. G. (2017). *Career guidance and livelihood planning across the Mediterranean challenging transitions in South Europe and the MENA region* (1st ed.). SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-992-8

Stevens, M. L., Armstrong, E. A., & Arum, R. (2008). Sieve, incubator, temple, and hub: Empirical and theoretical advances in the sociology of higher education. *Annual Review of Sociology, 34*(1), 127–151. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134737

Tahir, R. (2018). Expanding horizons and expatriate adjustment: Perceptions of Western expatriate managers in multinational companies in the United Arab Emirates. *Cross Cultural and Strategic Management, 25*(3), 401–424.

Tahir, R., & Ertek, G. (2017). Cross-cultural training: a crucial approach to improve the success of expatriate assignment in the United Arab Emirates. *Middle East Journal of Management, 5*(1), 50–74.

Taieb, S. H. (2024). Measuring the third mission of European Universities: A systematic literature review. *Society and Economy, 46*(2), 147–167. https://doi.org/10.1556/204.2023.00030

Terán-Bustamante, A., Martínez-Velasco, A., & López-Fernández, A. M. (2021). University–industry collaboration: a sustainable technology transfer model. *Administrative Sciences, 11*(4), 142. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci11040142

Tomlinson, M. (2017). Forms of graduate capital and their relationship to graduate employability. *Education + Training, 59*(4), 338–352. https://doi.org/10.1108/et-05-2016-0090

U.ae. (2024). *'We the UAE 2031' vision*. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/innovation-and-future-shaping/we-the-uae-2031-vision

UAE Cabinet. (n.d.). *UAE centennial plan 2071*. https://uaecabinet.ae/en/uae-centennial-plan-2071

University of Sharjah. (n.d.). *Student employment program*. https://sep.sharjah.ac.ae/English/Pages/Guidelines.aspx#:~:text=The%20Career%20Advancement%20%26%20Student%20Training,the%20needs%20of%20the%20University

Wanberg, C. R., Ali, A. A., & Csillag, B. (2019). Job seeking: The process and experience of looking for a job. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior 7*(1), 315–337. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012119-044939

We the UAE 2031. (n.d.). *Towards new peaks*. We The UAE 2031. https://wetheuae.ae/en

Winterton, J., & Turner, J. J. (2019). Preparing graduates for work readiness: an overview and agenda. *Education + Training, 61*(5), 536–551. https://doi.org/10.1108/et-03-2019-0044

Wiseman, P., & Juritsen, P. (2023, June 27). *University as connector: How universities can align industry needs and student demands using data*. Nous Group. https://nousgroup.com/insights/university-as-connector

Zayed University. (n.d.). *Student career counseling*. Retrieved June 6, 2024, from https://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/student-careers/student-career-counseling

## SHEIKH SAUD BIN SAQR AL QASIMI FOUNDATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH

Based in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research is a non-profit foundation that was established in 2009 under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi, United Arab Emirates Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Ras Al Khaimah. The Foundation has three broad functions:

- to inform policy making by conducting and commissioning high quality research;
- to enrich the local public sector, especially education, by providing educators and civil servants in Ras Al Khaimah with tools to make a positive impact on their own society; and
- to build a spirit of community, collaboration, and shared vision through purposeful engagement that fosters relationships among individuals and organizations.

Visit www.alqasimifoundation.com to learn more about our research, grants, and programmatic activities.

SHEIKH SAUD BIN SAQR AL QASIMI
FOUNDATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH

مؤسسة الشيخ سعود بن صقر القاسمي
لبحوث السياسة العامة

**Tel: +971 7 233 8060 • Fax: +971 7 233 8070, P.O. Box 12050, Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates**
**E-mail: info@alqasimifoundation.rak.ae**