



Press Release

30 per cent of the GCC youth face persistent unemployment

ICDL GCC Foundation points to ICT skills as key to balancing job market in world's second youngest regional population

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With more than half of its natives under the age of 25, the GCC and MENA areas have the second youngest population among world regions. Many employable youths here still do not have jobs due to the prevailing preference for public sector employment among young nationals, limited participation of female professionals, as well as a predominantly expatriate population and workforce.

Recent figures place Oman and Bahrain at the top with unemployment rates as high as 15 percent each, followed by Saudi Arabia at 10.8 percent. Figures are lower in Kuwait and UAE at 2.4 and 2.2 percent respectively. Although Qatar has the lowest rate at 0.5 percent, experts warn that future trends point towards an escalation rather than a decline.

According to the UN Population Division's 2010 report on World Population Prospects, GCC youths account for a substantial 30 per cent of the working-age population. Their unemployment is the highest among global regions; on average, only a third of MENA youth are in the labour force, compared to half of youth globally. Part of the problem is the proliferation of foreigners; in the GCC, foreign workforce accounts for more than 40 per cent of the population and in some countries like the UAE for example, expatriates account for almost 90 per cent. Local youths thus face stiff competition from more experienced multicultural job seekers. Moreover, female workforce participation is half of that of males in the region and the lowest in the world at 22 per cent.

Another facet of the challenge is the existing imbalance between private and public sector employment, with the latter attracting the majority of national job seekers. Government positions offer long-term job security, higher salaries and an array of attractive benefits such as shorter working-hours, longer holidays and generous pension packages. This reality is reaching a saturation point, however, and the public sector is steadily relinquishing its role as the employer of first and last resort.

But to direct nationals towards private sector jobs, which are usually more demanding in terms of qualifications, a number of factors have to be considered starting with the educational system. In many cases, curricula focus more on society, culture and religion rather than science, mathematics, engineering and technology. According to the US Department of Education's Institute of Education Statistics, the proportion of 15 year olds falling short of basic mathematics literacy in Qatar, for example, is 72 per cent compared with 10 per cent in the US.

To rectify the situation, GCC governments have been implementing strategies such as enhancing the relevance of the educational curricula and strengthening links between the educational system and the private sector. They have realized that the first step to establish competitiveness

of nationals amid a skilled expatriate workforce is a first-class education, one that facilitates more high-tech, high-skilled economic diversification.

But despite various government-led efforts and policy initiatives implemented and refined from one country to another, more still needs to be done to build up the motivation and self confidence of young nationals to address their weak presence in the private sector and empower them to meet the needs of today's dynamic job markets. Particularly, to steer them towards more challenging employment opportunities in areas such as information technology, one of the world's most developing and job growing industry in the private sector. Labour and educational authorities should devise more effective strategies for motivating citizens to acquire more technical qualifications and pursue relevant jobs. ICDL GCC Foundation, the governing body and the certification authority of the global standard for computer competency known as the International Computer Driving License, emphasizes the need to raise ICT proficiencies among students given the huge roles that the discipline currently fills in various industries and career growth opportunities in areas such as environmental and medical science. In the 2010 CareerBuilder annual IT hiring forecast, 42 per cent of IT employers are expected to increase their number of full-time, permanent employees this year, the highest among all industries surveyed.

ICDL GCC Foundation explains that a technology-focused education can help balance the region's employment landscape and give its youth better chances for professional development. As a concerned citizen, it stresses the importance of IT proficiency in taking part in the digital societies being built across the Arab World.

Jamil Ezzo, Director General of the ICDL GCC Foundation, said: "We are being faced with an urgent problem. Young GCC nationals will continue to confront persistent unemployment unless major reforms in the labour market are implemented. The region's governments need to step up efforts to enhance the employability of young nationals and create diversified opportunities that are likely to appeal to them. More government-initiated growth programs and better retirement plans need to be created to overcome the prevailing reluctance to work in the private sector. Job training provided through internship programs – at no cost to employers and with incentives to participants – is one way of raising competencies and improving the private sector's confidence

in the capability of local human resources. Similar compensatory approaches that reward employers can be undertaken.”

“Another strategy is to require hiring quota, knowledge transfer and technical training from private companies seeking government projects in the region, particularly foreign companies operating in the region. Companies can also be encouraged to develop projects involving local manpower – either run by nationals or advocating a ‘made in the GCC’ mindset – as part of CSR programs. The possibilities are limitless, but the point is that there’s an imminent need to prepare the region’s youths for the realities of today’s job markets and make them active players in the respective development agendas of Arab states.”

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About the ICDL GCC Foundation:The ICDL GCC Foundation administers and oversees the ICDL certification program in Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates. It has been operating in the region for nearly 10 years and has enrolled more than 800,000 in its certification program in the GCC alone