

Aligning the Skills of Jordanian Graduates with the Needs of Labor Market

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I firmly believe that every Jordanian deserves the opportunity to learn, create, succeed, excel and reach the highest ranks, with faith, courage, and balance, without setting limits to knowledge and giving.

King Abdullah II ibn al-Hussein.¹

Introduction

This paper examines the findings from a fieldwork study and a review of the literature to provide recommendations to decision-makers in government institutions, especially those affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education, on the most prominent skills that Jordanian youth need to be employable and competitive in the labor market. Although the Ministry of Higher Education is not mandated to support graduates transition into the labor market, it has an important role to play in empowering university students to acquire the 21st century skills. In the context of tertiary education, the term 21st century skills is used as a comprehensive concept of the skills university students need to bridge the gap between university education outputs and labor market requirements in terms of required skills.

This paper provides recommendations based on a survey conducted with 75 male and female senior university students or fresh graduates with an intermediate diploma or bachelor's degree from nine public universities. The paper recommends that decision-makers in the Ministry of Higher Education, the private sector, and other relevant institutions align Jordanian higher education with the requirements of the labor market, particularly to include practical training in all majors' curricula, and to work on the integration of extracurricular education by providing volunteering opportunities for students through partnerships with the private sector.

¹ Sulhi Shahatit, "The role of educational institutions in implementing the King's vision on the development of human resources", Fact International, 2019, <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/discussion-papers/developing-human-resources-and-education-imperative-jordan%E2%80%99s-progress>

Higher education in Jordan has achieved an impressive improvement in the past decades. This is demonstrated in the various public and private universities that have risen in the ranking and remarkably expanded their outreach in terms of the number of higher education institutions, registered students, faculty members, and administrative staff, in addition to the increase in government spending on and support for the vital higher education sector. According to the latest statistics of the Ministry of Higher Education, the number of public and private universities reached 10 and 16 respectively, alongside one regional university and two others under establishment. This surge has been accompanied by an increase in student numbers, as the number of enrolled students in public and private Jordanian universities for various programs and degrees is estimated at about 342,000 male and female students, with more than 40,000 of them hailing from Arab and foreign countries.²

The importance of the higher education sector in Jordan stems from the Kingdom's labelling as a young country, with 63% of its population under the age of 30. The growth of this young group and its entry into the labor market represents a unique opportunity for Jordan, although this endeavor does not come without challenges.³ The most important of these is the incompatibility of the skills demanded by the labor market with those students acquire during their university experience.

This challenge exacerbates unemployment in Jordan, where university graduates are affected in varying degrees. The Department of Statistics showed that the unemployment rate among university degree holders reached 24.4% during the first quarter of 2019.⁴ In the same year, the Civil Service Bureau recorded a cumulative number of job applications in its databases amounting to 400,000.⁵ For the year 2019, the Bureau reported that the same number reached 388,889 job applications, with the number of new applications amounting to 36,072 and appointments reaching 8,013, or 3% of the total applications.⁶

Therefore, the gap between existing vacancies and the number of university graduates continues to widen with no solutions in the near horizon to the problem of the discrepancy between skills acquired through university education and those required in the labor market. Ali Ahmed, the owner of a company specializing in electronic payments, explains that the company refrains from hiring new graduates due to their lack of required skills, explaining that "what is taught in universities is completely different from the nature of work in reality".⁷ This attests to the weakness of the curricula and their inadequacy for the labor market, as well as the lack of development in line with scientific and technical progress. The lengthy hours of theoretical teaching are inconsistent with the hands-on or practical training that is completely absent in several majors, and this contributes to widening the gap.⁸

² Official website of Government of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Higher Education Sector, 2022. <https://2u.pw/sApWG7>

³ Unicef, "Youth: a successful transition to adulthood for every child", n.d. <https://www.unicef.org/jordan/youth>

⁵ Mohammad Al Lubani, "Youth between education and labor market", Al Mamlaka, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3ioj3GA>

⁶ OECD, Key issues affecting youth in Jordan, n.d. -<https://www.oecd.org/countries/jordan/youth-issues-jordan.htm>

⁶ Mohammad Al Lubani, previous reference.

⁷ Mohammad Al Lubani, "Youth between education and labor market", previous reference.

⁸ Habes Hatamleh, Challenges of higher education in Jordan. Egypt's Presidential Specialized Council for Education and Scientific Research, Mansourah University 2015. https://mbse.journals.ekb.eg/article_140489.html

The skills gap between education outcomes and labor market requirements

82.7% of university students believe that the curricula of most academic majors are not adequate for the skills required by employers. Moreover, the lack of educational courses specialized in the required skills is a major obstacle that exacerbates the shortcomings of university education. For example, managers in international organizations and multinational corporations often mention skills such as communication, decision-making, problem-solving, critical and creative thinking, teamwork, personal responsibility, and self-awareness as prerequisites in most of the job descriptions they publish.⁹ All of these are skills that university students do not receive throughout their studies and do not obtain through any special course offerings available to them.

The importance of these personal skills stems from the fact that, according to Bernd Schultz, they often separate the quality of college and university graduates, particularly since they play a key role in shaping the individual's personality to become eligible to enter the labor market,¹⁰ as most employers these days want to recruit, retain, and promote people who are reliable, self-driven, and have effective communication skills.

The head of Civil Service Bureau, Sameh Al Naser, explained the aforementioned challenge by looking at the data structure of the unemployed and according to the data and information issued by the Department of Statistics. We find that unemployment is mainly concentrated among holders of university degrees.¹¹ President of Isra University, Dr. Noman Al-Khatib, believes that the gap between education outputs and the demands of the labor market is due to the Higher Education Council's multiple decisions and their rapid divergence, as well as confusing public with private interests. He also hinted to a weakness in higher education policies.¹²

As for the most important issues facing undergraduates and fresh graduates (Figure 1), 53.3% believe that the incompatibility of practical training in the curricula of academic majors with the labor market and its requirements is the most crucial problem they face. In terms of educational courses, 29.3% of them believe that the actual problem is the lack of educational courses specialized in the skills needed in the Jordanian labor market, as these courses are what may give them the basic skills necessary to enter the labor market.

On the other hand, 26.6% of students believe that neglecting networking between university students and the unavailability of suitable training opportunities that may provide them the basic skills necessary to enter the labor market is one of the most pressing pitfalls. What is interesting here is students put the blame on the deanships of student affairs, as in their opinion, these deanships are supposed to promote networking between students and the private sector.

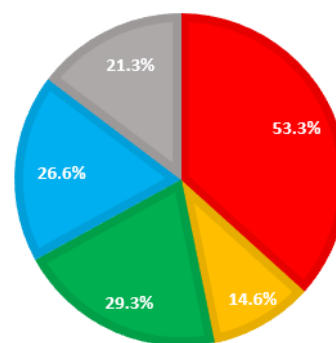
⁹ Soto, Irenka and Helen Eccles. "The Cambridge Approach to 21st Century Skills: Definitions, Development and Dilemmas for Assessment." in IAEA Conference. Singapore. 2014.

¹⁰ Schulz, Bernd. "The importance of soft skills: Education beyond academic knowledge." NAWA Journal of Language & Communication 2, no. 1, 2008

¹¹ Haneen Jaafari Experts: There is a gap between education outputs and the labor market ", Al-Rai newspaper, 8 25, 2022, [Experts: There is a gap between education outputs and the labor market| Al Rai Newspaper](#).

¹² Mohammed Alzayoud, " Academics: A large gap between education outcomes and labor market needs", Al-Rai newspaper, 7 7, 2011, [Academics: A large gap between education outcomes and labor market needs| Al Rai Newspaper \(alrai.com\)](#)

- 1 **The Special Study Plan's applied training in academic specialization is not commensurate with the labour market and its requirements.**
- 2 **Lack of specialized educational courses with the required skills in the Jordanian labour market.**
- 3 **Non-networking of undergraduate students and appropriate training opportunities provided by the Deanship of Students' Affairs at universities that may acquire the basic skills needed to enter the labour market.**
- 4 **There is no graduate follow-up department within the Department of Graduate Students' Affairs to follow up on their post-graduate affairs and engage them with opportunities that may suit them.**
- 5 **The number of hours of courses outside the field of specialization, the lack of networking of undergraduate students and the availability of appropriate training opportunities for them provided by the Deanship of Student Affairs at universities that may acquire the basic skills needed to enter the labour market.**



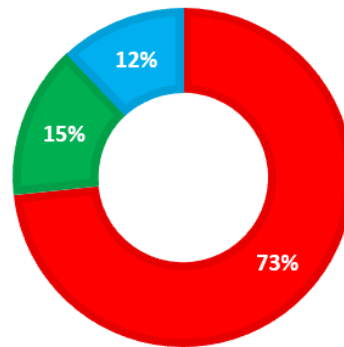
**Translation:

1. Incompatibility of practical training in the curriculums of academic majors with the labor market and its requirements.
2. Lack of educational courses specialized in the skills needed in the Jordanian labor market.
3. Not networking university students and not providing them with suitable training opportunities provided by the Deanship of Student Affairs that might give them the basic skills needed to enter the labor market.
4. Absence of a follow-up department for graduates affiliated with the Graduate Student Affairs Department to follow up on their affairs after graduation and network them with opportunities that may suit them.
5. The large number of course hours outside the field of specialization, the lack of networking of university students and the unavailability of suitable training opportunities for them provided by the Deanship of Student Affairs that may grant them the basic skills necessary to enter the labor market.

Figure1: The most important issues university undergraduate and postgraduate students face.

With regard to the courses proposed by university students (Figure 2), 73% of the students suggested adding a course for practical training on the specialization, while 15% mentioned the importance of courses specialized in labor market qualification, entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment. Additionally, 12% of the students suggested adding courses that include diverse skills, such as those of the 21st century.

- 1 Internship Subordinate to specialty.**
- 2 Qualification for the labor market, entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment.**
- 3 Skills included 21st-century skills, enhancing communication and teamwork skills, and a body correct to find work.**



**Translation:

1. Practical training as part of the academic major.
2. Becoming qualified for labor market, entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment.
3. Skills that cover those of the 21st century, strengthening communication and teamwork skills, and being properly prepared on how to search for a job.

Figure 2: Educational courses proposed by university students to enhance the acquisition of personal and other skills to match university education outputs with the labor market

A study at the University of Cambridge concluded that there is no specific definition of the term 21st century skills, which is expected, given the diversity of business majors adopted by various educators, policymakers, employers, education unions, and higher education institutions. 21st century skills cover various aspects such as life skills, workforce skills, interpersonal skills, applied skills, and non-cognitive skills.¹³ Figure 3 shows the classification of 21st century skills.

Referring to students' opinions regarding the quality of training opportunities, 52% expressed their need for practical training opportunities directly related to their scientific specialization, while 48% prefer general practical training that prepares them for the labor market. An article on the Jordanian website Forsa – a platform considered by many as the first Arab site that provides training opportunities and electronic services to guide students – detailed practical training that qualify graduates for the labor market, regardless of their major. These proposed trainings include information technology (ICT) courses, various language courses, courses in the field of translation and writing, courses for graduates and employees in engineering, soft skills development courses, and courses in the secretarial field.¹⁴

As for university study plans and their development, 82.7% of students said that it is necessary to add courses related to soft skills, while 81.3% of them believe that there is an urgent need for additional practical training period for students expected to graduate from all majors.¹⁵

¹³ Suto, Irenka, and Helen Eccles. "The Cambridge approach to 21st Century skills: definitions, development and dilemmas for assessment." In IAEA Conference. Singapore. 2014

¹⁴ "[What are the training courses that employees and fresh graduates should enroll in Browse on Forsa website](#)".2019,10.

¹⁵ The survey offered multiple options, so the total exceeds 100%.

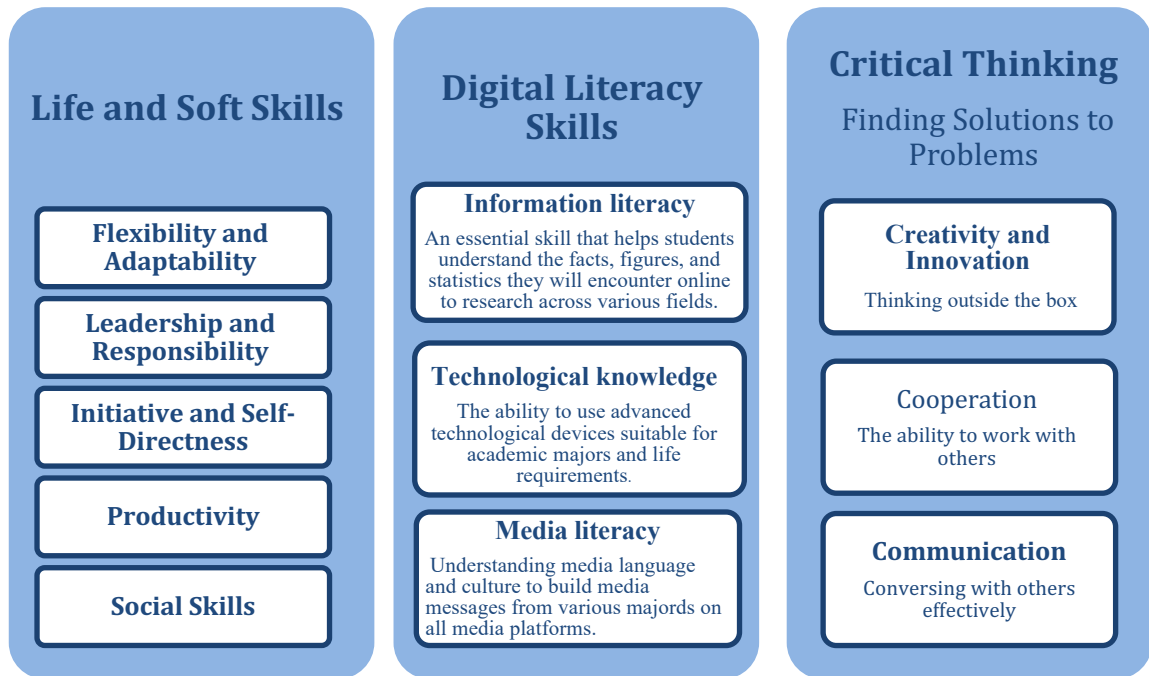


Figure 3: Classification of 21st Century Skills¹⁶

Recommendations

Decision makers in Jordanian universities from the Ministry of Higher Education and those responsible for managing university curricula and plans can study the following proposals:

1. Integrating 21st century skills and practical training into the study plan to include university majors and considering it a condition for graduation. This can be achieved by adding mandatory training hours specialized in 21st century skills for all university majors, and this can be applied by implementing the following strategy:
 - A. Forming a specialized committee of faculty members with the necessary practical experience from various majors across all universities, as well as representatives of the private sector and entrepreneurship initiatives in Jordan to design curricula specialized in 21st century skills that include and take into account all academic majors within a period of time decided by the Ministry of Higher Education. Approval of university study plans to be through deans' councils in Jordanian universities.
 - B. Adding a practical training course specialized in 21st century skills followed by a practical application for each academic year equivalent to 3 hours of the study plan and making it within the compulsory university requirements in all public and private universities of the Kingdom and considering it a condition for graduation for all majors.

¹⁶ Nadia Mustafa Al, Assaf, "21st Century Skills in Second Language Classes," new-educ, 9 09, 2022, <https://www.new-educ.com/%D9%85%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%86-21-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B5%D9%81%D9%88%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A9-2>

- C.** Attempting to work on coordinating the content of the practical application material dedicated for the 21st century skills to suit all academic major. Thus, ensuring that all university students across all disciplines graduate with the equivalent of 12 hours of practical training for the 21st century skills for students with four year specialization.
- 2.** Adding a period dedicated to practical training in the last academic year of all disciplines on the skills required for the labor market. This should be implemented by adding several practical training hours commensurate with the student's specialization in the year of graduation, where students receive intensive and hands-on training, especially for students of disciplines with study plans that do not contain a practical training period, such as literature, languages and sciences through:
- A.** Rendering the graduation project course a mandatory requirement to graduate for all university majors, which would promote the culture of entrepreneurship through thinking about issues and innovating solutions to problems even in disciplines that do not seemingly lend themselves to such projects, a process that would also enhance their demonstration, presentation, communication, and digital skills.
 - B.** Activating the role of the Career Guidance Office and following up with graduates in universities for faculties with specializations lacking practical training, by hosting entrepreneurs and pioneers of the private sector to conduct guidance activities and workshops such as design thinking, user experience in its multiple fields, storytelling, mind maps that improve thinking, and others that would expand the professional prospects of university students from various disciplines.
- 3.** Increasing the number of practical training hours in each study plan, making them a replacement for hours dedicated for some of the university's compulsory and optional requirements, which are often very detached from the students' specialization.
- 4.** Encouraging students to volunteer at higher education institutions through:
- A.** Activities sponsored by the university or on-campus clubs to broaden students' experiences, increase their self-confidence, and help them gain experience and knowledge that will support them in their career endeavors.
 - B.** Encouraging the deanships of student affairs across all universities of the Kingdom to establish partnerships and enhance communication with the private sector, youth centers affiliated to the Ministry of Youth and available in all governorates, the Crown Prince Foundation, the Royal Scientific Society and the Nahno platform, for the purposes of establishing creative student clubs in a specialized manner for each faculty by organizing events, workshops and volunteer activities that promote the acquisition and implementation of the 21st century skills for university students.
 - C.** Encouraging the Deanships of Student Affairs to cooperate with international organizations to introduce internships on university websites. For example, there could be a cooperation with institutions that do not require graduation or previous experience for such opportunities.

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من السفارة الأمريكية في الأردن.