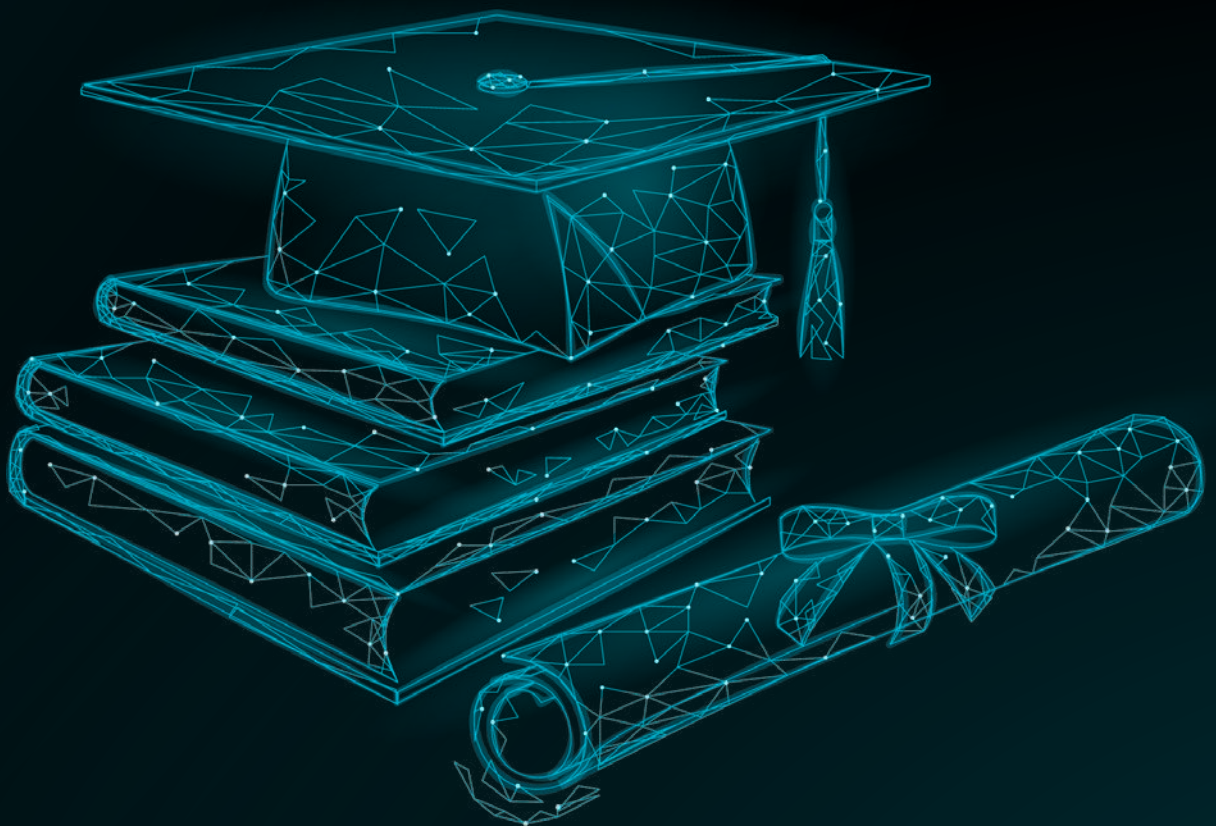


# BEST UNIVERSITIES & COLLEGES

FOR RECRUITMENT

AN OER-ABQ EDUCATION GROUP SURVEY



# BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP

Automation, artificial intelligence and machine learning have accelerated the need to equip our youth with job ready and future skills. The OER-ABQ Education Group Fresh Graduates Survey 2023 offers insightful signposts

**E**ncouraging ‘A society of creative individuals’ has been identified as an important pillar of Oman Vision 2040. The objectives of this pillar include - A high-quality educational system with societal partnership; a system that empowers human capabilities in the educational sector; an integrated and independent system to govern and evaluate the educational ecosystem against national and international standards; an effective national system that nurtures scientific research, innovation, and creativity to build a knowledge-based economy and society; diversified and sustainable funding sources for education, scientific research and innovation; national talents with dynamic capabilities and skills that are competitive locally and internationally.

The government is backing this with substantial spends on the education sector. Oman’s 2023 Budget has allocated RO4.30bn for spending on social sectors, out of which education gets the lion’s share of 44 per cent, followed by social welfare and health which get 22 per cent each and housing at 12 per cent.

Higher education in Oman has witnessed steady growth and significant positive transformation. The Ministry of Higher Education has a number of initiatives to support and develop higher education such as paying attention to the training system of professional development, increasing

the practical training component in higher education institutions, diversifying its sources and linking it to the needs of the labour market, supporting efforts to improve the quality of higher education, establishing the foundation for scientific research, innovation and entrepreneurship.

On the other hand, employers and organisations find students to be ill prepared for the workplace, lacking basic skills such as an ability to communicate, strategic thinking and problem solving. The growing skill gap between academia and the job market is a problem that is not restricted to Oman, but faced by the most advanced countries in the world.

## Need for concerted action

According to Wiley’s Closing the Skills Gap Report released in January 2023 companies in the United States are having an increasingly difficult time attracting and retaining workers who have the skills needed to fill their open jobs. Among 600 US human resources professionals surveyed by Wiley, 69 per cent said their organisation has a skills gap, up from 55 per cent in a similar survey in 2021.

“This widening of the skills gap is concerning and not likely to end soon,” said Todd Zipper, executive vice president at Wiley. “The demand for skills keeps evolving faster, and it’s increasingly hard for companies and higher education institutions to keep up,

particularly when it comes to soft skills. Indeed, there’s now a greater demand for soft skills over hard skills following the pandemic.”

The growing skills gap has led to staffing challenges, making it harder for organizations to recruit and retain talent. During 2022, nearly half of employers in Wiley’s survey reported that at least 10 per cent of their open roles went unfilled, but that figure rose to 20 per cent among employers who said they have a skills gap. These challenges can cause organisations to become less efficient and less competitive.

While some organisations address their skills gap by hiring new employees or using contractors, the majority say they try to upskill or reskill current employees to fill the gap. Those that lack the development initiatives and in-house resources to effectively retrain workers can instead reimburse employees’ tuition costs for training or partner with colleges or technical schools. The proportion of respondents who said more than five per cent of their workforce used tuition assistance rose from 61 per cent in 2021 to 69 per cent in 2022.

The report also suggests alternate credentials are gaining on the college degree as a way to validate a job candidate’s skills. While 81 per cent of respondents believe earning a bachelor’s degree positions an

individual for success, 62 per cent place less value on whether applicants graduated from college, with most saying they would interview non-graduates who have five years of relevant work experience, certificates from colleges or universities, and digital badges or micro-credentials.

Humayun Kabir, Chief Executive Officer, ABQ Education Group avers, “Given the incredible velocity of change all around us, educational systems are struggling to evolve and keep pace. To focus on traditional subjects and the memorising of information alone is no longer sufficient in a world that demands critical thinking, innovation and adaptability. With the rapid pace of technological advancements and the changing nature of work, students need to be equipped with skills that are relevant for the 21st-century workforce. Globally, the current educational system has been slow to adapt to these changes, resulting in a discrepancy between the skills that students possess and the skills that are in demand in the job market. There is a growing need for a more flexible, personalised and interdisciplinary approach to education that prepares students for success in a rapidly changing world.”

According to a Harvard Business Review report, ‘While the global youth skilling challenge varies by country, region, or locale, there are high-impact actions that governments and businesses can take to address this issue.’

The first amongst these is to - understand what skills your organisation or country needs. This will help in building a pipeline of workers who are suitably trained for the future labour market that requires both digital and relational skills, whether in regular employment, entrepreneurial ventures, or the gig economy.

The best way to answer it is with national skills maps, or an overview of all the skills future employees will need not just technical and job-specific skills, but emotional, relational, and communicative ones as well. The maps should include standardized definitions and methods that measure whether or



not a skill has been learned.

For example, Singapore’s SkillsFuture program provides opportunities for all learners, from students through experienced careerists, to identify the appropriate skills for their chosen profession and provides access to the resources needed to master those skills. Targeted to all Singaporeans, it encourages life-long learning and skills development. Germany’s skills anticipation programme uses “skills intelligence” to project what the future labour market might look like, even providing forward-looking career guidance to job seekers and insight to educators into what skills youth need as they prepare to enter the workforce.

Second, leverage corporate training outside of corporations. Many corporations have internal skills development platforms that help current employees acquire new skills. But what about their future employees? By pairing elements from best-of-class corporate programmes with a government-led national policy framework, stakeholders can jointly help establish a high-quality national skills development programme.

Amazon Web Services (AWS) and Microsoft Learn are already working in this direction. AWS provides students and military veterans with access to skills training courses for cloud careers

and outlines pathways to technology career tracks through its AWS Educate initiative, and its job board connects participants with technology jobs at Amazon and other companies.

Microsoft Learn is an online training platform that helps any interested individual achieve proficiency on a series of Microsoft technologies. Yuwaah (Generation Unlimited India) and PwC are developing a “platform of platforms” that will aggregate existing platforms providing digital upskilling opportunities to help connect youth with options for training, career guidance and, ultimately, jobs. The partnership aims to transform education, skilling, and employment for 300 million young people in India by 2030.

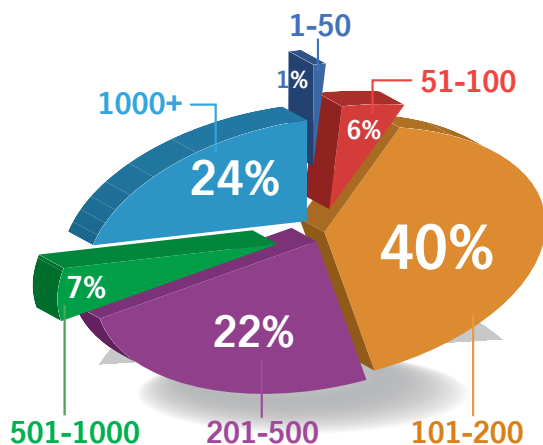
Training and making the youth employable is imperative for social stability and economic growth. As 1.3 billion youth — the largest generation of young people in the history of the planet — are about to attempt to enter the workforce the importance of bridging the skill gap can hardly be overstated.

Oman’s young demographic necessitates concerted action by the government, academic institutions and the corporate sector to tackle this challenge. The OER-ABQ Education Group ‘Fresh Graduates Survey’ highlights concerns and opportunities with data driven insights.



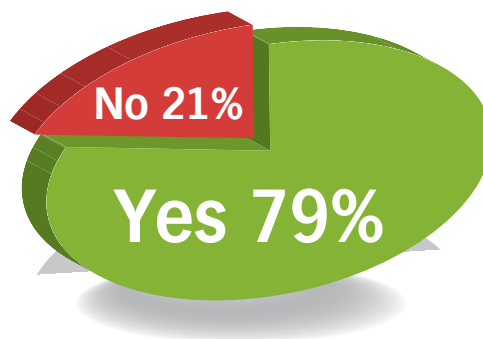
## COLLEGES

**Total Employees - Size of Organisation's held in the survey**



**Average no of employees 490.43**

**During the last one year, did your organisation recruit fresh college graduates for any full time position?**



**During the last one year in which job functions were fresh graduates recruited**

Job Categories	% of Companies who recruited
Highly Specialised jobs specific to our industry	9
Administration /Human Resources	70
Sales & Marketing	72
Accounts & Finance	72
IT and Computers	54
Logistics/Supply chain	42
Civil Engineering	39
Mechanical Engineering	42
Electrical Engineering	40
Petroleum Engineering	11
Others	18

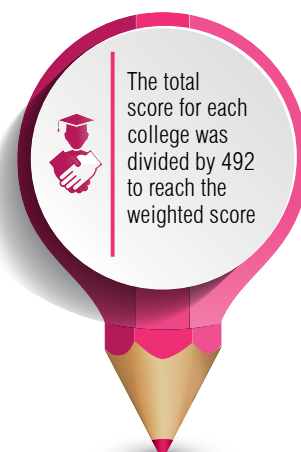
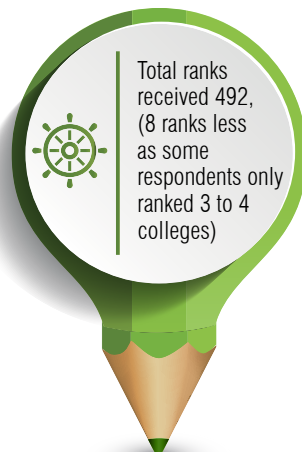
## COLLEGES RANKED BY SIMPLE PREFERENCE

Name of the Institutions	1st Preference	2nd Preference	3rd Preference	4th Preference	5th Preference	Cumulative	Rank
SQU	50	33	10	4	0	97	1
Higher College of Technology	25	35	11	8	8	87	2
Middle East College	10	0	14	21	13	58	3
GUtech	1	11	18	11	17	58	3
Majan College	4	4	15	13	10	46	4
Modern College of Business & Science	0	7	7	11	13	38	5
College of Banking & Financial Studies	4	3	6	13	7	33	6
National University of Science & Technology	0	4	10	4	11	29	7
Sohar University	3	0	3	1	4	11	8
Dhofar University	1	1	0	6	3	11	8

## COLLEGES RANKED BY WEIGHTED RANK SCORE

Points (Weightage assigned)	5	4	3	2	1	Score	Rank Score
SQU	250	132	30	8	0	420	85.4
Higher College of Technology	125	140	33	16	8	322	65.4
Middle East College	50	0	42	42	13	147	29.9
GUtech	5	44	54	22	17	142	28.9
Majan College	20	16	45	26	10	117	23.8
Modern College of Business & Science	0	28	21	22	13	84	17.1
College of Banking & Financial Studies	20	12	18	26	7	83	16.9
National University of Science & Technology	0	16	30	8	11	65	13.2
Sohar University	15	0	9	2	4	30	6.1
Dhofar University	5	4	0	12	3	24	4.9

## Weighted Ranking Explained







## COLLEGES PREFERRED FOR VARIOUS COURSES

### Universities and colleges preferred by recruiters for Administration/HR jobs

SQU
Higher College of Technology
Majan College
College of Banking & Financial Studies
Modern College of Business & Science
Oman Tourism College
Middle East College
GUtech
National University of Science & Technology
Muscat College

### Universities and colleges preferred by recruiters for Sales & Customer Service

SQU
Higher College of Technology
Majan College
College of Banking & Financial Studies
Modern College of Business & Science
Middle East College
GUtech
Oman Tourism College
National University of Science & Technology
Muscat College

### Universities and colleges preferred by recruiters for Accounting and Finance

SQU
Modern College of Business & Science
College of Banking & Financial Studies
Majan College
Higher College of Technology
GUtech
Dhofar University
Middle East College
Arab Open University
Muscat College



### Universities and colleges preferred by recruiters for Marketing & Media

SQU
Higher College of Technology
Modern College of Business & Science
Majan College
Middle East College
GUtech
College of Banking & Financial Studies
National University of Science & Technology
Oman Tourism College
Muscat College

### Universities and colleges preferred by recruiters for IT and Computers

SQU
Higher College of Technology
GUtech
Middle East College
National University of Science & Technology
Modern College of Business & Science
Majan College
Dhofar University
Sohar University
Muscat College

### Universities and colleges preferred by recruiters for Logistics and Supply Chain

SQU
Middle East College
Majan College
College of Banking & Financial Studies
Modern College of Business & Science
Higher College of Technology
GUtech
Oman Tourism College
National University of Science & Technology
Sohar University

### Universities and colleges preferred by recruiters for Civil Engineering

SQU
Higher College of Technology
GUtech
Middle East College
National University of Science & Technology
Modern College of Business & Science
Sohar University
Majan College
Muscat College
Nizwa University



## COLLEGES PREFERRED FOR VARIOUS COURSES

### Universities and colleges preferred by recruiters for Mechanical Engineering

SQU
Higher College of Technology
Middle East College
GUtech
National University of Science & Technology
Modern College of Business & Science
Dhofar University
Sohar University
Majan College
Nizwa University

### Universities and colleges preferred by recruiters for Petroleum Engineering

SQU
Higher College of Technology
Middle East College
GUtech
National University of Science & Technology
Sohar University
Majan College
Nizwa University
Dhofar University
Modern College of Business & Science

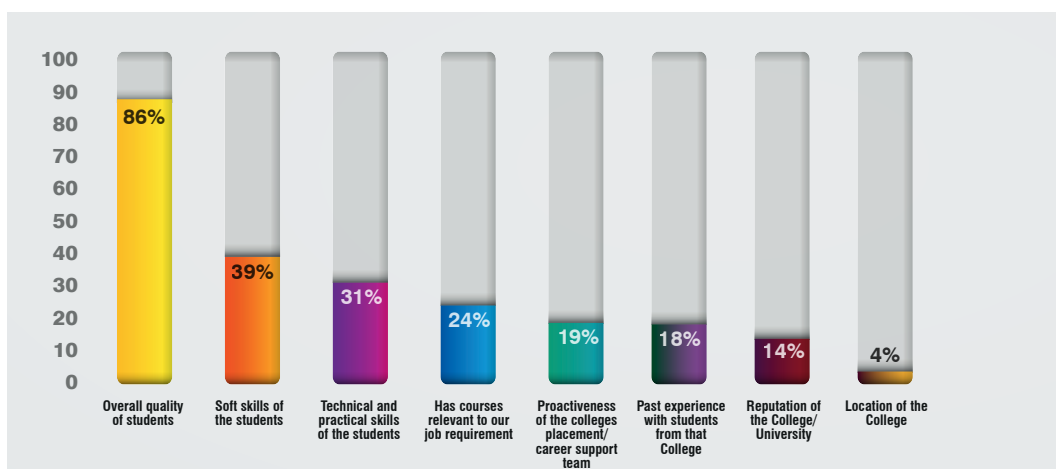
### Universities and colleges preferred by recruiters for Electrical Engineering

SQU
Higher College of Technology
Middle East College
GUtech
National University of Science & Technology
Dhofar University
Modern College of Business & Science
Sohar University
Majan College
Muscat College

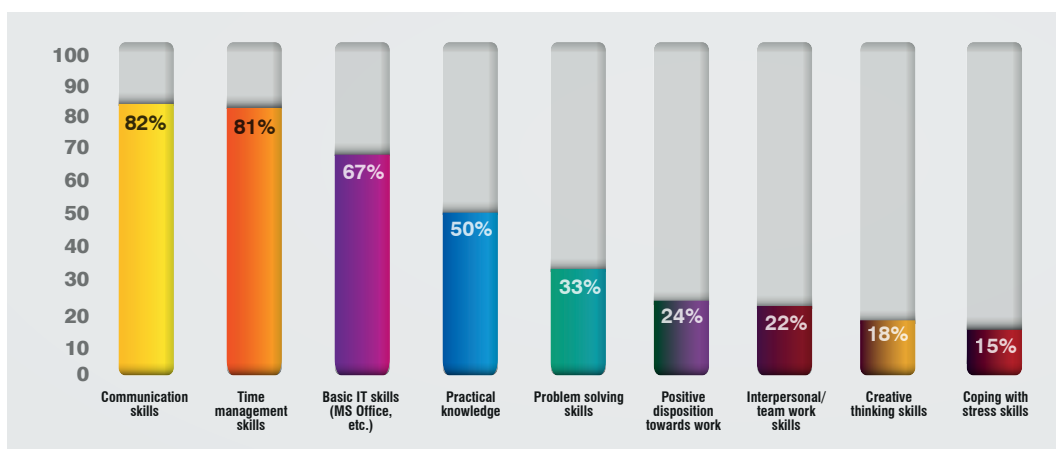




## Reasons why recruiters select students from a particular college



## What are the skill sets that are lacking in students coming out of colleges?



## Sample by Industry

Base	100
Manufacturing	10
Construction	6
Retail	4
Automotive	6
Logistics	2
Tourism & related industries	3
Utilities and related industries	4
EPC Contractors	3
Facility Management	3
Bank, Insurance & other financial institutions	8
Real Estate - property managers and developers	6
Large Industries	6
Oil & Gas - upstream/downstream	10
Telecom	8
IT & related	6
Corporate business House/Family Business	7
Ministry /Government Institutions	7
Others	2



## RANKING OF COLLEGES IN OMAN – STUDENTS

RESPONDENTS WERE CLASS  
12TH STUDENTS FROM PRIVATE  
INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

NATIONALITY SPLIT		
	Count	Percentage
Omani	235	76.7%
Non-Omani	71	23.3%
Total	306	100.0%

GENDER SPLIT		
	Count	Percentage
Male	178	62.6%
Female	128	37.4%
Total	306	100.0%

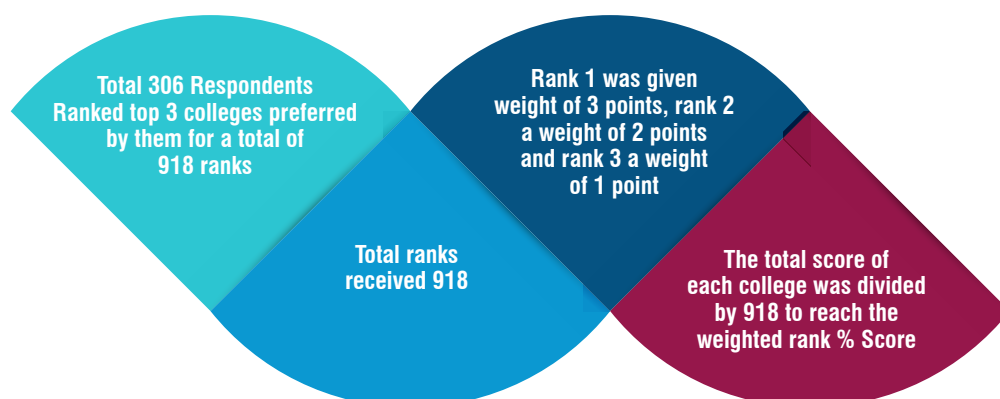
COURSE DECISION MAKER		
	Total Count	Total Percentage
I decide	148	50.5%
My Family members & I decide together	151	47.9%
Family decides	7	1.7%
Total	306	100.0%

COLLEGE DECISION MAKER		
	Total Count	Total Percentage
My Family members & I decide together	203	64.5%
I decide	94	33.1%
Family decides	9	2.4%
Total	306	100.0%

COURSE PREFERENCE		
Course	Count	Percentage
IT and Computers	60	18.6%
Medicine/Nursing/Dental	55	15.5%
Business Studies	29	12.1%
Specialised Engineering	23	9.2%
Mechanical Engineering	21	7.4%
Accounts & Finance/Economics	18	5.8%
Sales & Marketing	14	4.9%
Law	15	4.7%
Architecture	16	3.6%
Art & Design	11	3.4%
Petroleum Engineering	7	2.9%
Electrical Engineering	6	2.1%
Logistics/Supply chain	5	1.8%
Civil Engineering	3	1.6%
Maths/Science/Physics/Chemistry	6	1.4%
Travel & Tourism	3	1.4%
Psychology	5	0.9%
Human Resources	2	0.8%
Pharmacy	2	0.7%
Language	1	0.5%
Teaching	2	0.4%
Hospitality/Hotel Management	2	0.2%
Total	306	100.0%

## RANKING OF TOP 3 PREFERRED COLLEGE FOR FURTHER STUDIES

SIMPLE PREFERENCE					WEIGHTED SCORE				
Colleges	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Cumulative Rank	Rank 1 Points	Rank 2 Points	Rank 3 Points	Total Points	Weighted % Rank Score
					3	2	1		
SQU	159	55	14	228	477	110	14	601	65.5
GUtech	87	105	23	215	261	210	23	494	53.8
Muscat University	11	19	36	66	33	38	36	107	11.7
National University of Science & Technology	8	25	30	63	24	50	30	104	11.3
Higher College of Technology	6	23	27	56	18	46	27	91	9.9
Sohar University	7	15	33	55	21	30	33	84	9.2
Middle East College	8	11	34	53	24	22	34	80	8.7
Oman Medical/Dental College	6	4	18	28	18	8	18	44	4.8
Nizwa University	0	9	17	26	0	18	17	35	3.8
Dhofar University	3	6	11	20	9	12	11	32	3.5



**The OER-ABQ Research Survey was conducted by SIMPA Marketing Research and Consultancy**

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Phase 1- Secondary Research

Extensive Secondary research was conducted to identify all the colleges available in Oman and ascertain the courses being offered by each college

- Overall, 30 Colleges were ranked in the survey

### Phase 2- Quantitative Survey

- A structured questionnaire was prepared in consultation with industry as well as HR experts
- Interviews were conducted with senior HR executives/decision makers in large organisations across different industry segments
- The sample size for the study was 100
- Interviews were conducted face to face with the respondents

### Student's Online survey

- An online survey was conducted with 12th grade students at private international schools using a structured questionnaire

SIMPA Marketing Research is a full-service agency founded in 1996 in the Sultanate of Oman. It has extensive experience of over 25 years in consumer research as well as feasibility studies and is the first local firm of its kind in the country with an excellent understanding of the region's cultural nuances. SIMPA is primarily focused on catering to the needs of the Omani market and has a team of qualified and experienced market researchers in the country.

# ADAPTING TO STEP CHANGE

Humayun Kabir, CEO, ABQ Education Group advises students to explore cooperative education programmes and internship opportunities to enhance their theoretical knowledge with practical hands-on experience in an interview with OER

**Given the availability of resources online, how relevant is a school education in preparing students for the real world?**

Digital platforms should be seen as a complement and extension of traditional forms of learning. During the pandemic, it was evident that not even the best online learning programmes can fully replace the benefits of personal contact time with a teacher or the sincere friendships that develop in a classroom setup. An experiment by German psychologist, Ebbinghaus, revealed that students forget up to 95 per cent of what they learn in school after three days. However, school life plays an essential role in a child's holistic development as an individual, expanding their abilities in numerous social and disciplinary skills, such as teamwork, leadership, meeting deadlines, attendance, punctuality, and social interaction. These are invaluable life skills that online resources will never be able to fully substitute.

**There are growing concerns that the educational curriculum and delivery in large parts of the world both in schools and universities are outdated and not in line with the needs of a competitive global economy. Do you agree with this point of view?**

Yes, with the incredible velocity of

change all around us, educational systems are struggling to evolve and keep pace. To focus on traditional subjects and the memorising of information alone is no longer sufficient in a world that demands critical thinking, innovation and adaptability.

With the rapid pace of technological advancements and the changing nature of work, students need to be equipped with skills that are relevant for the 21st-century workforce. Globally, the current educational system has been slow to adapt to these changes, resulting in a discrepancy between the skills that students possess and the skills that are in demand in the job market. There is a growing need for a more flexible, personalised and interdisciplinary approach to education that prepares students for success in a rapidly changing world.

**How can the gap between the needs of the job market and the skills or proficiency of students be bridged?**

The job market is constantly evolving, and employers are looking for individuals with the right combination of competence, knowledge and experience. However, many students entering the job market lack the necessary skills and experience to secure their desired jobs.

To address this issue, educational

institutions and employers must collaborate to improve existing education product and to develop programmes that provide students with practical skills and hands-on experience. This will help them to develop the skills required to thrive after school and enable employers to identify and recruit perfectly suited candidates to join their organisations.

**In what ways will the growing usage of Artificial Intelligence help to innovate teaching and learning practices?**

Though I strongly believe that the presence of teachers is irreplaceable, there will be immense changes to best practices in education in the coming years. It is fascinating what chatbots like ChatGPT are able to produce even though it is still a relatively new phenomenon. AI allows teachers to instantly generate ever-changing and dynamic lesson plans, customised to specific curricula and student needs. It can also help teachers to personalise learning experiences and provides immediate feedback to students.

At ABQ, we believe in the importance of academic precision and to not leave outcomes to chance. We have integrated several internal and international benchmarking assessments and academic support systems throughout our students'



educational journey. With the use of AI, we will be able to analyse data and provide insights to educators even more accurately than we are currently able to do.

**Is there a risk that AI will widen the gap between resource-rich educational institutions and schools or colleges in less affluent areas?**

Whilst AI has the potential to transform

education by personalising learning and providing real-time feedback to teachers and students, it is likely that wealthier schools will have an easier time accessing and implementing it.



## Educational institutions play a critical role in preparing students for the workforce. It is important to create employable students by implementing a range of strategies and programmes that equip students with the skills, knowledge, and practical experience they need to succeed after graduation

AI technology requires a significant investment to implement the necessary infrastructure and training needed to fully utilise it. This will inevitably lead to a situation where students in more affluent areas have a significant advantage over students in less fortunate communities, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities even more.

Having said that, it is important to note that AI can also help to level the playing field by providing personalised learning opportunities and support to students who may otherwise not have access to such resources. It would therefore be ideal to implement AI in a way that benefits all students, regardless of their background or socio-economic status.

**How does the ABQ Group prepare and equip students for college and the job market? Please share details of the resources employed, counselling, industry interactions etc.**

Preparing students for tertiary studies and the job market requires a multifaceted approach that includes a mindset of success, cultivating students' academic knowledge and developing the skills required by employers.

We encourage our students to develop strong academic skills. Good grades and a solid foundation in subjects like mathematics, science, and English can definitely open doors to future

opportunities. ABQ has also developed a two-part (Grades 3-7 and 8-12) market-leading mentorship programme called the Discovering You Programme (DYP), which focuses on the mastering of 21st-century skills, educational goal setting and career guidance.

Many students enter university or college unsure of what they want to do with their lives. We help them to discover what they are passionate about by exposing them to different career options and encouraging them to pursue their interests and find a career path that suits them. This is done through career expos, exposure to industry experts, mentoring sessions, and more.

**Given the young demographic of Oman, the need for creating employability and employable students is an overriding imperative. In what ways can educational institutions contribute towards this larger objective?**

Educational institutions play a critical role in preparing students for the workforce. It is important to create employable students by implementing a range of strategies and programmes that equip students with the skills, knowledge, and practical experience they need to succeed after graduation.

One effective approach is to prioritise experiential learning opportunities, such as internships and job shadowing initiatives, which provide students with hands-on work experience, as well as connections to potential employers.

Tertiary institutions must also ensure that their curricula are relevant and up to date, with a focus on in-demand skills and emerging industries.

**Have you seen a change in industry expectations from students over the last few years? If so, how can students keep pace with the constantly evolving needs of companies?**

Pertinent work experience is almost as valuable as a degree and exam results when it comes to building a successful career today. Therefore, students should take advantage of cooperative education programmes and internships that balance theory with periods of practical, hands-on experience prior to graduation.

These opportunities provide valuable experience and build their professional networks in preparation for entering the workforce. By bridging the gap between the job market and the skills and proficiency of students we can ensure that they are well-prepared for the future and that employers have access to the skilled talent they need to succeed.

My advice for students is this, the key to remaining relevant with the constantly evolving needs of companies is by learning how to adapt and by grabbing every opportunity to acquire new skills. The world is changing at a rapid pace and businesses are looking for the employees who are most flexible and adaptable. [OER](#)