

## University Resources and the Job Search: What is Useful and What Can Be Improved?

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Project: Supply and Demand: Understanding Saudi College Student-Employer Matches and Preferences

### KEY INSIGHTS

- While students currently utilize a breadth of university resources in their job market search, such as job list-serves and workshops, they also identify a few areas for improvement
- Tailored online resources, career counseling, and additional courses, workshops and career fairs could improve graduates' employment outcomes

### HOW CAN UNIVERSITIES STRENGTHEN STUDENT EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT SERVICES?

#### Background

As labor market participation increases among Saudis, the labor market faces added pressure to supply jobs. The number of Saudi job seekers increased from 945 thousand to over 1 million between the first and the third quarters of 2019.<sup>1</sup> The highest percentage of unemployed Saudis was recorded in the 25-29 age group, constituting 40.6% of the total unemployed population, followed by individuals aged 20-24, representing 22.8% of the unemployed. University graduates represented 52.9% (67.8% of females and 26.7% of males) of all unemployed Saudis.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of a large young and educated unemployed labor force, universities can play a critical role in improving employment outcomes. Research by Dr. Alessandra González at the University of Chicago examines Saudi university students' and recent graduates' perceived gaps surrounding employment search support in order to map the resources that young Saudi college graduates use and value, as well as those they would like to see improved. Once the primary underlying challenges are identified, policymakers will be able to better target employment support programs and policies to fill existing gaps, improving the employment opportunities for Saudi talent.

#### Research Findings

Researchers conducted longitudinal interviews with 63 students and recent graduates (44 female, 19 male) from several prestigious private and public universities in Riyadh. Students were invited to participate in the study through surveys distributed widely to students and alumni as well as focus groups with current students organized by the universities. These students and graduates represent a variety of majors and specializations: 23 majored in STEM-related fields (e.g. Chemistry, Chemical/Civil/Electrical Engineering), 20 in Social Science majors (e.g. Economics, Law, Psychology), 15 in Finance/Marketing (e.g. Finance, Marketing, Quality Management), and 5 in Arts & Humanities (e.g. Arts, English Literature/Translation, Qur'an Studies).

<sup>1</sup> Saudi Labor Force Survey. Q3 2019. Saudi General Authority for Statistics

<sup>2</sup> Saudi Labor Force Survey. Q2 2019. Saudi General Authority for Statistics



In order to understand the gaps between graduation and labor market entrance, it is important to understand the experience of students and fresh graduates seeking jobs in this dynamic economy. In terms of existing university resources, about half of the interviewees reported having taken advantage of university resources during job search.

These resources can be classified into six types: 1) University list of jobs and other opportunities; 2) Workshops for job application preparation; 3) Career- related centers; 4) Courses; 5) Faculty resources; and 6) Other informal support ranging from consultation programs to support groups. While many students reported how beneficial these resources are in their work, study, and life, they all felt that additional resources would be helpful.

In terms or areas for improvement to help students in their school to work transition, interviewees shared several aspects that could be improved, most of which included enhancements to existing resources, outlined in Table I below. After some time on the job market, interviewees generally agreed that universities could develop more targeted career services programs, utilize their institutional role and connect with other social entities to hold more regular, larger-scale, or more specialized career fairs, and improve their online resources. It is important to note that these recommendations are based on suggestions from a select sample of students. To determine efficacy of recommendations, universities could monitor outcomes through pilot programs, randomized control trials, or impact evaluations to determine if they do improve employment outcomes.

**Table I** | Existing Resources and Suggested Enhancements to University Career Services

Existing university resources		Suggested Areas for improvement	
University list of jobs and other opportunities	Universities often circulate a list of companies where students can apply for jobs/internships/co-op training. Based on individual students' experiences, universities are able to build this database to guide students' job applications. If a student wants to apply for a company that is not on the list, the university can also help add it to the database.	Tailored Online resources	Universities could enrich their online resources, tailoring them to be more accessible and effective for students. For instance, advertising available resources more widely and effectively through a webpage or social media account that provides an overview of available resources at the university to help students explore their career opportunities. This could be potentially effective in connecting alumni with current students.
Workshops for job application preparation	Some universities hold career-related workshops to help students prepare for job application. These offer students help with writing skills including CV writing and proofreading, business writing, etc. In some cases, these workshops were organized by companies when they were invited to the university to present to students interested in applying.	Additional Workshops	Several interviewees said that more workshops devoted to the job finding process such as communication skills for job interviews and targeted CV writing could be useful.



Career-related centers	Universities often have career related centers at university that organize a university-wide career fair. Some interviewees also talked about the presence of business incubators that provide resources such as consultancies for students who are interested in starting their own business.	Additional career fairs	Although career fairs are becoming increasingly common, interviewees thought that more regular, larger-scale, or more specialized career fairs organized by major or career path would be very helpful for job application and networking with alumni. Also, the scheduling of the career fairs could better fit the academic calendar and job search cycle of students.
Courses	In addition to workshops and centers, interviewees also talked about the usefulness of courses that are either mandatory or optional for students to learn a variety of things ranging from work skills to personal development. Cooperative training opportunities were often the first work experience for graduating students.	Additional courses	Some interviewees also talked about the fact that courses do not teach them about what a real working environment looks like. Courses which invited speakers from companies or employed alumni or trips to visit future employers seemed extremely valuable. Also, more language courses could improve student language skills and competitiveness in the job market (particularly English Language coursework and course options).
Faculty resources	Faculty are an important resource for students to get useful advice on their study or life concerns. They often become valuable mentors and help students in their job preparation and career choices.	Career Counseling	In order to have a more individualized service, interviewees also suggested that career counseling facilitated by the university could be helpful to get one-on-one help in their job finding process. Some mentioned that most faculty lacked the job experience to accurately advise them on career choices.
Other more informal support ranging from consultation programs to support groups	In addition to formal resources, there are also relatively more informal resources available for students. For example, there are university-run student networks for students to help each other. Student academic and extracurricular clubs can also be an important resource to connect students with external entities to help with their employment search.	Mentoring and Networking	Most interviewees reported not having a career mentor and some felt that they lack a career sponsor to refer them to a job. Additional support could come from mentoring programs pairing students with alumni and other networking opportunities.



### How can policymakers use this information?

Policymakers can support universities to restructure their course and workshop offerings, career centers and other resources to improve the job search support to current students and graduates. Grants for universities to improve job market resources for students and recent graduates might be a fruitful start.

Universities can work with employers to add courses or workshops devoted to the steps involved in a tailored job market search. These could include courses on skills that are in high demand in the job market and could improve the competitiveness of their graduates, such as English language courses. Universities can also widen the services offered by their career services, adding personalized career counseling, organizing more topic focused career fairs, and utilizing their alumni in networking events.

Moving forward, Dr. González will work with university partners to tailor reforms to improve their job-search support.

### RESEARCH TEAM

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