



THE FUTURE OF EMIRATI YOUTH

Perspectives from Policymakers,
Employers and Youth





TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	04
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	08
INTRODUCTION	09
WHAT DRIVES EMIRATI YOUTH TODAY	10
THE UNSEEN INFLUENCERS	12
DESIGNING THE MODERN WORKPLACE	14
MANAGERS AS CULTURAL ARCHITECTS	16
CASE STUDIES	18
TRANSFORMING PRIVATE SECTOR PERCEPTIONS	22
PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE	24
BEYOND TRADITIONAL TRAINING	28
RECOMMENDATIONS	30
APPENDIX	32
REFERENCES	33
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	34

Foreword

Mira Al Futtaim
Chief Future Education Officer
Al-Futtaim Education Foundation

Chairwoman of Emiratisation
Al-Futtaim



The long-term prosperity of the UAE is innately linked to the potential of its youth, ensuring they are not only prepared for the rapidly evolving world of work but are also inspired to lead and contribute meaningfully to our collective vision. This white paper represents a vital step in understanding their aspirations, identifying opportunities, and charting a collaborative path forward.

At Al-Futtaim, we firmly believe that building a robust launchpad for young Emirati talent requires concerted effort across diverse stakeholders. Strategic partnerships between government, academia, and the private sector are essential to bridging gaps and unlocking exceptional opportunities. As one of the region's largest employers, Al-Futtaim is proud to serve as a leading enabler of national talent development. Our commitment extends beyond targets; we

create career paths within the private sector, aligning seamlessly with initiatives such as NAFIS and the UAE's broader employment goals.

This white paper builds upon rigorous quantitative research and, importantly, the qualitative perspectives gathered through open and candid dialogue with industry peers and emerging Emirati leaders. It is through these conversations that we identify actionable insights and shared responsibilities for shaping a future where young talent thrives.

We are proud to convene this dialogue and view this white paper as a milestone in our ongoing collaboration. At Al-Futtaim, we remain committed to building a future where young Emiratis lead, innovate, and drive the nation's sustainable growth.



Educators play a vital role in shaping the future of any nation, and in the UAE this responsibility takes on added significance as we prepare the next generation to lead with knowledge, creativity, and resilience. Preparing Emirati youth to navigate a world defined by rapid technological shifts, global interconnection, and the need for sustainable growth, requires more than academic excellence; it demands that we nurture curiosity, adaptability, and a spirit of innovation.

In today's fast-changing landscape and amid global challenges, the role of educators extends far beyond the classroom. They are mentors, role models, and guides who equip students with the skills and values, as well as the confidence, and vision to succeed in dynamic global environment.

At the American University in Dubai, we are committed to contributing to this mission. Our faculty and programmes are designed to empower Emirati students to think critically, embrace digital transformation, and connect their studies with the opportunities and challenges of tomorrow.

By working in partnership with industry and government, educators ensure that today's youth will be the leaders, innovators, and change-makers of the UAE's future.

Dr. Kyle Long
President

American University in Dubai



The next era of national progress will be shaped by a generation of Emiratis who bring curiosity, global perspective and a strong sense of purpose. Their future reflects ambition, supported by systems designed to unlock opportunity and drive impact.

This white paper brings together perspectives from government, education and industry leaders on how to best align these systems. The aim is to equip Emirati talent with the skills, experiences and pathways needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving economy.

At G42, we focus on creating the right environment for this growth. Our teams work at the intersection of advanced technologies and national priorities, building careers that offer continuous learning, global exposure and meaningful contribution.

Creating the right conditions for Emirati youth to thrive requires mentorship, access, and an environment that supports their growth. The insights in this paper reflect what becomes possible when intention leads to action, and action is strengthened through collaboration.

Together, we are building a future to believe in, one shaped by capability, inclusion, and shared ambition.

Maymee Kurian
**Group Chief Human Capital
and Culture Officer**

G42



The future of Emirati youth is central to the UAE's long-term vision for sustainable growth, innovation and national development. As the country continues to diversify its economy and build a globally competitive workforce, it is essential to empower Emirati graduates to take an active and confident role in shaping this future.

While the UAE has made significant progress in expanding opportunities and improving access to quality education and employment, future efforts require strong partnerships and targeted action that support youth integration into today's competitive landscape. Emirati youth are highly capable and driven. Effective nationalisation efforts go beyond hiring targets. They must create meaningful career paths, provide early exposure to leadership, foster a sense of purpose and build environments where youth feel seen, supported and inspired.

Youth development calls for investment in role models, mentorship and skills development programmes tailored to the evolving realities of the UAE job market.

By listening to young Emiratis and involving them in shaping the systems that support their success, we can move from intention to impact. Building a confident, future-ready generation that contributes to the nation's continued progress is a collective responsibility that spans all sectors.

Marketa Simkova
Partner, Head of People
KPMG Middle East

Executive Summary

The UAE's dynamic economic landscape demands a workforce that is not only skilled but also deeply connected to the nation's ambitious vision. Emirati youth are central to these ambitions, yet without a clear understanding of their evolving career motivations, aspirations, and drivers, there is a significant risk of misaligning talent development efforts and missing crucial opportunities for innovation and sustained growth.

This white paper, drawing on a nationwide online survey of over 500 young Emiratis, conversations with young Emirati professionals and insights from a multi-stakeholder industry roundtable, addresses this critical challenge. Our findings reveal a generation that prioritises work-life balance (53%) and a supportive environment (51%) over traditional incentives, while family remains the biggest career influencer (46%). They are acutely aware of future trends like AI (42%) yet face significant barriers including high competition for entry-level roles (33%) and a lack of practical experience (28%). The paper further highlights how perceptions of the private sector, pension disparities, and the need for early, practical exposure to professional experiences contribute to a persistent disconnect between youth aspirations and workplace realities.

To bridge these gaps, this paper outlines a collaborative roadmap with actionable recommendations for all stakeholders. It calls for evolving Emiratisation from quotas to quality, harmonising pension systems, and fostering holistic employee well-being. Key solutions include integrating early industry exposure in academia, empowering managers as talent developers, cultivating purpose-driven workplaces, and investing in visible role models.

By translating these insights into actionable strategies, this initiative aims to ensure young Emiratis are not just participants in the workforce, but empowered leaders driving the nation's successful future.



Introduction

For a nation, its youth are often seen as the primary engine of long-term success and transformation. They bring energy, innovation, and fresh perspectives that are crucial for economic diversification and social progress.

The UAE has long recognised this reality, taking bold steps to empower its young people. From appointing a Minister of State for Youth Affairs in 2016 to establishing a Federal Youth Authority and the Emirates Youth Council, the country has ensured that youth voices are heard at the highest levels of decision-making. The National Youth Agenda 2031 builds on this foundation, aiming to position Emiratis as role models on the global stage while significantly increasing their contribution to national development.

Most importantly, the UAE's leadership recognises that this generation is unlike any before it: digitally native, globally aware, and deeply motivated to make a meaningful impact. Yet harnessing this immense potential requires more than well-intentioned policies; it demands a clear understanding of what drives them, the environments in which they thrive, and the barriers they face.

Achieving this alignment cannot be the responsibility of government alone. Employers, especially from private-sector organisations, must play an active role in complementing national policies, by creating opportunities, nurturing talent, and supporting young people as they enter and shape the workforce.

To address this, Al-Futtaim embarked on a comprehensive, three-phase initiative to listen, learn, and lead the conversation on the future of work for Emirati youth. The journey began with a nationwide survey, conducted in partnership with YouGov, which engaged more than 500 Emiratis aged 18–25 and captured their aspirations, workplace expectations, and perceived skills gaps. Building on these findings, we hosted a Youth Circle on International Youth Day, providing young Emiratis a platform to share their perspectives directly. Finally, we convened an industry roundtable, bringing together government, academia, and private-sector leaders to co-create recommendations and practical solutions.

This white paper synthesises the insights gathered across these phases. It aims to provide a holistic view of both the challenges and opportunities, while offering actionable strategies for stakeholders. By building a collaborative ecosystem that empowers young Emiratis, we can ensure they are not only active participants in the workforce, but also leaders shaping the nation's future, driving innovation, and upholding the values that define the UAE. Unlocking this potential is a shared responsibility, and one that carries the promise of lasting transformation.

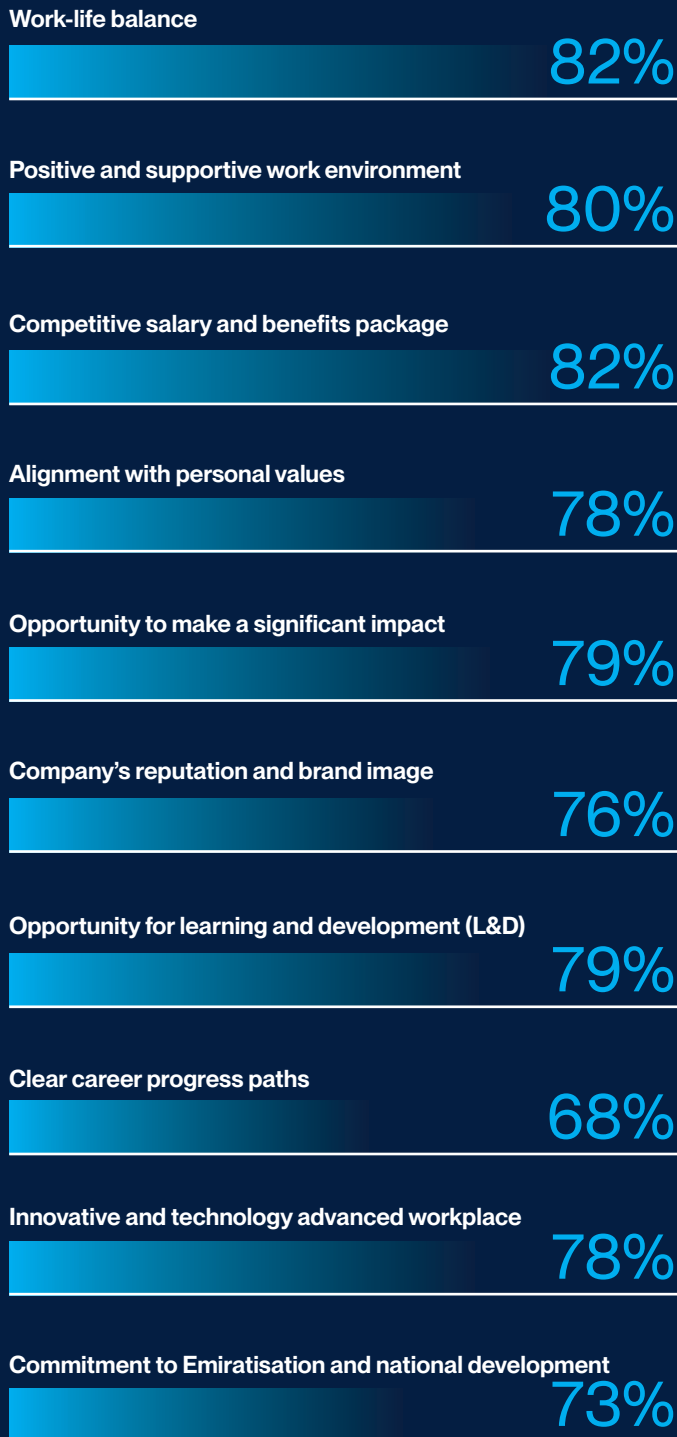
What Drives Emirati Youth Today

The UAE's future relies heavily on its vibrant young people, and understanding what they want from their careers is important. In a recent survey, Al-Futtaim asked 519 young Emiratis (aged 18-25) about their career expectations and long-term goals. The results show a surprising shift in what motivates today's youth.



Q. What are your primary career aspirations for the next 5-10 years?

Source: Voices of Emirati Youth Survey by Al-Futtaim, July 2025



Q. When selecting an employer, how important are the following factors to you?

Source: Voices of Emirati Youth Survey by Al-Futtaim, July 2025

While earning good money (39% want financial independence) and starting their own business (31% are keen on entrepreneurship) are still key goals, something else has come to the forefront.

For this generation, a fulfilling career means more than just the salary. A striking 53% of young Emiratis said that work-life balance is extremely important when choosing an employer. A positive and supportive work environment came a close second (51%), followed by competitive salary and benefits (49%).

This shift reflects a desire for growth aligned with individual preferences, where making an impact and contributing meaningfully are as important as traditional career progression. For many, the gender mix in the workforce has also changed significantly in recent years, with more women entering, for whom compensation is often secondary to making a difference and finding supportive, empathetic managers.

Moreover, these young individuals demonstrate a strong awareness of developments around the world. A significant 42% are thinking about how trends like AI and automation will affect their careers, and 35% are concerned about global competition for jobs. This reflects a practical and forward-thinking mindset, with a focus on preparing for the workforce of tomorrow, rather than solely the opportunities of today.

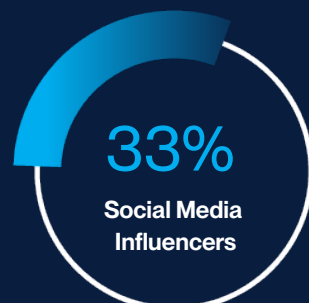
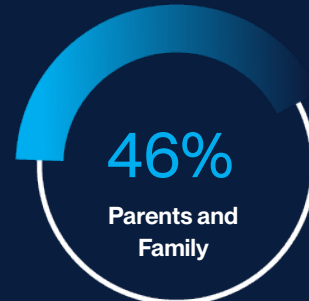
The Unseen Influencers

While online platforms and social media play a major role in young people's lives globally, our survey found a very strong, lasting influence on Emirati youth's career decisions: their family.

A significant 46% of young Emiratis said their parents and family are the biggest influence on their career choices. This factor is higher than online platforms (37%), social media influencers (33%), or even career mentors (31%).

This finding highlights the strong cultural values in Emirati society, where family guidance and approval are central to big life decisions, including career paths. For employers and educators, this means there's a real chance to work with this dynamic. Strategies that acknowledge and respectfully involve families, like career events for parents or clear information about job options, could be very effective in attracting and developing talent.

Beyond family, young people's desires to contribute to the UAE and find purpose in their work also reflects this strong cultural connection. Youth leaders at the Al-Futtaim Youth Circle consistently highlight that their top priorities include culture, flexibility, and empowerment, with many stating that empowerment – the full responsibility and space to try new things – is above everything else. Understanding these deep cultural roots is essential for creating effective talent strategies that truly resonate with young Emiratis.



Q. Who or what influences and inspires your career choices the most?

Source: Voices of Emirati Youth Survey by Al-Futtaim, July 2025

Emirati youth prioritise work-life balance (53%) and supportive culture (51%) over salary, and are heavily influenced by family (46%).

The Challenge



Traditional workplace models and recruitment strategies often fail to address these core motivators and cultural dynamics, leading to a disconnect in attracting and retaining talent.



Designing the Modern Workplace

The hopes of young Emiratis are changing what a modern workplace looks like, with a clear demand for environments that focus on well-being and purpose. Our survey showed that work-life balance and a supportive culture are topmost priorities, and companies are responding with fresh ideas.

Flexible working hours, longer parental leave, and options to work from home or even abroad, are becoming ways to attract talent. Such adaptable work arrangements also allow companies to leverage skills from youth residing in different emirates.

Q. When asked what aspects of workplace culture are most important, here's what Emirati youth said:

Source: Voices of Emirati Youth Survey by Al-Futtaim, July 2025

Innovation & Recognition

82%

Continuous Learning & Ethics

81%

Supportive Leadership

80%

Collaboration & Teamwork

79%

Communication & Transparency

77%

Insights further show that traditional incentive structures are losing their power to attract top Emirati talent. While competitive salaries remain important, today's professionals demand workplaces that foster innovation and creativity (82%), provide meaningful recognition (82%), and offer continuous learning opportunities (81%).

Organisations are adapting their value propositions accordingly. One leading retail conglomerate in the UAE offers comprehensive flexible arrangements including full-month paternity leave and two-day remote work policies with flexible core hours. Their “mothers’ community” actively shapes company policies, transforming ad-hoc benefits into systematic support structures that address real employee needs.

One participant at the roundtable observed how their company’s Emiratisation strategy has moved beyond meeting quotas to enhancing overall Emirati workforce capabilities. They measure success through development quality and advancement achievement rather than retention statistics. Some companies now track Emirati employee career progression over time, celebrating advancement to senior roles even when employees move to other organisations, recognising this as contribution to broader national workforce development.

A major technology multinational takes a different approach, ensuring young Emiratis work on projects that directly benefit the UAE. Nearly 30% of the youth surveyed by AI-Futtaim state that contributing to national development motivates them as much as financial rewards. Purpose has, therefore, become a competitive advantage. The goals of the organisation should also align with the UAE’s national goals; for instance, a tech company focusing on AI and innovation resonates strongly with the country’s strategic direction, empowering youth to see their direct contribution.

The shift extends beyond individual preferences to cultural expectations. Young Emiratis increasingly view work as an extension of personal values rather than merely a source of income. Companies that understand this dynamic are winning the talent competition.



Managers as Cultural Architects

The quality of immediate management directly determines employee experience, yet many organisations still treat management development as an afterthought. Leading companies invest heavily in training supervisors to understand individual motivations rather than applying standardised approaches.

A prominent UAE aviation group has established youth councils that actively influence policy development through structured feedback mechanisms. Young employees contribute directly to organisational strategy, creating genuine empowerment that translates into measurably higher engagement.

Similarly, an international banking institution trains managers to conduct individualised career conversations that explore whether employees prefer management tracks, technical specialisation, or entrepreneurial opportunities within corporate structures. This approach recognises that motivation varies dramatically between individuals, even within similar demographic groups.

The most effective managers learn to identify what drives each team member. Some employees respond to financial incentives, others to learning opportunities, and others to chances for national impact. Skilled managers can navigate these differences while maintaining team cohesion and performance standards.

Opportunities to work on projects that directly benefit the UAE

29%

Mentorship connecting experienced professionals with young Emiratis

28%

Flexible work arrangements that accommodate cultural & family values

27%

Clear career progression paths for Emirati talent

27%

Competitive compensation and benefits tailored for Emiratis

26%

A significant percentage of Emirati employees across all levels

26%

Presence of Emirati leadership and role models within the company

25%

Active participation in national initiatives (e.g Nafis)

24%

A company culture that celebrates Emirati identity & values

23%

Investment in training & development

23%

Q. When considering a company's commitment to Emiratisation, which of the following factors are most important to you?

Source: Voices of Emirati Youth Survey by Al-Futtaim, July 2025

Leading organisations are adapting to youth demands for flexibility, purpose, and supportive management.

The Challenge



Many organisations still lag in adopting these modern workplace practices, risking a disconnect with the aspirations of young Emiratis and hindering their ability to attract and retain top talent.



Case Study



As one of the UAE's leading companies with a legacy of more than 90 years, Al-Futtaim is deeply committed to nurturing UAE talent and creating meaningful career pathways for Emiratis in the private sector.

SINYAR, Al-Futtaim's Emiratisation platform, empowers Emiratis at every career stage through a structured journey designed to inspire, prepare, and advance national talent. **SINYAR** means "making the journey together" in Arabic, reflecting the collaborative and future-focused spirit of this initiative.

Our approach begins with early interventions through engagement with schools and summer camps that shape mindsets, help youth discover their strengths, and define career goals aligned with their aspirations. Building on this, Sinyar Prospects provides university students with opportunities for internships and micro-internships, giving them exposure to real workplace environments and the chance to learn directly from others.

Graduates then progress into the flagship **Sinyar Graduate Programme**, an 18-month learning journey that blends functional readiness with in-depth development. The programme includes functional rotations across different areas of the business, complemented by six tailored learning experiences designed to equip fresh graduates with the most critical skills needed for Emirati talent to succeed in corporate life. Participants also benefit from a structured planning and alignment phase that connects their growth to business priorities. In the final months, they are challenged with real business projects identified by business leaders and rooted in current functional priorities translating learning into on-the-job impact.

This progression ensures that youth is supported from the earliest stages of career exploration through to becoming future-ready professionals, building skills that align with both their personal strengths and the UAE's economic ambitions.

Inside Sinyar Graduate Programme



Case Study



The American University in Dubai (AUD) actively supports the UAE's Emiratisation agenda by equipping students with both academic knowledge and workplace-ready skills.

Senior students gain practical experience through internship programmes with leading organisations that align with their career ambitions and provide exposure to real business challenges. Faculty design courses in close collaboration with industry partners, while guest speakers from multinational corporations bring global perspectives directly into the classroom.

AUD's large and committed alumni network further strengthens this framework, with graduates such as H.E. Omar Sultan Al Olama (B.B.A. 2011), Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, Digital Economy, and Remote Work Applications, serving as role models who inspire and motivate students to achieve their full potential.

AUD also partners with the Emirati Human Resources Development Council to build a digitally skilled Emirati Workforce for the nation's technology-driven economy. In addition to academic programmes, micro-credential courses reinforce critical soft and technical skills needed in today's dynamic workplace. The Entrepreneurship and Innovation Centre fosters creativity and business acumen, preparing students to lead in knowledge-based industries.

By combining industry engagement, experiential learning, and a commitment to a diverse and inclusive campus culture, AUD offers a holistic and exemplary model for advancing Emiratisation in the UAE.

How AUD impacts the national workforce

Top Ranked

AUD consistently ranks among the leading universities in Dubai and the UAE

Excellence

Recognised for its quality education and strong contribution to the national workforce

High Employability

89.74%

Overall Emirati graduate employment rate (2023–2024)

Private Sector Success

57.14%

Of employed Emirati graduates work in the private sector

Case Study



Emiratisation reflects G42's commitment to national progress.

The Accelerator Programme for UAE Nationals offers structured mentorship and hands-on experience in AI, supporting early-career professionals as they grow into future technology leaders.

In 2024, G42 launched QudraTech, a specialised AI upskilling programme focused on data annotation, LLM evaluation and AI product development. The initiative has onboarded 220 Emiratis, most of whom are women, first-time professionals, and People of Determination. Each participant completes more than 1,000 hours of training and contributes to projects including Large Language Model evaluation, Arabic Automatic Speech Recognition, Optical Character Recognition and Text to Speech development, helping ensure cultural relevance and inclusion in AI systems.

QudraTech also builds community through partnerships with universities, youth councils and inclusion programmes, and recently represented the UAE at the AI for Good Global Summit.

Together with ongoing efforts to advance Emirati women in tech, these initiatives support a diverse and future-ready workforce prepared to lead in the UAE's AI ecosystem.

Inside G42's QudraTech Initiative

220
Emirati participants

1,000
hours
Training per participant

Cultural
Relevance

Inclusion
In the UAE's AI ecosystem

Case Study



KPMG has made Emiratisation a central pillar of its strategy in the UAE.

Initiatives like **Intilaq**, the bespoke Emirati learning pathway, offer focused skill development, mentorship, peer networking, and curated degree pathways, culminating in graduation ceremonies to celebrate growth.

Intilaq is a 12-month programme designed to equip Emiratis in KPMG with the consulting, professional and workplace skills needed to grow and succeed within the firm. Delivered in collaboration with HultEF Business School, the programme focuses on building core consulting capabilities, corporate etiquette, and on-the-job readiness.

The programme is structured in three phases

Launch Pad

A foundational stage focused on self-awareness with strengths assessments and teaching essential business skills like basic business writing, personal branding, and corporate etiquette.

Lift-Off

A development stage focused on refining consulting and technical skills through hands-on learning trainings like 'Core Consulting skills', 'Future Ready Me' and 'Business Development'.

Infinite

The final stage, supporting readiness for broader responsibilities and long-term growth. Trainings include 'Present with Impact', 'Coaching Essentials' and 'Building Professional Presence' with HultEF Business School.

Transforming Private Sector Perceptions

A persistent challenge is the perception that private sector employment serves as temporary preparation for government roles rather than a destination career.

This mindset stems from both cultural expectations and tangible benefit disparities that create real disadvantages for private sector employment.

Organisations are addressing this through systematic efforts to showcase Emirati success stories within their structures. The most effective approaches feature visible Emirati leaders as role models who demonstrate that private sector careers offer legitimate paths to senior positions and meaningful impact.

International exposure opportunities also serve as powerful differentiators. Young Emiratis value global experience, with 36% of Emirati youth stating they are open to working abroad. Multinational companies can leverage international networks to provide assignments and learning opportunities outside the UAE. One international banking institution highlights its global mobility options as a key attraction for Emirati talent. Domestic organisations can compete through partnerships with international entities, exchange programmes, and global project involvement, providing international exposure without permanent relocation. The key is channelling international experience toward long-term UAE commitment rather than viewing it as brain drain risk.

Pension is very important when selecting an employer

58%

Yes; I feel it limits my long-term financial security

41%

Somewhat important; I consider it along with other benefits

35%

Q. How important is a strong pension scheme in your decision to choose or stay with an employer?

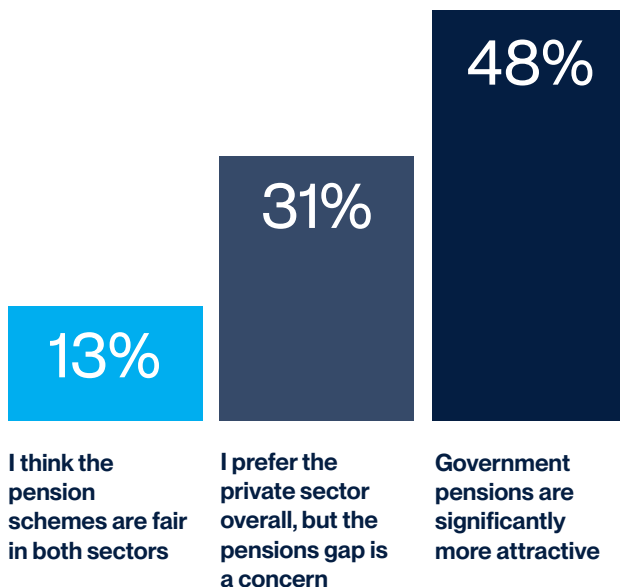
Source: Voices of Emirati Youth Survey by Al-Futtaim, July 2025

Another area of differentiation is pension schemes, with 58% of Emiratis surveyed by Al-Futtaim stating that pension is very important when selecting an employer. 48% feel that government pension schemes are significantly more attractive than private ones. This perception creates a tangible barrier, as 41% of respondents explicitly state that pension concerns limit their long-term financial security, and 31% prefer the private sector but find the pension gap concerning. Only a small minority, 13%, believe pension schemes are fair across both public and private sectors.

Pension portability between Dubai and Abu Dhabi, for example, is another challenge, creating artificial barriers to talent mobility. Professionals often cannot transfer pension benefits when switching between emirates, significantly limiting career flexibility.

These systemic issues require policy-level interventions beyond individual employer capabilities. However, leading organisations are developing creative approaches, including enhanced retirement packages, stock option programmes, and other long-term financial incentives that help bridge perceived gaps. The most successful strategies combine immediate workplace improvements with advocacy for broader policy reforms.

Some employers are collaborating on industry-wide initiatives to address these challenges collectively, recognising that individual company efforts have limited impact on systemic issues. This collaborative approach shows promise for creating meaningful change at scale. The need for a unified Emirati talent hub, where government, private sector, and academia communicate and speak the same language about market skills, was also highlighted as crucial to building a future-ready workforce.



Q. How important is a strong pension scheme in your decision to choose or stay with an employer?

Source: Voices of Emirati Youth Survey by Al-Futtaim, July 2025

Private sector perception is hindered by cultural expectations, benefit disparities (especially pensions), and mobility issues.

The Challenge



Attracting and retaining top Emirati talent in the private sector requires overcoming these systemic barriers and actively showcasing long-term career viability and value.



Preparing for the Future

Despite 81% of young Emiratis feeling confident in their abilities and 78% optimistic about finding fulfilling employment, significant gaps persist between educational preparation and workplace readiness.



Q. What do you consider to be the most significant barriers preventing young Emiratis from achieving their full career potential in the UAE today?

Source: Voices of Emirati Youth Survey by Al-Futtaim, July 2025



Youth demonstrate strong interest in emerging technologies like AI and cybersecurity, with 62% expressing optimism about AI's impact on the UAE's workforce. However, only 33% identify data literacy as critical for success, highlighting worrying awareness gaps between technological enthusiasm and practical skill requirements.

Prominent obstacles cited by Emirati youth include high competition for entry-level positions (33%), exacerbated by a perceived lack of experience or practical skills (28%) and limited exposure to diverse career pathways (29%). Perhaps most critically, one participant at the roundtable states that as many as 90% of Grade 11-12 students lack clear career direction, while 80% base educational choices on family preferences rather than market realities or personal aptitudes.

These challenges compound at the university level, where students must declare majors without adequate workplace exposure. As one roundtable participant observed: "We put students on a train for 12 years, then at the end tell them to choose their destination without ever showing them what the journey looks like."

The disconnect between academic preparation and workplace requirements has created strong demand for experiential learning. Survey findings show 30% of youth prioritise internships and mentorship as their top development need, followed by improved job market information access (29%) and enhanced vocational training (29%).

Career support priorities also vary by income levels, revealing an interesting pattern. Lower-income groups focus on startup funding and education subsidies, highlighting the need for financial accessibility to build opportunities. Meanwhile, higher-income groups prioritise networking events and private sector integration, reflecting a focus on career advancement and leadership growth.

The emphasis on mentorship particularly stands out, with participants consistently highlighting the value of connecting with established professionals for industry insights and career guidance. Youth particularly value having an Emirati buddy or mentor who can guide them through the journey, especially in international firms, helping them adapt and grow.

Equally important is the demand for transparency about job market dynamics. Young people want to understand which skills employers value, what career progression looks like, and how educational choices translate into professional opportunities. They also need to develop crucial soft skills like emotional intelligence, communication, and humility, which are essential for adding value to roles.

Educational institutions occupy unique positions to address these challenges, but require fundamental restructuring. Progressive institutions recognise that intervention must begin as early as Grade 9 when students maintain flexibility in academic trajectories. One leading university in the UAE, after recognising that first-year students arrived with insufficient career exposure, implemented comprehensive experiential learning programmes. However, they acknowledge this intervention often comes late – students have already committed to educational pathways that may not align with interests or market opportunities.

The most innovative approaches focus on developing adaptability and entrepreneurial thinking rather than narrow specialisation. As one educator at the roundtable noted: “The bridge between education and business isn’t about specific skills; it’s about adaptability, resilience, and creativity. These soft skills aren’t taught in traditional curricula but are essential for modern careers.”

Support for work-life balance initiatives



Improved access to information about job market trends



Subsidies for higher education/specialised certifications



Networking events with industry leaders



Programmes specifically designed to integrate Emiratis



Career counseling and guidance services



Easier access to funding for startups/entrepreneurship



More internship and mentorship opportunities



Enhanced vocational training and skills development programme



Q. What kind of support or initiatives from the government or private sector would best help you achieve your career goals? (by income levels)

Source: Voices of Emirati Youth Survey by Al-Futtaim, July 2025

Despite optimism, young Emiratis face significant gaps in practical skills, career awareness, and early exposure, leading to a disconnect between education and workplace readiness.

The Challenge



The current educational system often fails to provide sufficient real-world experience and soft skills development early enough, creating hurdles for youth entering a competitive and rapidly evolving job market.



Beyond Traditional Training

Recognising the pace and importance of change, educational institutions in the UAE are increasingly going beyond traditional classroom models, actively integrating real-world experience into their curricula to prepare young Emiratis.

Universities and schools are now making industry engagement a core part of the student journey, for instance, by awarding academic credit for internships and volunteering. Many are pushing for earlier interventions, with some advocating for structured industry exposure and career awareness programmes to begin as early as Grade 9 or 10, long before students select their university majors. This ensures that students gain practical insights and develop essential soft skills like decision-making and critical thinking, which are often not fully cultivated through traditional methods.

Educational outreach now extends beyond students to parents and families (who remain primary career influencers for 46% of young Emiratis surveyed by Al-Futtaim). These programmes provide transparency about career progression, compensation structures, and impactful work opportunities available in private roles. Involving parents in these discussions is seen as crucial, as changing family perceptions often proves more important than changing student attitudes. In a similar approach, leading employers are

recognising that talent investment requires long-term thinking and systematic approaches beginning before formal employment. One participant at the industry roundtable highlighted the positive impact of ‘bring your kids to work day’ in helping children understand their parents’ roles and inspiring them.

A major aviation group in the UAE has developed six-week intensive programmes for students, providing behind-the-scenes industry exposure. Participants receive “aviation passports” and experience multiple business aspects. Critically, the programme includes systematic tracking to monitor how many participants ultimately pursue aviation careers.

Another organisation has introduced a summer programme, Future Shapers, which challenges students to envision themselves in 2030, then work backwards, identifying changes they would implement in 2025. This approach encourages strategic thinking while connecting personal aspirations to national development objectives.

Gamification represents another significant innovation, incorporating game-like elements into career development programmes, including point systems, achievement badges, and competitive elements that make professional development more engaging for contemporary youth. Similarly, micro-internships offer flexibility for students unable to commit to full-time placements, allowing broader organisational exposure while maintaining academic commitments.

While informal mentorship occurs naturally, structured programmes with clear objectives produce significantly better results. One international banking institution has developed multi-tiered mentorship, senior professional guidance, and executive sponsorship for high-potential individuals. These programs serve retention functions by creating emotional connections that transcend immediate job satisfaction, with mentored employees showing measurably stronger organisational commitment. Cross-industry mentorship can further allow young Emiratis to explore different career options while maintaining professional networks. Career paths have become increasingly non-linear and broad networks often prove more valuable than narrow specialisation.

Academia and leading employers are innovating with experiential learning, mentorship, and engagement programmes.

The Challenge



Scaling these effective, non-traditional approaches across the entire ecosystem requires overcoming inertia, aligning diverse stakeholders, and ensuring consistent quality and accessibility for all young Emiratis.



Recommendations

For Government and Policymakers



Evolve Emiratisation frameworks

Shift from purely quantitative targets to a qualitative, value-based system that rewards long-term talent development, career progression, and retention efforts by employers.

Harmonise pension systems

Implement comprehensive reforms to ensure full pension portability and equity across all sectors and emirates, removing barriers to private sector employment.

Facilitate early career awareness

Develop national frameworks and incentives for schools and universities to integrate mandatory industry exposure, internships, and career guidance from Grade 9 onwards.

Support collaborative ecosystems

Create policy frameworks and funding mechanisms that actively foster and reward partnerships between academia, industry, and government for talent development initiatives.

Invest in national role models

Launch country-wide campaigns and platforms to spotlight successful Emirati professionals in diverse fields, particularly the private sector, to inspire youth and educate parents.

For Industry (Employers)



Prioritise holistic employee well-being

Implement comprehensive flexible work arrangements, supportive cultures, and well-being programmes that address work-life balance, family values, and mental health.

Invest in structured experiential learning

Develop and expand robust internship, mentorship, and leadership development programmes with clear learning outcomes and career pathways, starting with early talent.

Cultivate purpose-driven workplaces

Clearly communicate how roles contribute to national objectives and organisational impact, empowering employees to see their value beyond financial rewards.

Empower managers as talent developers

Train managers to understand individual motivations, provide personalised career guidance, and foster inclusive, high-performing teams.

Advocate for systemic change

Actively collaborate with policymakers and industry peers to address systemic barriers like pension disparities and evolve Emiratisation frameworks towards quality.

Companies are increasingly seeing Emiratisation as a smart investment, not just a rule they have to follow. This means creating clear career paths, investing in training and development, and making sure Emiratis feel valued and loyal. By focusing on quality, long-term growth, and making people feel they belong, the UAE can ensure its national talent is not just employed but truly empowered to help the nation's economy grow and succeed.

For Academia (Educational Institutions)



Integrate early industry exposure

Implement mandatory, credit-bearing internships, micro-internships, and industry awareness programmes for students from Grade 9 through university.

Restructure curricula for future skills

Develop flexible curricula that embed critical thinking, adaptability, decision-making, AI literacy, and entrepreneurial mindsets, rather than narrow specialisation.

Strengthen industry-academia partnerships

Establish systematic collaborations with employers to align academic offerings with market demands and provide students with real-world project experience.

Enhance career guidance and mentorship

Provide comprehensive, up-to-date career counselling and facilitate structured mentorship networks connecting students with industry professionals.

Engage parents in career awareness

Develop programmes to educate parents about diverse career pathways, private sector opportunities, and the evolving demands of the job market.

For Young Emiratis (Employees/Future Talent)



Actively seek experiential learning

Proactively engage in internships, volunteering, and summer programmes to gain practical skills and industry awareness early in their academic journey.

Cultivate adaptability and soft skills

Focus on developing critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and resilience, recognising these as essential for navigating non-linear career paths.

Explore diverse career pathways

Seek out information and exposure to a wide range of industries and roles, challenging traditional perceptions and broadening career horizons.

Leverage mentorship opportunities

Actively seek out and engage with mentors to gain insights, guidance, and build professional networks.

Embrace a growth mindset

Be open to continuous learning, feedback, and opportunities for personal and professional development, understanding that career success is a dynamic journey.

Appendix

Survey methodology

Al-Futtaim commissioned a nationwide survey to gain a comprehensive understanding of the career aspirations and workplace expectations of the UAE's youth. The study specifically targeted Emirati nationals aged between 18 and 25 years, a demographic crucial to the nation's future workforce.

Data collection was conducted over a three-week period, from 1 to 20 July 2025, ensuring timely insights into current youth perspectives. A total of 519 respondents participated in the survey, providing a robust dataset for analysis. All responses were collected anonymously, with no identifiable personal data gathered, ensuring participant privacy.

The respondent pool represented a diverse cross-section of young Emiratis across the UAE. Gender distribution was 59% male and 41% female. Geographically, the majority of participants resided in the major economic hubs, with 45% from Abu Dhabi and 35% from Dubai, while 10% hailed from Sharjah and 11% from other emirates, including Ajman, Ras Al-Khaimah, Umm Al-Quwain, and Fujairah.

In terms of their highest educational qualification, 40% held a bachelor's degree, 25% a master's degree, 21% had completed school-level education, 8% had attended vocational college, and 6% had pursued professional education. Regarding their current employment status, 29% were employed full-time, 28% were students, 17% identified as self-employed or freelancers, 14% were entrepreneurs or business owners, 6% worked part-time, and 5% were unemployed. This demographic spread provides a rich and varied perspective on the future of work for Emirati youth.



References

- <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/uae/government/youngest-minister-in-the-world-how-shamma-al-mazruis-life-changed-after-sheikh-mohammeds-open-cal>
- <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/uae/2025/10/07/number-of-emiratis-in-private-sector-reaches-154000-under-nafis-scheme/>
- <https://economymiddleeast.com/news/uae-ministry-of-higher-education-establishes-youth-council/>
- <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/youth>

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the participants at the Future of Youth Industry Roundtable, as well as the Youth Circle, whose diverse perspectives and expertise have shaped the findings and recommendations presented in this white paper. We would like to thank everyone who participated including the following individuals for their invaluable insights.

Industry Roundtable

David Henderson, Chief Human Resources Officer, Al-Futtaim

Dr. Farah Sarraj, Chief Corporate Officer, Al-Futtaim Education Foundation

Ibrahim Al-Sayegh, Head of Emiratization & Diversity & Inclusion, HSBC

Jane Tatterton, Assistant Provost - Student Affairs, Zayed University

Dr. Kyle Long, President, American University in Dubai

Dr. Lama Blaique, Assistant Professor of Management, American University in Dubai

Marketa Simkova, Partner, Head of People and Change, KPMG Middle East

Maymee Kurian, Group Chief Human Capital and Culture Officer, G42

Mira Al Futtaim, Chief Future Education Officer, Al-Futtaim Education Foundation; Chairwoman of Emiratisation, Al-Futtaim

Mohammed Al Alawi, Executive Director of the Economic Affairs Sector, Emirati Talent Competitiveness Council

Mostafa Sallam, Regional HR Lead, Microsoft

Nasser AlBlooshi, Managing Director UAE, Chalhoub Group

Raghda Fatme, Interim Head of Emiratisation, Al-Futtaim

Dr. Ronan Coyle, Senior Vice President: Head of Group Talent Acquisition, G42

Samy Abu Aishah, Chief HR Business Partner, SAP

Saqr Al Maazmi, General Manager, Mercer

Yousuf Bin Lahej Al Falasi, Vice President Emiratisation and Government Partnership, Emirates

Youth Circle

Aaisha Al Refaei, SAP Youth Council

Abdulrahim AlHashmi, Al-Futtaim Youth Council

Ahmad AlFardan, Nationalization Manager, Azadea

Ahmad Al Janahi, Nafis Youth Council

Fatima S Galadari, HSBC Youth Council

Khawla AlRaesi, Al-Futtaim Youth Council

Mohamed Al Ansari, Nafis Youth Council

Mohammed Salman, President, Al-Futtaim Youth Council

Nasser Al Harmoozi, KPMG Youth Council

Saif Al Kindi, SAP Youth Council

Saud AlSharif, Sinyar Management Trainee, Al-Futtaim

Yasmine AlShaikh, Vice President, Al-Futtaim Youth Council



