



Experiential Learning: A Key to Better Talent Development





In the ever-changing landscape of education and employment, where rapid digitalization and a focus on skills-based learning are increasingly prominent, Experiential Learning (EL) has become a crucial component. This development reflects the growing need for practical, real-world applications in learning environments. EL is an approach to learning that integrates students into real work environments, aligning practical experiences with academic pursuits. As a key driver in the transformation of educational methodologies, EL facilitates a comprehensive approach to talent development. Research shows that experiential learning, in its various forms, can stimulate academic inquiry in students by promoting interdisciplinary learning, civic engagement, career development, cultural awareness, leadership, and other professional and intellectual skills.¹

The United Arab Emirates' ambition to become the global hub for innovation and knowledge has put a spotlight on EL programs with nation-wide initiatives like the Advanced Skills Strategy². The Advanced Skills Strategy is an integral part of the UAE National Strategy of 2030 to provide a dynamic framework for advancing human resources development through high-quality practical learning opportunities. In keeping with the UAE Centennial plan of 2071, the strategy seeks to integrate life-long learning practices into the education-to-employment journeys of both residents and citizens, thereby shaping a future-ready workforce. This is crucial in supporting the local economy and preparing youth for work earlier in their lives.

Under its strategic pillar of Education 360, the Foundation encourages multi-sector collaboration among the stakeholders to foster dialogues around challenges and opportunities of engaging students in real-life professional experience through various forms of Experiential Learning.

¹ Center for Teaching and Learning, Boston University.

² Advanced Skills Strategy



Elements of Effective Experiential Learning

To foster impactful discussions on initiatives, incentives, structures, and policies necessary for Experiential Learning (EL), it is essential to cultivate meaningful partnerships among stakeholders. There are five key elements to successfully implement, scale, and sustain EL programs:

- **A Proactive Labor Market:** It is vital to have employers willing to cultivate partnerships and adopt innovative approaches that lead to providing a meaningful experience to students at their organizations. Bringing in employers into program design will ensure a commitment and a strong connection to market requirements of the workforce.
- **Government Support:** A supportive framework plays a crucial role through removing legislative barriers to ensure an enabling ecosystem for employers to engage students in the workplace. Accreditation bodies can facilitate academic credit for work experiences and encourage institutions to adopt innovative models that boost students' skills.
- **Dedicated Students:** Self-motivated and passionate students, who are eager to gain meaningful experiences and understand the nuances of professional life, make role models for other students and improve EL programs by showing commitment and dedication.
- **Informed Faculty:** The success of EL relies on the commitment of faculty within higher education entities. Faculty members need to view employability as an essential outcome of higher education and support students to make the most of their EL experiences.
- **Experiential Learning Experts:** Recognizing the variety of education and employment ecosystems, experts play a crucial role in advising and helping to curate different modules that prioritize the learner's experience.

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”The success of experiential learning is multi-faceted. We need proactive higher education institutions that claim their role in preparing students for the job market, willing employers who can foster strategic partnerships to bring impactful programs to life, and students who understand the importance of EL as a step in beginning their professional journey. When we tell students that the best way to predict their own future is by designing it, we need to enable them to do so by meaningfully involving them in tailored and innovative EL opportunities.”

Dr. Yousef Al-Assaf

President, Rochester Institute of Technology in Dubai



The Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation's Initiative for Work-Integrated Learning

In line with its mandate to empower Emirati and Arab youth through high-quality education and skill-building opportunities, the Foundation partnered with University of Waterloo (UoW) in 2022 to support the enhancement of work-integrated learning at institutions in the UAE. The work-integrated learning (WIL) initiative at the Foundation falls under the 360 Education Strategic Pillar and Experiential Learning pathway, in which a broad range of learning experiences are included, each through one or more strategic partner(s).

This AGF initiative aims to support the wider education ecosystem through exploring how WIL can enhance employability outcomes of UAE graduates. It aims to reduce the skills gap by offering market-driven employment experiences as part of higher education programs. The WIL initiative outlined a multi-phased approach, dividing it into several stages that would allow room for flexibility, adjustments, and revisions to foster continuous improvements.

Phase one of this partnership focused on assessing the potential of implementing WIL models in the UAE through a multi-stakeholder analysis. The main findings were summarized in a final report. [Read the report here.](#)



Co-op at the University of Waterloo (UoW)

In 1957, the UoW opened its doors to 74 engineering students with co-operative education as its cornerstone. Today, with over 42,000 students attending annually, UoW ranks first in Canada for experiential learning and employer-student connections. With a global network spanning more than 238,000 alumni in 153 countries, Waterloo attracts world-class scholars including a Nobel Laureate, leads in providing work-integrated learning opportunities with 7,500+ active co-op employers and fosters an entrepreneurial spirit that's created 5,000+ jobs.



Benefits of Adopting a Wide Experiential Learning Program

The following advantages of an EL program are widely recognized for enhancing the educational and professional prospects of students, as well as benefiting the broader ecosystem:

- **Adaptability to Job Market:** A meaningful EL experience would prepare the students for the fast-changing job market, thus gradually closing the gap between academia and industries.
- **Sustainable Talent Pipeline:** A strong EL program across different higher education institutions and different fields of study would secure continuous flow of talent to the private sector.
- **Technology and Upskilling:** In a world moving fast in all aspects of technological advancements, EL not only prepares the graduates for the actual applications of technology, but also would direct their next fields of study, hence reduce further the digital skills gap in the market.



A woman with long brown hair and glasses is speaking into a microphone. She is wearing a green floral patterned top. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. A semi-transparent white box is overlaid on the bottom half of the image, containing text and a quote icon.

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“Companies that are looking into building a sustainable talent pipeline can do so by leveraging EL and offering opportunities to students to learn, train, and develop within those entities. This will help highlight the talents and enable their growth in the selected careers.”

Ms. Monika Carlton

Senior Talent Recruiter Middle East & Africa, Emerson



Recommendations for Enhancing Experiential Learning:

Establishing an ecosystem that recognizes EL as a critical component for preparing, diversifying, and building a resilient future workforce is important. However, getting this right for different actors can sometimes be a challenge. These recommendations have a track record of driving successful outcomes:

For Higher Education Institutions (HEIs):

Incorporating EL into HEI's academic frameworks can enhance students' practical skills and provide them with real-world experiences. It can also attract prospective students by showcasing universities' ability to graduate academically proficient graduates, who are also well-prepared for the challenges of the workforce. To implement effective EL programs, HEIs can:

- **Foster Stronger Partnerships for Holistic Programs:** Through collaboration, HEIs can create the much-needed bridge between academia and industry, building the trust required to coordinate efforts and work towards desired learning outcomes for learners.
- **Integrate EL into the Curricula:** By modifying curricula to integrate EL as a part of students' academic journeys, HEIs can introduce transformational change into the higher education landscape and put the students' future at the center of its academic efforts.



“EL is about giving authentic experiences to students. Around the world, experiential learning is strongest when it is both authentic and tailored. The closer you can work with a student as an employee, the more real work you can give them and the better the outcomes for both the organization and the student. It is through our partnership with Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation that we are working towards availing more EL programs in the UAE, where we can build well-equipped local talent pipelines.”

Ms. Anne-Marie Fannon

Director, Work-Learn Institute at University of Waterloo

Recommendations for Enhancing Experiential Learning

For Employers:

Companies can capitalize on their experience of engaging students in EL programs at their organizations by:

- **Challenge the Youth:** Employers can recognize the willingness of youth to learn and channel their enthusiasm through providing them with meaningful tasks. This allows the students to be active, accountable, and impactful.
- **Transform Internships into Learning Opportunities:** By moving beyond viewing internships as extra organizational burden, employers can work with HEIs to design internships that lead to productive learning outcomes while remaining aligned with the organization's work.
- **Combine EL with Learning and Micro Credentials:** By merging EL with other learning initiatives and/or micro-credentials, employers can encourage students to join EL programs. This can take the form of implementing on-the-job training or linking other types of fellowships/micro-credentials to teach practical skills and enhance the overall learning experience.



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“As stakeholders, we need to challenge students and to allow them to be accountable. The more we give them access to projects, The more responsibilities we give them, the more they will be able to develop and contribute to actual work. This will give us insights on how to bridge existing skills gaps between education and industry.”

Ms. Azza Aljuwaied

Account Technology Strategist, Microsoft



Moving Forward

There are different modes of cooperative education and experiential learning, each with distinct challenges that are facing a wider implementation of in the UAE. Despite those challenges, the UAE provides an enabling environment that would allow stakeholders to work together towards introducing more initiatives in this area.



Moving Forward

Prioritizing the following points would enhance both the scale and quality of provided programs:

- **Listen to students'** voices and provide them with a platform to share their experiences, insights, and aspirations, as well as their ideas for innovation in this regard.
- **Take additional steps** and extend efforts beyond basic programs, encouraging universities to challenge companies and vice versa. This can lead to productive outcomes including mentoring programs, workshops, and open days where students and staff can interact with company leaders.
- **Leverage successful international models** to highlight the advantages of EL using successful examples of both companies and students. Strong partnerships are crucial in supporting the knowledge transfer of the well-established EL programs and exploring how localization of those programs could boost the skills development in the local context.



Annex:

This outcome paper presents key takeaways from a panel discussion organized by the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation with the University of Waterloo and Times Higher Education (THE) at THE MENA Universities Summit 2023.

The panel featured the following field experts and a youth representative to reflect on their experience with EL:

- Ms. Anne-Marie Fannon; Director, Work-Learn Institute at University of Waterloo
- Dr. Yousef Al-Assaf; President, Rochester Institute of Technology in Dubai (RIT)
- Ms. Monika Carlton; Senior Talent Recruiter Middle East & Africa, Emerson
- Ms. Azza Aljuwaied; Account Technology Strategist, Microsoft
- Elizabeth Shepherd; Managing Director of Consultancy Services, Times Higher Ed (Moderator)



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