

Future Skills and the Workforce of Tomorrow

Positioning Dubai as a Global Destination for Higher Education and Talent



Contents

03. Foreword

04. Introduction

06. Whitepaper Structure

07. Methodology

08. Whitepaper

Chapter 1: Market Size and Evolution

Chapter 2: Market and Student Trends

Chapter 3. Market Structure and Value Chain

32. Case Studies

University of Birmingham Dubai

Middlesex University Dubai

University of Wollongong Dubai

44. Evidence and Insights

Theme 1: Dubai’s Higher Education is Viewed Primarily as a Career Launchpad

Theme 2: Businesses in Dubai Are Eager to Engage, but Collaboration Remains Transactional

Theme 3: Students are Well-Equipped for Work, but Stronger Career Support is Expected

Theme 4: Employers Endorse Graduate Skills, with Opportunities for More Applied Learning

Theme 5: Graduates Are Digitally Skilled, but Future Skills Alignment Requires Agile Academic-Industry Collaboration

66. Summary and Recommendations



Marwan Abdulaziz Janahi
Senior Vice President

Dubai International Academic City,
Dubai Knowledge Park, and Dubai Science Park
TECOM Group PJSC



Foreword

Dubai’s enduring strength lies in its ability to remain at the forefront of regional and global trends. The city’s legacy as a pivotal hub connecting East and West is enhanced by its sustained focus on innovation and nurturing future-ready talent. At TECOM Group, we witness these efforts and benefits across our 10 vibrant business districts, home to global corporations, SMEs, start-ups, Fortune 500s, and world-class universities.

Education plays a central role in this growth, and through Dubai International Academic City and Dubai Knowledge Park, the city has established a robust foundation for learning and research that addresses the demands of the future economy. Together comprising TECOM Group’s Education Cluster, our districts help to strengthen the knowledge- and innovation-based economy and foster vital collaboration between government, academia, and industry leaders. This synergy is integral to shaping a more sustainable and prosperous future and achieving the goals of Dubai Economic Agenda ‘D33’ and the Education 33 Strategy ‘E33’.

Home to over 85% of students enrolled in private higher education institutions across Dubai, our Education Cluster spotlights our city’s appeal to international talent and serves as a testbed to implement innovation that empowers today’s talent to emerge as tomorrow’s leaders. Leveraging data and insights, this white paper highlights key trends from the vibrant education landscape our districts are contributing towards in Dubai, and examines how enhanced academic-industry partnerships can propel future skills development in the higher education sector.

Dubai International Academic City and Dubai Knowledge Park have a rich legacy of collectively enhancing our city’s appeal to global talent. This white paper presents a roadmap for higher education leaders from around the world to create an unparalleled higher education ecosystem that is future-ready, equitable, and nurtures innovation. I invite you to explore the findings of our study and join us in our endeavour to deliver world-class education for talent in the UAE, the region and the world.

Introduction

Dubai’s long-term economic vision, as outlined in the Dubai Economic Agenda (D33), places human development and technological advancement at the centre of growth.

To achieve its ambitions in priority sectors, Dubai must align its higher education ecosystem not only with the skills and competencies these industries require today, but also with those that will define the jobs of tomorrow. To support these economic objectives, Dubai has also implemented the Education Strategy 2033 (E33), which seeks to develop a higher education ecosystem aligned with current and future labour market needs. The strategy emphasises the expansion of research and innovation capacity, the

development of graduate skills relevant to emerging sectors, and the creation of pathways that connect universities with industry.

This white paper examines the role that Dubai’s higher education institutions are playing in supporting industry growth, attracting global talent, and preparing graduates for the future of work. Drawing on primary research, it examines the ways in which academia and industry already connect, where further alignment is needed, and how the student experience in Dubai contributes to the city’s competitiveness as an education destination. The objectives of the white paper are shown on the next page.

By drawing on insights and data from current students, alumni, and educators, this paper aims to provide evidence-based recommendations to strengthen Dubai’s position as a destination for high-quality education and a source of industry-ready talent.

This white paper examines the role that Dubai’s higher education institutions are playing in supporting industry growth, attracting global talent, and preparing graduates for the future of work.

The objectives of the white paper are to:

Assess the Current Higher Education Landscape

Map the market size, institutional diversity, student demographics, and existing points of connection with priority industries.

Assess Alignment with Future Workforce Demands

Examine how effectively universities in Dubai prepare graduates for emerging industry needs, with attention to both sector-specific expertise and future-ready skills.

Gather Insights through Primary Research

Use surveys, interviews, and case studies to highlight practical examples of effective collaboration between higher education and industry.

Develop Actionable Recommendations

Offer evidence-based strategies to enhance the responsiveness of higher education institutions to economic priorities, improve graduate employability, and strengthen Dubai’s position as a hub for talent and innovation.

White Paper Structure

The structure of this white paper is as follows. The Methodology section provides a detailed account of the data collection procedures employed in its development, together with a discussion of the study's limitations. The main body of the report presents the findings in six chapters:

 Chapter 1: Market Size and Evolution	 Chapter 2: Market and Student Trends
 Chapter 3: Market Structure and Value Chain	 Chapter 4: Case Studies
 Chapter 5: Evidence and Insights	 Chapter 6: Summary and Recommendations

Illustrative case studies are integrated between chapters, showcasing best practices in alignment and collaboration between universities and industry.

Methodology

Two main methods were deployed to write this white paper:

Quantitative Analysis

A qualitative approach was adopted to examine the scale, scope, and key characteristics of Dubai's higher education ecosystem. The research began with comprehensive desk-based analysis, drawing on a wide range of sources including policy documents, news articles, press releases, and official government websites. This phase set the context for the development of the white paper.

Building on these insights, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with industry stakeholders and senior university decision-makers from three universities located in Dubai Knowledge Park and Dubai International Academic City. The interviews sought to capture first-hand perspectives on the initiatives underpinning effective university-industry collaboration, as well as institutional practices aimed at enhancing student career readiness. These qualitative findings informed the development of the case studies and provided an understanding of best-practice models within the local context.

Quantitative Analysis

Detailed quantitative analysis was conducted to support the development of the white paper. This included data collected from three surveys: one distributed to current students at Dubai-based universities, another focused on capturing insights from recent alumni of the same institutions, and a third designed to assess academic-industry alignment from the perspective of Dubai-based businesses that hire graduates. Across the three surveys, a total of 329 responses were recorded, with each survey receiving at least 100 completions. Findings from these surveys were key to identifying themes related to academic-industry alignment in Dubai from the perspective of primary stakeholders. Additionally, quantitative analysis of student enrolment data was conducted to examine overall trends in market size and growth in recent years.



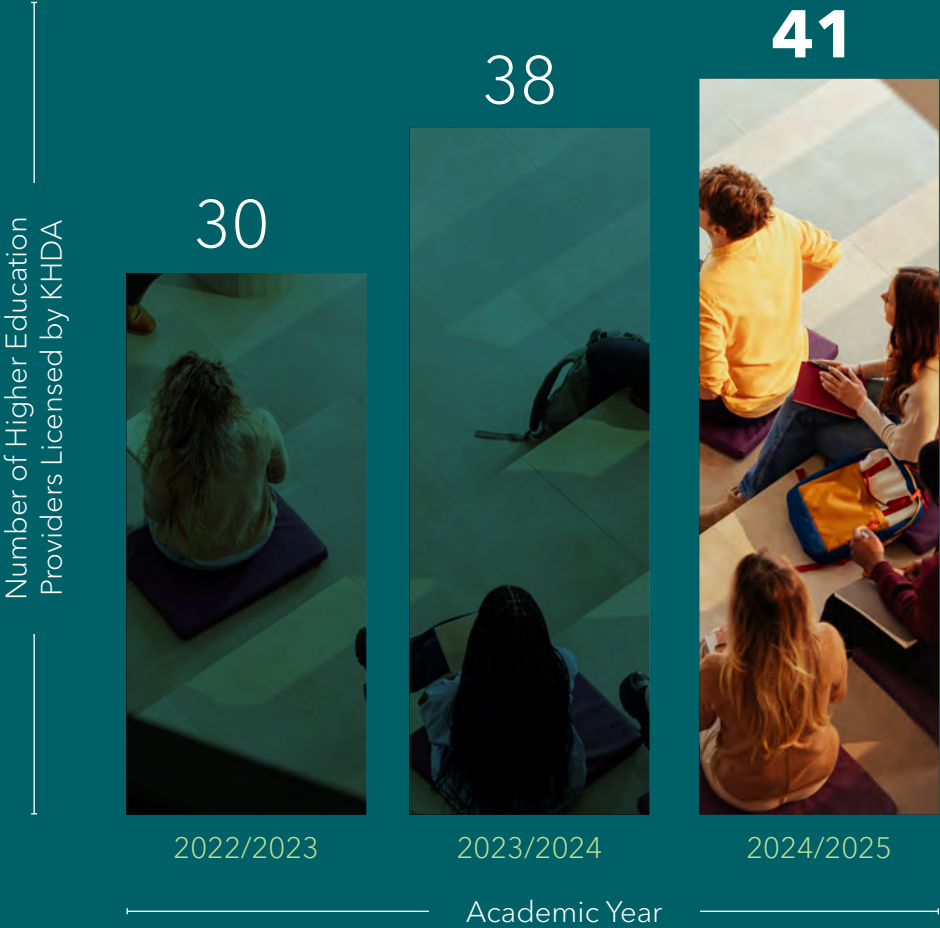
Chapter 1: Market Size and Evolution

Dubai's Two-Decade Rise as a Higher Education Hub

Over the past two decades, Dubai has established itself as a global hub for the international higher education sector. Its transformation into a regional centre for international branch campuses (IBCs) began in the early 2000s with the development of dedicated free zones owned and managed by the TECOM Group intended to help attract overseas universities to Dubai. The first of these was Dubai Knowledge Village (now, Dubai Knowledge Park) which was established in 2001, followed by Dubai International Academic City (DIAC), launched in 2005. The sector's growth has been closely aligned with the expansion of TECOM Group's business zones, which have provided purpose-built facilities and regulatory incentives for global universities to establish a presence in the Emirate.

The first overseas university to open an IBC in the UAE was the University of Wollongong, established in 1993 then as the Institute for Australian Studies.¹ This marked the beginning of Dubai's journey to becoming a hub for international higher education. According to the latest Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) data published in May 2025, Dubai currently has forty-one private higher education providers (HEPs), of which thirty-seven are IBCs from thirteen countries. Many of these universities have grown into centres of research and innovation as well as established hubs of teaching, embedding themselves in local economies and forging strong connections with business and industry - key themes highlighted in the recent TNE 3.0 study, published by Times Higher Education to assess the global impact of TNE.²

Figure 1: A Rapidly Expanding University Market



According to the latest Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) data published in May 2025, Dubai currently has **forty-one private higher education providers (HEPs)**

Source: Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) - Higher Education and UQAIB
¹ <https://www.austrade.gov.au/en/news-and-analysis/news/uowd-poised-to-leverage-auae-cepa-for-growth>
² <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/press-releases/times-higher-education-introduces-groundbreaking-new-concept-transnational-education>

In light of this growth, this chapter traces Dubai's rise as a higher education hub by outlining the major milestones that have shaped the sector, assesses the current scale and economic contribution of the market, and considers future growth prospects over the next decade, considering evolving demand, regulatory developments, and broader economic trends.

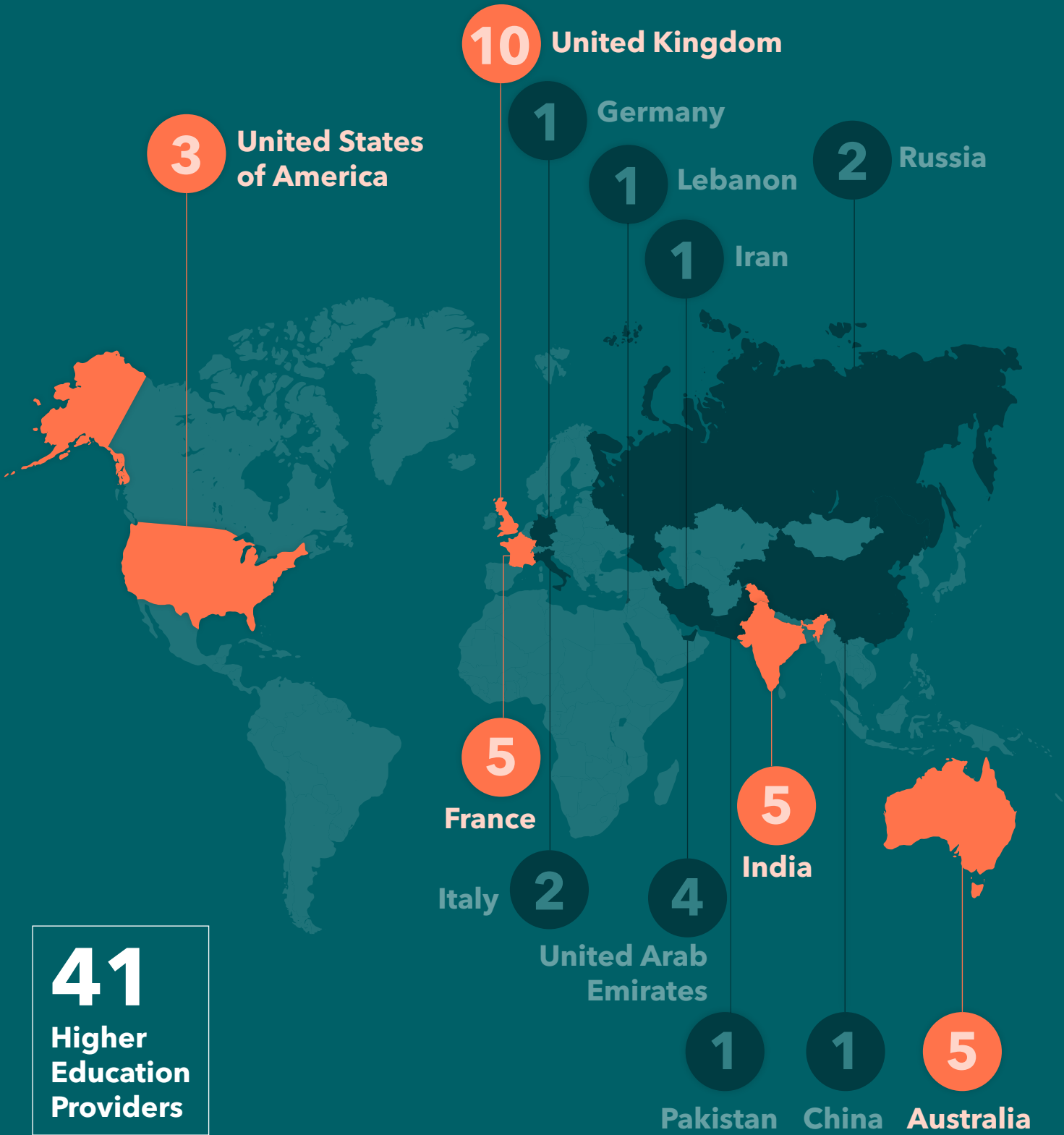
As shown by Figure 1, the number of higher education providers licensed by the KHDA - the quality assurance and regulatory authority of the Government of Dubai - increased from 30 in 2022/2023 to 38 in the 2023/2024 academic year and then to 41 in the 2024/2025 academic year. This reflects a 37% increase over just two years and demonstrates steady growth across the past three academic years. Dubai's 41 higher education providers comprise 37 international branch campuses representing twelve countries - ranked by number of campuses:

41 providers, 37 branch campuses, 12 countries
Dubai's higher education landscape continues to expand and diversify as it builds its global education hub status.

UK (10), France (5), India (5), Australia (5), USA (3), Italy (2), Russia (2), China (1), Germany (1), Lebanon (1), Pakistan (1), and Iran (1). The remaining four providers were domestic UAE institutions.

The increasing number of licensed providers aligns with Dubai's broader vision to establish itself as a global education hub, as the expanding pool of institutions is likely to lead to more diverse academic offerings and healthy competition among providers, thereby enhancing educational quality and global appeal. In July 2025, the KHDA also announced that 3 new branch campuses would open during the 2025/2026 academic year, bringing the total number of IBCs in Dubai to 40. The universities confirmed to begin operations include the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Ahmedabad from India, the American University of Beirut from Lebanon, and Fakeeh College for Medical Sciences from Saudi Arabia.²

Figure 2: Dubai - Number of Higher Education Providers Licensed by KHDA

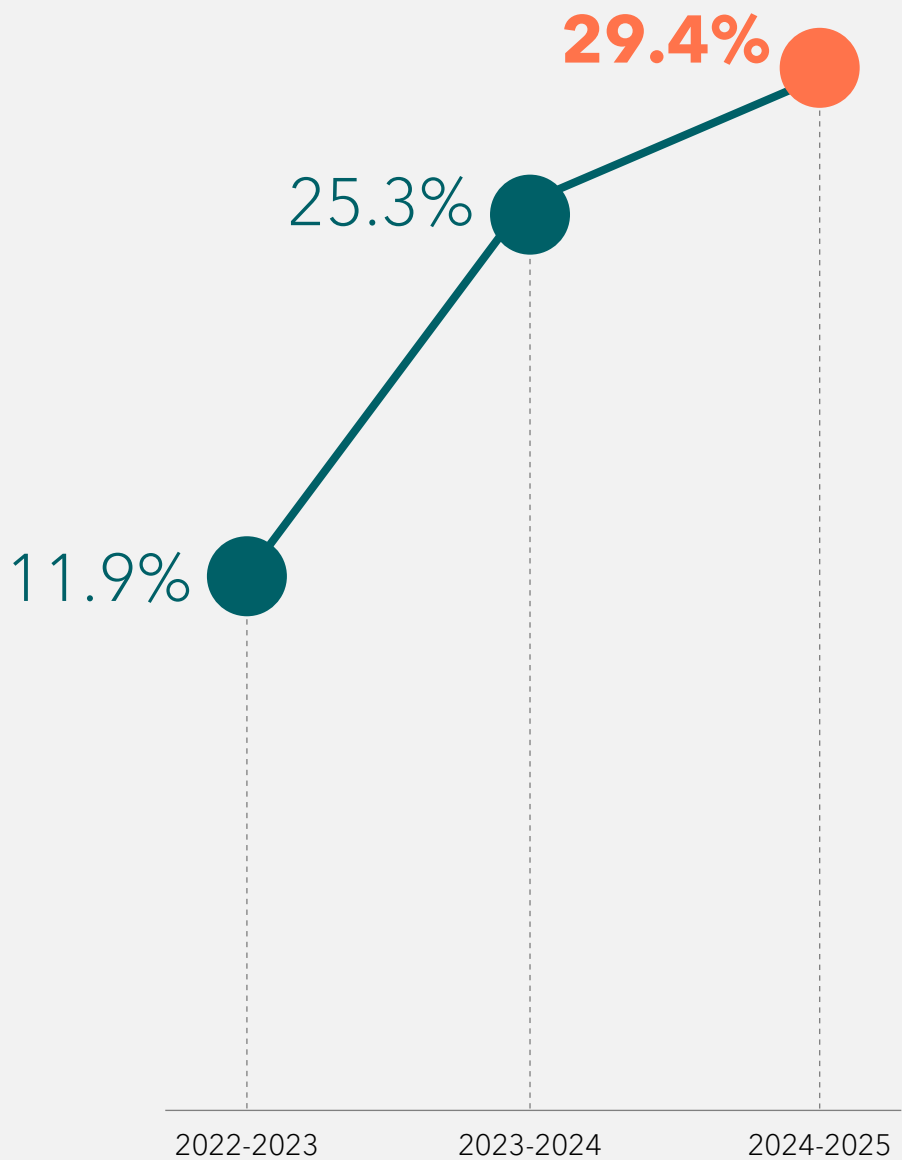


²University World News: Three more international campuses set to open in Dubai. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250711094949156>

Meeting Demand: Dubai Will Need Up To 15 More Campuses by 2040

According to KHDA projections, student enrolments in Dubai are expected to more than double by 2040, driven by increasing demand from both local and international markets.³ With the city's population continuing to rise, the demand for university places is set to increase. Dubai's population grew by 5.5% over the past year (August 2024-August 2025) and by a total of 17% over the last five years.⁴ Furthermore, more students are relocating to Dubai specifically to pursue higher education. Based on current capacity and planned expansions at existing institutions, the city will require an additional ten to fifteen international branch campuses to meet projected demand.⁵ This anticipated growth builds on recent trends, including a nearly 40% increase in higher education providers between 2022/23 and 2024/25, highlighting Dubai's accelerating emergence as a global education hub during a transformative period of enrolment growth and strategic expansion.

Figure 3: Enrolment growth (per cent) in international students in Dubai (those who came to Dubai for the purpose of study).



Balancing Quality and Growth Through Dual Regulation

The creation of the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in 2006 was a turning point in systematising and overseeing private education in Dubai. In 2008, the KHDA introduced the University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB) to ensure that international branch campuses maintain the same academic standards as their home campuses. Meanwhile, the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), operating under the United Arab Emirates' Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, serves as the federal quality-assurance body for higher education in the UAE. Established in 2006, the CAA plays a central role in licensing higher education institutions and accrediting academic programmes at the diploma, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, ensuring alignment with the National Qualifications Framework (QFEmirates).

Institutions seeking federal recognition and entry into the national register of licensed institutions must receive CAA licensure and programme accreditation, even if they

operate in TECOM Group operated free zones in Dubai, underscoring CAA's status as the national authority for academic quality in the UAE. It should also be noted that only institutions with CAA accreditation are eligible to receive federal funding. This dual-track regulatory environment: KHDA for free zones and CAA for federal recognition, encourages institutions to maintain high academic quality, benchmarked against international and national standards. As of August 2025, thirty-one Dubai based IBCs have dual accreditation from both the KHDA and CAA – a full list of these institutions can be found in the appendices.

31
Dubai-based international branch campuses hold dual accreditation from both the KHDA and the CAA as of August 2025.

³ The PIE News. (2025). Dubai anticipates need for more branch campuses as enrolments rise. Retrieved from <https://thepienews.com/dubai-uae-the-expansion>
⁴ <https://www.dsc.gov.ae/en-us/eservices/pages/population-clock.aspx>
⁵ <https://monitor.icef.com/2025/02/student-mobility-in-mena-boosted-by-foreign-partnerships-and-branch-campuses/>

How Dubai Compares with Other Global Education Hubs

Dubai can be compared against other regional education hubs globally across key indicators. This is displayed on the table on page 15 and includes details on size of each hub by number of universities and enrolments, age of the sector, as well as the research environment. A summary of the key partner countries is also given along with a ranking in the latest 2026 best student cities rankings. What makes Dubai distinctive from other hubs is its combination of a comprehensive education offering, its research environment, recognition as a safe and QS-ranked global city, and the supportive ecosystem created by DIAC, DKP, and the wider TECOM Group network.

Moreover, Dubai’s strategic partnerships with such a wide range of countries enhances its global connectivity and appeal. This is reflected in its QS Best Student Cities ranking of 75, ahead of Doha (85), with the education hubs in Malaysia and India not ranked at all. Collectively, these indicators position Dubai as a global leader in international higher education.



Figure 4: Comparative Analysis of Higher Education Hubs Worldwide

					
Location	Dubai, UAE	Johor, Malaysia	Doha, Qatar	Cairo, Egypt	Ahmedabad, India
Education Hub	Dubai International Academic City, Dubai Knowledge Park	EduCity	Education City	Various	GIFT City
Est. Enrolments	~40,000	~4,000	~5,000	~4,000	~1,000
Sector Maturity (Years)	20+ years	17	20+ years	~5 years	~2 years
Number of Universities	29	6	8	7	4
Research Environment	Advanced	Moderate	Advanced	Low	Low
Key Partner Countries	UK, France, India, Russia, Australia, USA	UK, Netherlands	USA	Canada, UK, Portugal	UK, Australia
QS Best Student Cities Ranking 2026	75	Not Ranked	85	=71	Not Ranked

Chapter 2: Market and Student Trends

Dubai’s higher education sector is undergoing a dynamic transformation, driven by the emirate’s Education Strategy 2033.

Enrolment trends reveal a growing share of globally mobile learners alongside sustained participation from local students, as discussed below. This chapter explores the demographic composition of the student population by areas such as nationality and study level, while examining the most in-demand fields of study. It also highlights key challenges faced and the accelerating integration of online and hybrid learning models, all of which reflect Dubai’s ambition to build a diversified, globally competitive, and digitally enabled higher education ecosystem.

Sustained Growth in Student Numbers

As can be seen in Figure 5, the total number of students enrolled in Dubai’s higher education sector has shown consistent year-on-year growth, from 25,253 in 2020/2021 to 42,026 in 2024/2025. Looking forward, different projection methods highlight a range of possible futures. A linear regression model suggests enrolments could reach 60,470 by 2029/2030, representing a 139% increase over the decade. By contrast, if the sector were to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10%, which is close to recent historical growth, enrolments would be around 59,600 by 2029/2030. Other benchmarks include Dubai’s KHDA 2040 target of doubling enrolments, and a baseline 4.4% population CAGR, each implying different capacity needs. Under any of these scenarios, Dubai will likely require 10-15 additional higher education providers by 2040 to accommodate the expanding student population.

Figure 5: Dubai - Number of Students (with Forecast)



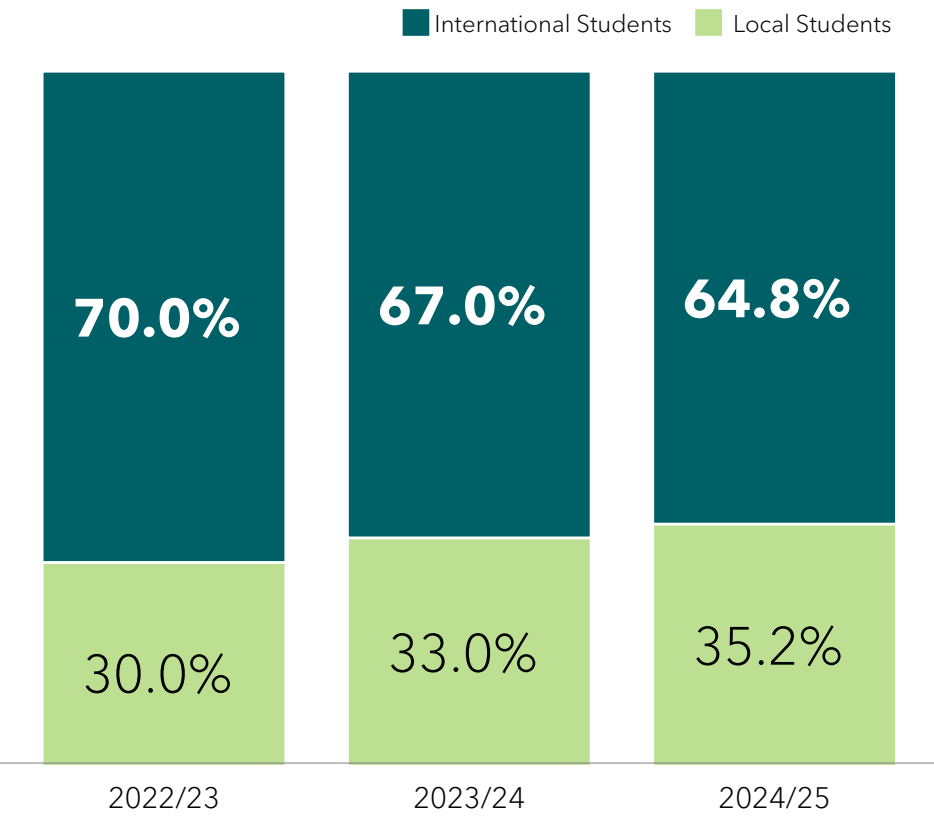
Source: Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) - Higher Education and UQAIB

The number of KHDA-licensed higher education institutions in Dubai rose significantly over the same period, from 30 to 41 providers between 2022/2023 and 2024/2025 (see Figure 6 on the next page). The expansion of programmes and campuses may account for the increasing student numbers. From 2025/2026 onwards as projected, the growth continues at a steady rate, averaging around 4,200 new students per year. Dubai's rapid growth in student enrolments over the past four years, coupled with projections of further increases, underscores its rising status as a leading higher education hub in the region with widening international appeal.

A Diverse Student Body with Strong Local Participation

The composition of Dubai's higher education sector remains primarily shaped by local student enrolments, which accounted for 64.8% of students in the 2024/2025 academic year. The category of 'local students' encompasses both Emirati nationals and non-Emirati residents of Dubai at the time of enrolment. Within this cohort, the number of Emirati students specifically has reached a record high, with 3,832 enrolments in 2024/2025 compared with 3,140 in the preceding year. Furthermore, the proportion of international students coming to the city for the purpose of study has also grown steadily, rising from 30.0% in 2022/2023 to 35.2% in 2024/2025. This trend signals Dubai's increasing success in positioning itself as a global education destination, while still maintaining strong local participation.

Figure 6: Dubai - International vs Local Student Distribution across academic years



Source: Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) - Higher Education and UQAIB

4,200 new enrolments annually signal Dubai's expanding global appeal and sustained growth in higher education.



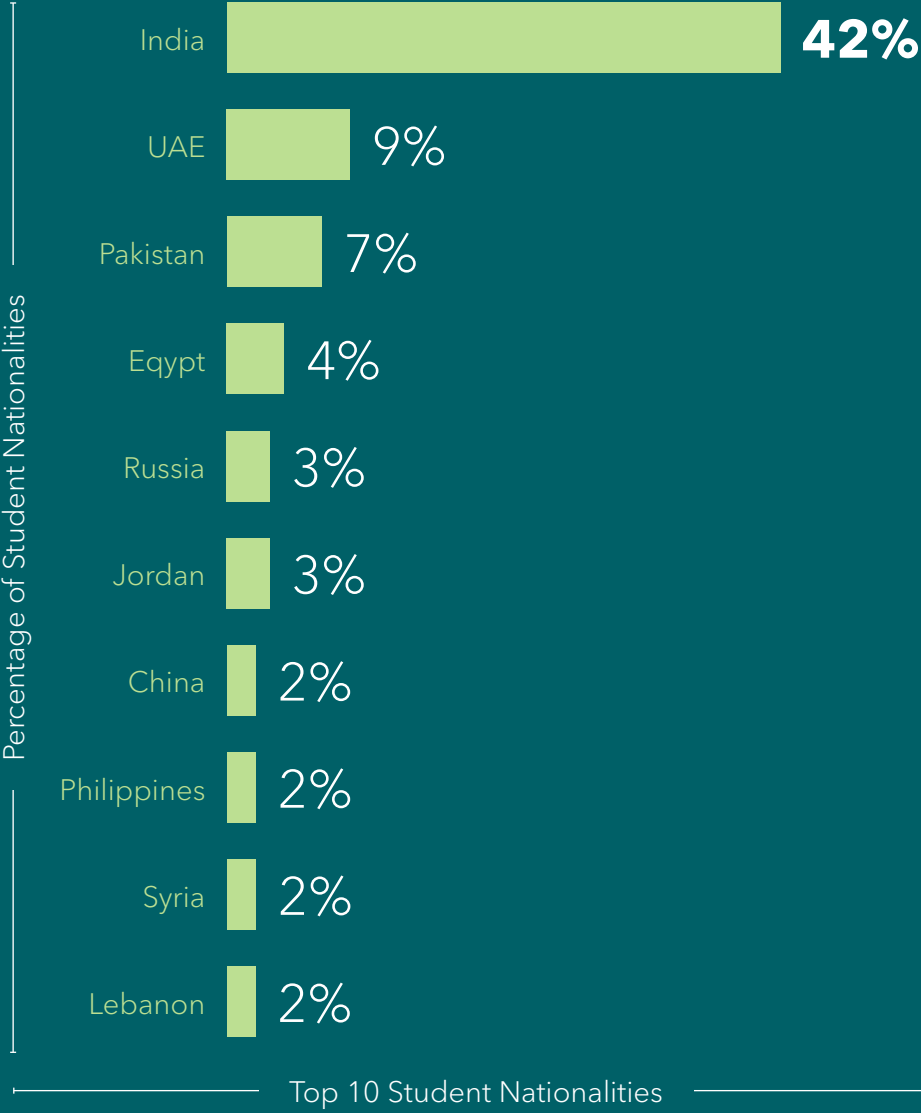
To further illustrate how Dubai’s higher education system continues to attract a highly international student population, the data in Figure 7 shows a diverse picture, albeit with Indian students alone making up 42% of total enrolments. The remaining top nine nationalities collectively account for 38% of enrolments, indicating a mix of regional and global representation. The top five nationalities of students coming to Dubai solely for the purposes of education is similar in its geographic distribution, but here we can see the addition of Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan which accounted for 3% of international student enrolments in 2024/2025. This underscores Dubai’s appeal as a transnational education hub, especially for students from South Asia, the Middle East, and other emerging markets.

42%
of all students in Dubai’s higher education institutions **are Indian nationals**, reflecting strong South Asian representation.

International Students Strengthen Dubai’s Global Position

Backed up by this data it is evident that Dubai’s private higher education sector is experiencing significant growth in international student enrolments, reinforcing the emirate’s strategic vision of becoming a global hub for academic excellence. According to data published by the KHDA, the number of international students, defined as those relocating to Dubai specifically for study as stated above, rose by 29% between the 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 academic years. These students now account for 35% of the total enrolment at private higher education institutions across Dubai. This increase aligns with the goals of Dubai’s E33, specifically its City of Students initiative, which aspires to increase the share of international students to 50% by the year 2033. The initiative underscores Dubai’s commitment to positioning itself as a magnet for globally mobile learners by enhancing campus infrastructure, academic offerings, and regulatory support.

Figure 7: Dubai - Top 10 Student Nationalities in Academic Year 2024/25



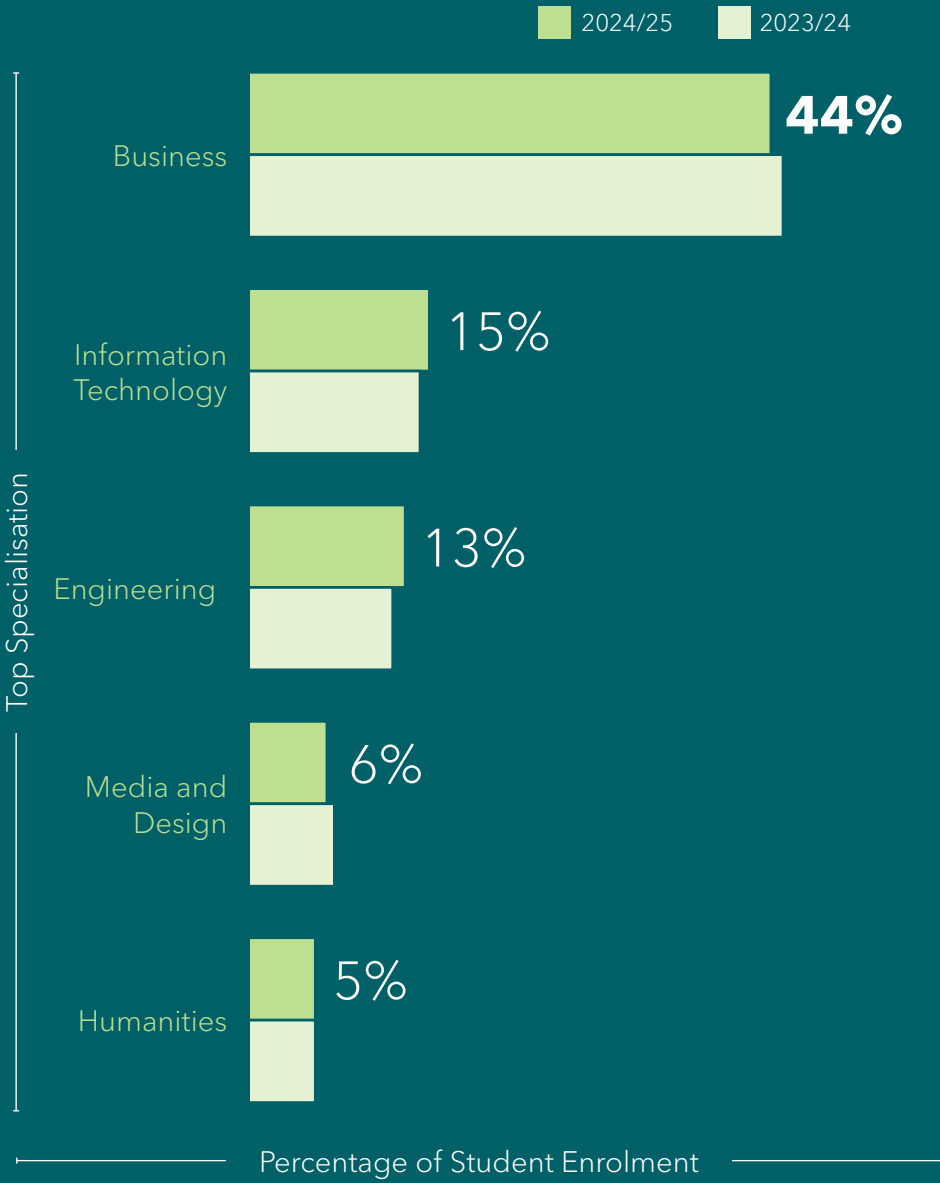
In terms of fields of knowledge, Figure 8 illustrates that, in the 2024/2025 academic year, Dubai's higher education landscape remains highly concentrated around a few key disciplines. The top five academic specialisations together account for 83% of total student enrolment, indicating a strong preference for career-oriented and industry-relevant programmes aligned with Dubai's current and future labour market needs. Business is by far the dominant field, while STEM-related disciplines (Information Technology and Engineering) are also popular subjects for students. Creative and liberal arts fields (Media & Design, Humanities) make up a smaller but stable portion of the student body. The following provides an individual analysis per each of the top three disciplines.

Business leads as the most popular field of study, making up nearly half (44%) of all enrolments in the top specialisations in year 2024/2025. Its dominance reflects Dubai's status as a global business hub where there is high demand for graduates

skilled in management, finance, marketing, and entrepreneurship. Information Technology holds the second position, with 15% of students pursuing studies in this field. Its strong showing highlights the increasing importance of digital skills in Dubai's workforce that align closely with Dubai's smart city ambitions. Engineering is a well-established discipline in Dubai, attracting 13% of students. Increased investment in infrastructure, sustainability, and innovation continues to drive strong employment opportunities in engineering, reflecting the city's current labour market priorities.

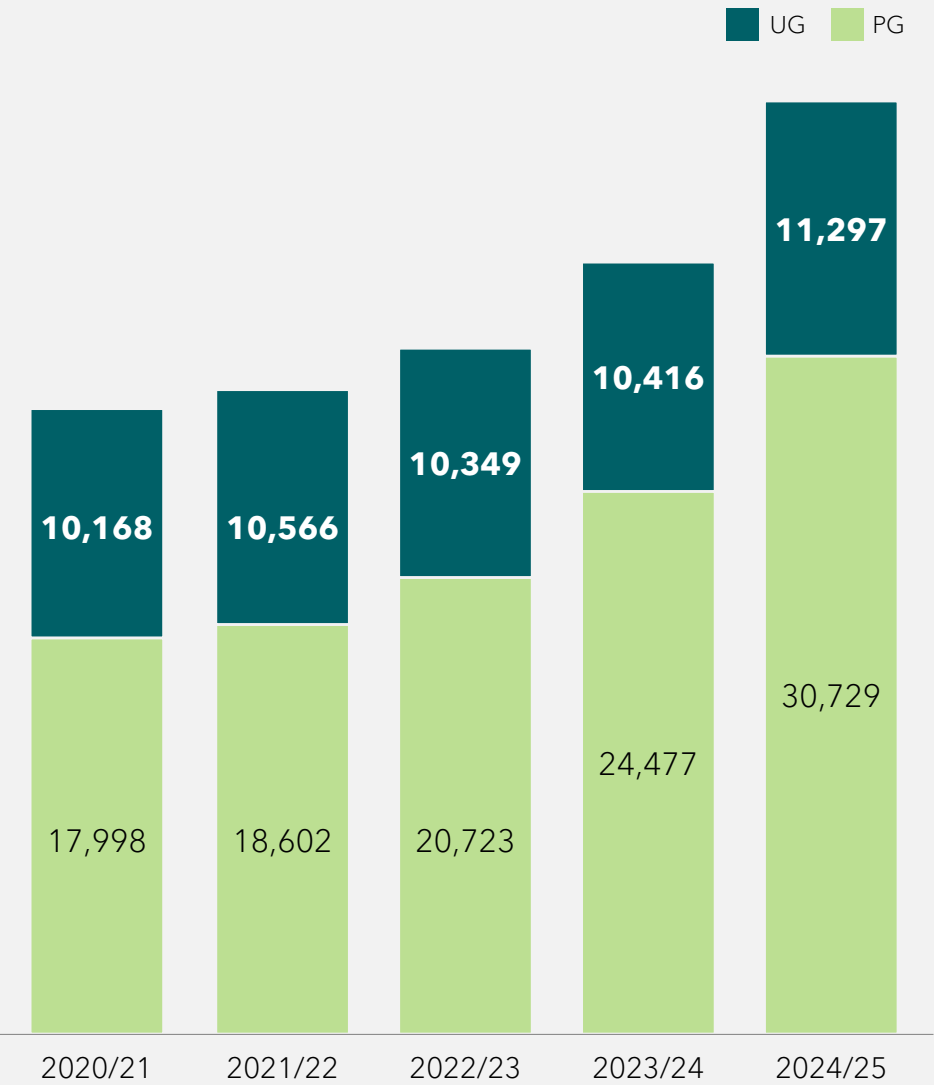
Official KHDA data further highlights areas of growth within Dubai's higher education sector. Between 2023/2024 and 2024/2025, the most significant increases in student enrolments were recorded in Information Technology (+32%), Engineering (+30%), and Health and Medicine (+27%), reflecting both Dubai's economic diversification agenda and the growing global demand for graduates in these fields.

Figure 8: Dubai - Top 5 fields of study across academic years 2023/24 and 2024/25



Enrolment data from KHDA-licensed higher education institutions in Dubai shows a marked and sustained increase in undergraduate (UG) enrolments over the five-year period from 2020/2021 to 2024/2025. UG student numbers grew from 17,998 in 2020/2021 to 30,729 by 2024/2025, representing a 71% increase. This growth highlights the expanding appeal of Dubai's higher education offerings to young and first-time tertiary learners, both locally and internationally. In contrast, postgraduate (PG) enrolments remained relatively stable during the same period, fluctuating only slightly around the 10,000 to 11,000 mark. While there was a modest increase from 10,168 in 2020/2021 to 11,297 in 2024/2025, an 11% rise, this growth is considerably more subdued compared to the UG segment. Overall, the main growth engine lies in the undergraduate segment while the consistent PG numbers suggest that Dubai also remains an attractive destination for advanced study.

Figure 9: Dubai - Split of Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate (PG) Enrolments



Source: Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) - Dubai's Private Higher Education Institutions Open Data



11%
rise in postgraduate enrolments over five years, growing modestly from 10,168 to 11,297 students.

Chapter 3: Market Structure and Value Chain

Dubai's higher education sector has undergone a significant structural transformation over the past two decades, shaped by strategic investments in specialised education free zones, an increasingly diverse mix of international higher education institutions, and a regulatory framework that balances international quality standards with local priorities.

Through the development of these free zones, Dubai has positioned itself as a hub for international branch campuses and private providers. The following sub-sections will explore each strategic area in detail to provide a comprehensive understanding of Dubai's higher education landscape.

How Free Zones Enable Dubai's Higher Education Growth

Since the early 2000s, Dubai has successfully developed two higher education free zones to support its ambition of becoming an international higher education hub. Of the current 41 universities in Dubai, 29 sit within the two TECOM Group education-specific business districts:



Dubai Knowledge Park (DKP): Dubai Knowledge Park, the first education-focused business zone in the city, was launched by TECOM Group in 2001 to foster human capital development and support knowledge-based industries. Today, DKP is home to international universities from Australia, the United States, India, Iran, Russia, and the UK. It is also made up of more than 250 organisations, including vocational & corporate training institutes, student recruitment companies, executive search firms, language schools, HR consultancies, university hubs, and EdTech companies. Examples of university international branch campuses located at DKP include University of Manchester's Middle East Centre, Heriot-Watt University, University of Wollongong in Dubai, and Middlesex University Dubai.



Dubai International Academic City (DIAC): Established in 2005 to meet the rising demand for full-scale university education, DIAC was Dubai's first free zone dedicated to housing higher education branch campuses and is home to the majority of enrolled students enrolled within Dubai higher education ecosystem. It offers advanced facilities and infrastructure, including land for universities to develop purpose-built campuses. Today, DIAC accommodates around 20 international branch campuses, such as the University of Birmingham Dubai, IIM Ahmedabad, and Curtin University Dubai, alongside innovation centres, purpose-built student housing, and a small number of Early Learning Centers (nurseries).

29

of Dubai's 41 universities are located within **TECOM Group's two education-focused free zones – Dubai Knowledge Park (DKP) and Dubai International Academic City (DIAC).**

How TECOM Group Links Higher Education to Dubai’s Business Landscape

Dubai Knowledge Park (DKP) and Dubai International Academic City (DIAC) are two of ten “Business Districts” operated under the ownership of the TECOM Group. Collectively, those ten business districts accommodate over 11,900 companies covering 6 sectors and 124,000 professionals.⁷ The business districts all feature purpose-built facilities and industry-specific infrastructure, offering a range of commercial spaces tailored to businesses of all sizes, from major multinationals to local SMEs and start-ups. Examples of businesses present in the TECOM Group ecosystem include Intel, CISCO, Amazon Web Services, CNN, Olympus, Adidas, BBC, Google, Pfizer and Unilever. These businesses are spread across eight additional business districts: Dubai Internet City, Dubai Outsource City, Dubai Media City, Dubai Studio City, Dubai Production City, Dubai Science Park, Dubai Industrial City and Dubai Design District (d3).

Beyond providing just the physical infrastructure, the TECOM Group ecosystem also plays an active role in connecting academia with industry across different sectors. Through initiatives such as In5⁸,

TECOM Group helps create an environment that supports innovators and students by offering access to mentorship, networking opportunities, prototyping labs, and access to investors. This creates a pathway for students to turn ideas into viable start-ups. Furthermore, collaboration between businesses and universities within the TECOM Group ecosystem reinforces this connection between higher education and real-world skills development. One such example is Alibaba Cloud’s partnership with the University of Birmingham Dubai, which aims to enhance digital capabilities and cloud computing skills across the Middle East and Africa region, equipping students with the expertise needed for the evolving digital economy.⁹

The Role of Private and Public Institutions in Dubai

Dubai’s higher education ecosystem is predominantly shaped by private institutions, which accounts for most student enrolments and active providers in the emirate. As of the 2024/2025 academic year, there are 41 private higher education providers as discussed in Chapter 1. These institutions are mainly concentrated in education free zones such as Dubai International Academic City (DIAC) and Dubai Knowledge Park (DKP)

as introduced above, where they operate under streamlined regulatory frameworks designed to attract foreign providers. On the other hand, public institutions in Dubai are limited in number and largely serve Emirati nationals. Key government-affiliated universities include

Zayed University (Dubai Campus), and the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) – a public institution made up of sixteen campuses throughout the UAE including several in Dubai. Both universities operate outside of the free zone model.



1. Dubai Internet City
2. Dubai Media City
3. Dubai Knowledge Park
4. Dubai Design District
5. Dubai Science Park
6. Dubai Studio City
7. Dubai Production City
8. Dubai International Academic City
9. Dubai Outsource City
10. Dubai Industrial City

⁷ <https://tecomgroup.ae/business-districts.html>
⁸ <https://infive.ae/about-us/>
⁹ https://www.alibabacloud.com/blog/alibaba-cloud-collaborates-with-university-of-birmingham-dubai-to-enhance-digital-skills-across-the-mea-region_602454

Types of Institutions:
Diverse and Internationally
Aligned

Higher education providers in Dubai can broadly be categorised as follows:

International Branch
Campuses

Comprehensive
Institutions:

These institutions are large scale branch campuses of overseas universities usually with 2,000 or more enrolled students. These institutions usually over a diverse number of programmes spread across multiple schools, or faculty. They may also host research and innovation centres. The student enrolments base of these universities is a mix of local residents graduating from Dubai’s K-12 schools and overseas students who have chosen specifically to pursue their studies in Dubai. Examples of comprehensive universities include the University of Wollongong – first established in Dubai in 1993, and the University of Birmingham Dubai, based in DIAC.

Community Institutions:

These institutions are primarily teaching institutions similar in nature to comprehensive institutions in

terms of the diversity of course offerings but usually have a smaller enrolments base that target specific segments of Dubai’s expatriate community. Examples include Amity University and Manipal University from India – both located in DIAC.

University Centres
or Single Discipline IBCs:

The largest category by volume, these are branch campuses of overseas universities offering a limited range of programmes. They typically use existing TECOM Group provided infrastructure and are located in shared spaces across the main business zones – DIAC and DKP. Their focus is primarily on teaching within a specific academic area or discipline, such as business (Hult International Business School), executive education (University of Manchester Middle East Centre), or creative fields like fashion, design, and media (Istituto Marangoni and SAE Institute).

Local Institutions

Government-affiliated
Institutions:

These institutions are not located in the TECOM Group free zones and primarily serve Emirati nationals by offering specialised higher education degrees.

- Private Institutions:** These are private universities that have been established outside of the free zone environment. Examples include the American University in Dubai and Emirate Aviation University.

Vocational Education
as a Critical Driver of
Workforce Readiness

Dubai’s TVET ecosystem is another example of how different forms of education can meaningfully contribute to the alignment between academia and industry. The wider TVET system in Dubai is mature, established and plays a central role in providing education to people seeking specific knowledge and practical skills needed for jobs and employment in priority sectors. Within Dubai, the TVET sector is overseen and regulated by Qualifications and Awards in Dubai (QAD) – an arm of the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA). It ensures that local TVET providers offer accessible learning opportunities and deliver qualifications which create alternative pathways to high-demand careers. Examples of successful TVET providers include:



Figure 10: Dubai-based TVET Providers

Provider	Key Courses/ Sectors	Labour Market Alignment
Regent College London	Business, IT (AI, Cybersecurity), Tourism, Language Courses, Animation	Aligned with high-growth UAE sectors (tech, AI, hospitality); Pearson-accredited HNDs; internship support ensures work-ready graduates.
Dubai College of Tourism	Tourism, Events, Hospitality, Culinary Arts	Apprenticeship programmes for students, combining on-the job training with select employers.
International Centre for Culinary Arts (ICCA)	Culinary Arts, Food Preparation, Baking	Directly supports UAE's expanding hospitality & F&B sector; guaranteed job placements; strong links with top hotel and restaurant brands across the region.
Global Business Studies	Digital Tech, Construction, Healthcare, Business & Management, Accounting	Wide range of courses matches demand in critical sectors (construction, healthcare, IT);
CNM Institute of Natural Health	Health Coaching, Natural Health, Wellness	Serves UAE’s rising wellness and preventative health market; includes entrepreneurship skills to support self-employment and private practice.

CASE STUDY 1



University of Birmingham Dubai

The University of Birmingham was the first global top 100 university to establish a campus in Dubai, marking a milestone in the Emirate’s higher education landscape.

The Russell Group institution from the UK began its teaching operations in 2017 from a shared space, before quickly outgrowing the facility and moving in 2021 to a purpose-built campus in TECOM Group’s Dubai International Academic City. Guided by its ‘one university, two campuses’ ethos, the University chose to open a campus in Dubai for its open regulatory framework within a free-zone environment, the UAE’s strong economic prospects, and its strategic location, which enables the campus to function as both a national and regional centre for higher education.

Curriculum Design for the Local Context

According to the KHDA 2024/2025 Census Data, the University currently enrolls 2,491 students, representing a substantial increase from 1,552 students in the previous year 2023/2024. 96% of current

students are foreign students. This includes foreign residents of Dubai, plus students who chose to study in Dubai directly from their home country. 4% of students are local Emirati students. The courses in which these students are enrolled provide an indication of how the University is aligning its offerings with Dubai’s priority sectors.

Approximately 60% of the current student body is enrolled in undergraduate programmes. The portfolio includes disciplines such as Biomedical Science, Environmental Science, Law, Media and Marketing, and Psychology. Business programmes cover areas like Business Management with specialisations in Finance, Economics, and Accounting, supporting Dubai’s financial services and commercial sectors. Engineering is offered with applications in infrastructure and construction, while the Computer



Science curriculum is evolving from a theoretical base toward applied AI in response to sector demand. Many courses also incorporate integrated, credit-bearing industrial placements to enhance practical experience and employability.

Postgraduate taught programmes are primarily designed for mid-career working professionals aiming to upskill, or transition into new career paths. Programmes include an MSc in Supply Chain and Logistics, as well as specialist courses in AI and Machine Learning. Additionally, AI and Computer Science conversion courses cater to professionals entering the technology sector. The focus on mid-career learners influences programme design, delivery modes, and content to accommodate the specific needs

of this demographic. Additionally, the master’s-level specialisms in Education also contribute significantly by preparing local graduates to engage with Dubai’s expanding K-12 sector, supporting the shift toward a learner-centred education ecosystem - an important pillar of Dubai’s broader economic and educational transformation under the D33 and Education 33 agendas.

Industry Partnerships and Graduate Employability

Strong collaboration between academia and industry is essential for equipping graduates with the skills needed to meet the evolving demands of Dubai’s dynamic economy. Reflecting this, the University offers a range of courses designed to reflect



industry needs. In several majors, industry partnerships are integrated into the curriculum, providing students with opportunities to develop skills applicable to Dubai’s labour market and key industries.

Examples include the Global Health System Leadership MSc, adapted from the UK’s National Health Service (NHS) model and developed in collaboration with the Dubai Health Authority (DHA) to prepare students for leadership roles in healthcare management; the Urban Analytics and AI for Planners MSc, created with Dubai Municipality to equip learners with data-driven skills for urban planning and smart city initiatives; and the Future Mobility Programme, in partnership with the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA), which focuses on transportation solutions aligned with Dubai’s evolving needs around public transportation and wider city development. Through close collaboration with key industry stakeholders, these programmes incorporate practical experience and relevant industry knowledge into the curriculum, ensuring that students graduate with the skills necessary for Dubai’s evolving workforce and the demands of the future economy.

The practice of working with industry through advisory boards and partnerships with accreditation bodies has helped the University ensure that teaching remains relevant and aligned with sector needs. This collaboration extends to graduate employability through partnerships with organisations such as Grant Thornton, which offered placements to all members of the most recent BSc Accounting and Finance graduating class. The Dubai Health Authority (DHA) also provides clinical placement opportunities for students enrolled in the Mental Health MSc programme, helping them build relationships with health providers in the region. Teacher training programmes also embed two integrated work placements, designed to strengthen graduate employability and facilitate entry into the profession locally.

Furthermore, as part of their studies, students are encouraged to source industrial placements independently – one in Dubai and one internationally – with dedicated career services providing support, and many placements being credit-bearing. Additionally, initiatives such as the Barclays mentorship scheme support students by connecting them with industry professionals in Dubai’s financial sector – a key driver of the D33 agenda. To suit

The University of Birmingham Dubai combines academic excellence with civic responsibility, producing job-ready graduates who support Dubai’s future skills agenda.

student’s familiarity with digital engagement, all students have online access to the University’s Careers Network employability programme. Initiatives like the Dubai Award – a personal skills award recognising competencies developed outside the classroom – also help foster a culture of career readiness across the campus community.

Civic Roots Helping Dubai’s Growth

Engagement with the local community and contribution to economic advancement have been central to the mission of civic universities, such as the University of Birmingham, since their emergence in the UK

in the early twentieth century. By extending these founding values to its Dubai campus and aligning its tradition of world-class teaching with Dubai’s future skills agenda, the University has made a substantial contribution to the Emirate’s higher education landscape. This approach generates mutual benefits: Dubai and its economy gain access to highly skilled, job-ready graduates who meet employers’ needs, while the University strengthens its global presence, reputation, and academic impact. A key takeaway from the University of Birmingham’s experience is understanding the value in embedding industry needs from the start.



CASE STUDY 2



Middlesex University Dubai

Middlesex University Dubai launched its first UAE campus in Dubai Knowledge Park in 2005. In 2021, it expanded further into Dubai International Academic City, helping to establish it as the largest international branch campus by transnational education student enrolments in Dubai.

Today, the university is home to over 6,000 students from over 120 countries, having increased its enrolments 68% from 2020 numbers, according to official KHDA data. Since it opened its doors, it has transformed from offering a small portfolio of functional degree programmes into one of Dubai’s most dynamic and fully integrated international campuses. Middlesex University Dubai’s contribution to the D33 agenda can be understood across three areas: aligning courses with labour market needs, advancing knowledge through research centres, and fostering student entrepreneurship via the Middlesex Innovation Hub (MIH).

Course Alignment with Economic Priorities

Middlesex University Dubai has aligned its academic programmes with Dubai’s shifting economic priorities over the past 20 years, closely aligning it with the city’s evolving labour market demands. The institution’s portfolio, initially centred on business, IT, and law, has expanded as Dubai has sought to strengthen its role as a knowledge-based and innovation-driven economy. Programmes in logistics and supply chain management, for example, reflect Dubai’s established status as a regional and global trade hub and provide students with the technical and analytical skills needed to maintain that



position. Similarly, courses in robotics, data science, financial technology, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence are designed around the increasing demand for advanced manufacturing knowledge and digital competencies across different sectors.

This course alignment also extends into fields beyond traditional business and STEM-related subjects. The Healthcare Management MBA pathway respond to Dubai’s investment in private medical infrastructure, while the BSc Sport and Exercise Science, offered through the London Sports Institute Dubai, mirrors Dubai’s ambitions in growing its sports ecosystem capacity. The latter helps students get ready for the sports industry

through required modules on work-based practice and employability, where they take part in industry placements to build professional skills and workplace readiness. Overall, this shows how central workplace readiness is to the University, which actively aligns course offerings with local economic development and prepares graduates for work in those industries

Research and Centres of Excellence

Beyond offering programmes and courses that support Dubai’s economic development, the University has further embedded itself into the local context by establishing specialist centres that connect



¹⁰ <https://web.khda.gov.ae/en/Resources/KHDA-data-statistics>

academic expertise with the city's economic priorities. These centres focus on applied research and professional training, generating knowledge that directly supports both institutional and industry development. JURIS, the University's law centre of excellence, reflects this model through its six-month DIFC Laws Certificate Programme which equips legal and corporate professionals with training in common law and DIFC procedures, contributing to the city's legal and financial capacity. Separately, the Institute of Sustainable Development serves as the central hub for the university's sustainability initiatives, focusing on impactful research, campus sustainability projects, and training programs that promote climate action and social responsibility.

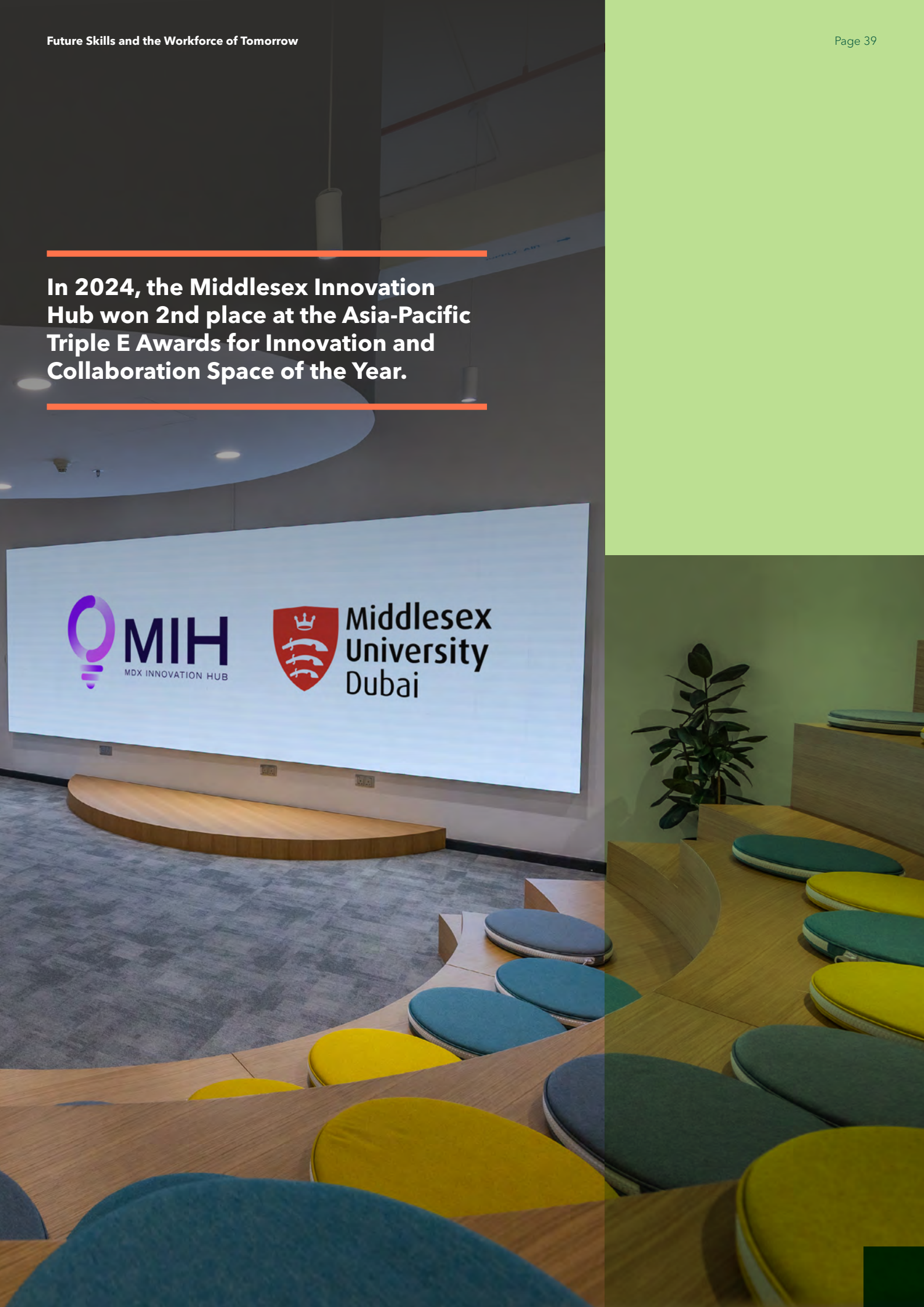
Entrepreneurship and the Middlesex Innovation Hub

Launched in 2024 with support from the Dubai Future Foundation, the Middlesex Innovation Hub (MIH) supports student start-ups by providing mentorship and support for students, fostering a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship on campus and helping their business ideas become a reality. The Hub has also attracted recognition and partnerships that extend its reach beyond campus. In 2024, the Middlesex Innovation

Hub placed second at the Asia-Pacific Triple E Awards in the 'Innovation and Collaboration Space of the Year' category, recognising its role within the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem. It has since developed collaborations with organisations such as Alibaba Cloud and the LUMS Centre for Entrepreneurship. From initiatives like the Innovation Hub, we can see how Middlesex University Dubai's industry-academic alignment supports the D33 agenda by cultivating skilled graduates and fostering innovation that responds to Dubai's long-term economic vision.

Middlesex University Dubai illustrates how a higher education institution can align with a city's long-term economic ambitions by shaping its academic portfolio around emerging sectors while also developing research centres that strengthen Dubai's knowledge economy. The University's Innovation Hub extends this impact by equipping students with entrepreneurial skills and opportunities to contribute to a diversified, innovation-led economy. Taken together, these initiatives show that the University is not limited to producing graduates but is deeply embedded in the local context, actively contributing to Dubai's innovation-led growth.

In 2024, the Middlesex Innovation Hub won 2nd place at the Asia-Pacific Triple E Awards for Innovation and Collaboration Space of the Year.



CASE STUDY 3



University of Wollongong Dubai

The University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD) was the first international branch campus to establish a presence in Dubai. Launched in 1993 as the Institute of Australian Studies, the institution has grown in parallel with the Emirate’s higher education sector and the broader local economy.

Today, it stands as one of the largest destinations for university students in Dubai and across the UAE, moving into its current purpose-built campus in Dubai Knowledge Park in 2022. Beyond Dubai, the University of Wollongong operates additional branch campuses in India and Malaysia. Across its various stages of growth, the institution has consistently aligned its programmes and strategic direction with national priorities, most recently the UAE’s D33 agenda. This commitment is reflected in the development of new academic offerings, the integration of employability into degree structures, and close collaboration with industry to equip graduates for the workforce of the future

Programme Development and Economic Alignment

From its early postgraduate programmes in quality management, designed to serve labour market needs in government and customer service, UOWD has consistently adapted its portfolio to local demand. An early example is the Master of Quality Management, introduced in the 1990s at the request of Dubai Government, which trained more than 1,200 students, many of whom now make up senior roles in local governance and public service. Market research studies were also used by the University to identify and introduce new degrees in areas such as luxury brand management, reflecting Dubai’s evolving economic needs.



In 2019, the university also launched a nursing conversion degree, designed specifically to upskill locally based nursing professionals and strengthen capacity in the healthcare sector. More recently, the University has aligned with the D33 agenda through programmes in digital transformation, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, business analytics, and mechatronics engineering. These programmes are informed by both government initiatives and input from the relevant industry bodies in Dubai, ensuring graduates are prepared for roles across the public and private sectors.

“Degrees in AI, cybersecurity, and digital transformation are designed around the D33 agenda’s call for future-ready skills.”



Employability and Industry Partnerships

Graduate employability is a defining feature of UOWD’s approach. Its engineering and computer science programmes have employment rates of around 90% within six months of graduation. This is attributed to how the University builds employability skills progressively and emphasises innovation, and industry-linked projects. Furthermore, every academic school at UOWD is supported by an advisory board that links academic departments directly to industry. These boards help ensure programme relevance and provide input on emerging workforce needs. This engagement is complemented by structured work-integrated learning (WIL), which is introduced in the second year of study and viewed as a “soft way” to prepare students for the job market. In some programmes, this also includes mentoring from industry professionals in years two and three, giving students early exposure to professional practice. UOWD has also piloted flexible internship models, including on-campus summer internships and distant online internships.

Capstone projects co-designed with employers provide real-world experience and direct recruitment pipelines.”

Career Services and Internationalisation

UOWD’s Career Services operates as a central hub for employability support for students. Activities include monthly career fairs and industry visits, CV and interview workshops, psychometric testing, and use of career-development software The University also invests in external certification: each year, approximately 500 students receive Coursera licenses to complete industry-recognised courses to supplement their degrees with professional credentials. These initiatives are designed to build confidence and workplace readiness, particularly in an international student population preparing to enter a competitive labour market. International mobility and utilising the wider Wollongong network of campuses is another strategic

focus. Opportunities for students to study a semester at the Wollongong campus in Australia or to participate in exchange programmes provide exposure to different cultural and professional environments. Such experiences are seen as enhancing adaptability and employability, further reinforcing UOWD’s role in preparing graduates for the global workforce.

The University of Wollongong in Dubai shows how an international branch campus can shape its programmes to match a country’s economic goals. By offering degrees that respond to market needs, involving employers in student projects, and investing in strong career services, UOWD helps Dubai prepare graduates with the skills called for in the D33 agenda, while keeping close connections between universities, industry, and government.



Evidence and Insights

The previous chapters and case studies have outlined Dubai’s ambition to build a world leading knowledge economy through increased higher education and industry alignment.

To test the strength of alignment between higher education and the labour market, we undertook a large-scale survey of students, recent graduates, and businesses based in Dubai. The quantitative evidence provides a clear picture: students come to Dubai with career outcomes front of mind, businesses are already engaging in meaningful ways with universities, and graduates are seen as well-prepared. Yet the data also highlights structural gaps, in practical experience, communication, and support systems, that must be addressed if Dubai is to realise the full potential of academic-industry integration. This chapter presents the findings in detail, organised around five themes that together explain both the strengths and the weaknesses of the current alignment.

- Theme 1 >
- Theme 2 >
- Theme 3 >
- Theme 4 >
- Theme 5 >



Theme 1:

Dubai's Higher Education is Viewed Primarily as a Career Launchpad



Evidence from the survey



Students choosing to study in Dubai's higher education sector are primarily motivated by career outcomes:

- 01

Undergraduates: 58% said their subject was chosen because it would increase their chance of getting a job, while 57% cited interest in the subject as their main motivation. Other important factors were proximity to home (48%) and the reputation of the institution (45%).
- 02

Postgraduates: motivations skew even more sharply towards employability for students at this level of study, with 54% citing employment prospects, 49% career progression, and 54% specialist skill development as the most important factors in choosing Dubai as a study destination.
- 03

Dubai-specific choice: 73% of all students said that they selected Dubai because of employment opportunities, strong industry links, and the ability to stay and work in Dubai after graduation.

58%
of undergraduates chose their subject because it would **increase their chances of getting a job.**

Key Takeaways



This data indicates that Dubai’s higher education system and its institutions are more than just academic attractions. The Emirate is primarily perceived as a destination where pursuing academic credentials is closely linked with meaningful employment and career development. Students clearly choose Dubai-based institutions with the expectation that their studies will translate directly into future job opportunities.

For undergraduates, who typically enter university at a younger age than postgraduate students, there is a blend of personal interest in the subject and career motivation. While passion for the field plays a role in their programme choices,

employability remains the key factor in selecting a university course. Postgraduates, who are generally older and more career-focused, are even more explicitly motivated by professional outcomes. They seek higher earnings, career advancement, and specialised skills that will set them apart in a competitive job market.

Dubai’s positioning as a regional business hub enhances this trend. Unlike some international study destinations where lifestyle or global rankings drive student decision making, Dubai is selected for its career connectivity, with education serving as a gateway to the job market.

Postgraduate students in Dubai are **primarily motivated by career advancement, higher earnings, and specialised skills.**

Turning Insight into Action



Embed Industry in the Curriculum

Universities should continue integrating career-focused learning into their programmes, as illustrated by the University of Birmingham Dubai, Middlesex University Dubai and the University of Wollongong Dubai. This involves teaching employability skills, incorporating industry placements within degree programmes, equipping students with the practical skills needed for the workplace.

Measure Employment Trends

Student satisfaction will hinge not just on academic quality, but on career outcomes for students beyond graduation. Up-to-date detailed data on employment trends, internship conversion rates, average starting salaries, and employer partnerships should be tracked and publicised as key performance indicators.

Differentiated Strategies

Universities must serve both groups: undergraduates who require structured support in navigating first-time work experiences, and postgraduates who expect advanced, specialised industry integration.

A Supportive Ecosystem for Universities

Dubai’s commitment to building an economy and labour market based on future skills aligns with student demand for career-focused education. This creates an environment well-suited for universities able to demonstrate strong industry integration.



Theme 2:

Businesses in Dubai Are Eager to Engage, but Collaboration Remains Transactional



Evidence from the survey



Businesses in Dubai are already collaborating with universities in various ways, generating a range of mutual benefits:

- 01

Employment and internships: The most direct form of collaboration between industry and universities is through the recruitment of graduates and interns. Half of the surveyed businesses (50%) employ graduates or interns from Dubai-based universities
- 02

Sponsorship: Among these employers, 44% also sponsor students, through scholarships, stipends, or other forms of financial support.
- 03

Research collaboration: 57% of businesses indicated that they collaborate with academics or participate in research activities alongside academics at Dubai-based universities to support their operations, highlighting strong and direct connections between industry and academia.
- 04

Breadth of engagement: On average, businesses participate in 2.8 different types of activities with universities, indicating that companies in Dubai tend to have multidimensional relationships with higher education institutions. For instance, nearly four in ten (38%) are directly involved with a university through advisory boards or by serving as non-executive members of university council.

57%

of businesses collaborate with academics or participate in joint research with Dubai-based universities

Key Takeaways



If students are selecting Dubai with careers front-of-mind, the critical question becomes: how are businesses engaging with universities to meet those expectations? Businesses see universities as sources of talent, partners for academic collaboration and research. The fact that many businesses engage in more than one activity signals a willingness to participate across multiple fronts. Other examples of industry-university engagement in Dubai include collaborating with university start-ups or spin-out companies (30%) and participating in professional development, training, or short courses (37%). These figures highlight both the breadth of connections between industry and academia.

However, the pattern of engagement is uneven. The most common activities, that is the recruitment of graduates and participation in research, are primarily transactional rather than strategic. Businesses hire students when needed or collaborate on research when it directly serves their priorities. Only 24% of businesses are involved in curriculum co-design, and separately, just 12% of individuals from the private

sector serve on advisory boards that could shape long-term academic-industry integration

This imbalance carries risks. Students choose Dubai on the expectation that higher education will be closely aligned with future career pathways. Yet if industry-academic collaboration remains a peripheral concern for both sides, the system risks under-delivering on that promise. For businesses specifically, limited involvement in programme design, for example, means that curricula may fall behind evolving workforce needs becoming less relevant over time.

However, examples of strong practice already exist. The University of Birmingham Dubai has embedded industry into programme design through partnerships with the Dubai Health Authority, Dubai Municipality, and the RTA. These collaborations have led to co-designed courses that align with industry needs. Likewise, Middlesex University Dubai has ensured that its course portfolio aligns with priority sectors such as fintech, logistics, advanced engineering, and healthcare. Its Innovation Hub further connects students with the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Turning Insight into Action



Deepen Engagement Beyond Hiring

Universities should formalise employer roles in curriculum co-design, guest teaching, and programme advisory boards, ensuring that industry voices shape course content and assessment.

Create Business-Friendly Structures

If not already in place, institutions should establish single points of contact or dedicated industry liaison offices within universities to create higher levels of industry engagement for students. The University of Wollongong in Dubai serves as a strong example of this approach.

Track Depth of Engagement

Success should be measured not only by how many businesses hire from universities, but also by how many contribute to curriculum shaping, programme development, and even helping deliver relevant parts of educational programmes.



Theme 3:

Students are Well-Equipped for Work, but Stronger Career Support is Expected



Evidence from the survey



There is a strong consensus among students and graduates that Dubai's institutions are equipping them with useful skills. However, they feel that gaps remain in how these skills are applied in practice and in the availability of work-based learning opportunities:

- 01

Graduates Seen as Well-Prepared: Most students (85%) agreed that universities equip them with useful skills, with soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability rated highly by both groups.
- 02

Digital Skills: 82% reported good access to digital tools, but only 69% felt these were fully embedded into their programmes.
- 03

Work-Experience Opportunities: Just over half of students (51%) reported access to work experience opportunities, but only 42% completed short internships and 29% longer placements, with recent graduates significantly less likely to have completed work experience (49%) compared to earlier cohorts (71-74%).
- 04

Student Perspectives: Students praised internships and careers expos as helpful, but many felt career support was lacking, with one noting: "I expected more support to help us build our careers...."

51%

of students said they had **access to work experience opportunities** during their studies.

Key Takeaways



The student voice highlights two key dynamics. First, students overwhelmingly feel that Dubai’s higher education institutions equip them with transferable and labour market-relevant skills, including digital literacy, cultural awareness, and communication skills. Notably, 85% of current and former students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the skills they developed during their time at university were useful for their future careers. The example of well-developed careers centres at Dubai based universities is likely the reason for these high levels of satisfaction as Dubai based universities value this a lot.

Secondly, although students value the careers resources available to them, particularly career expos and internships there are gaps in structured support for work-based learning and career development. To improve in this area, universities in Dubai should consider expanding access to structured, hands-on learning through internships, embedded industry placements, and project-based collaborations with local businesses to help students apply their academic knowledge in real-world settings and gain practical confidence. Although participation rates in such programmes among current students and alumni is relatively high, there remains significant potential to expand and deepen engagement in this area

//

The course was completely tailored to working as a teacher and I found the regular input from existing teachers and head teachers in Dubai really valuable and insightful. **There was a balance of theory and real-life guidance and expectations”**

Alumni

Turning Insight into Action



Normalise Work-Integrated Learning

Instead of leaving internships to occasional or unsystematic arrangements, institutions should consider increasing the number of credit-bearing, guaranteed work-integrated learning opportunities co-managed with industry.

Embed Digital Skills in Curricula

Institutions must go beyond access to tools and fully integrate digital competencies into curricula. Digital literacy should be treated as both a technical and socio-cultural skillset, aligned with industry standards in areas such as AI, to ensure graduates are ready for the demands of a digital society.

Strengthen Careers Support

While overall satisfaction with careers services was generally positive, there is an opportunity to further strengthen these services by investing in well-resourced, proactive career development teams that actively connect students with employers and support them in securing meaningful opportunities.

Align KPIs with Outcomes

Track and report on the proportion of students completing substantive work experience, alongside graduate employment rates, as key performance indicators for universities.



Theme 4: Employers Endorse Graduate Skills, with Opportunities for More Applied Learning



Evidence from the survey



Dubai-based businesses reported high levels of confidence in the quality of skills graduates learnt from local universities:

- 01

Overall satisfaction: 88% of businesses agreed that the skills students develop at university are useful to their organisation. Only 2% disagreed.
- 02

Digital literacy: 87% of businesses agreed that new graduates can use up-to-date digital tools and technologies that are relevant to their sector.
- 03

Soft skills: 84% of businesses agreed that graduates demonstrate well-developed transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.
- 04

Work readiness: 81% of businesses agreed that graduates are well prepared for employment within their organisation.
- 05

Areas for development: Employers who were less positive typically cited “lack of practical knowledge” and “insufficient work experience” as the main weaknesses of new graduates.

87%

of businesses agree that **new graduates are proficient** in using up-to-date digital tools and technologies relevant to their industry.

Key Takeaways



Dubai-based business shows a high level of overall satisfaction with the skillset and preparedness of graduates. Businesses broadly view Dubai's higher education institutions as producing graduates with the skills, competencies, and attributes required for the labour market in Dubai. Confidence levels above 80% across multiple areas such as soft skills, digital tools, and overall work readiness show that universities are meeting industry expectations in ways that other international study destinations struggle with.

At the same time, employers see clear opportunities to strengthen workplace exposure during study. This is not that they think graduates are unprepared for the workplace, but rather that the transition into employment could be made smoother if students had more chances to apply their skills in real life professional contexts before they graduate. This reflects a recognition that the foundations are strong, but also that businesses feel that Dubai could further enhance its position in this area through even greater attention paid to workplace integration and providing the structures that allow students to gain hands-on experience at scale.

//
Honestly, **new graduates and interns are a great fit for banking because they've just spent years learning the most up-to-date stuff in finance.** They're also digital natives—they just get technology, which is huge for where banking is headed. Plus, they're super eager to learn and bring a fresh energy and perspective that can really help a company stay ahead of the curve."

Turning Insight into Action



Employer Involvement in Teaching

Encourage employers to co-deliver elements of curricula (e.g., guest teaching, live case studies, project supervision) to integrate workplace expectations directly into learning.

Position Employers as Co-Creators

Frame businesses not only as recruiters but as partners in the learning journey, co-owning the preparation of future talent, expanding on initiative like the Barclays mentoring scheme at the University of Birmingham, Dubai.

Establish Dual Academic-Industry Pathway

Foster partnerships between universities and businesses in priority sectors to create dual study programs that combine academic learning with practical, in-company experience. Businesses can provide financial sponsorship to support students and create seamless pathways into employment.

Develop On-Campus WIL Hubs

Set up dedicated Work-Integrated Learning hubs on campus to strengthen collaboration between universities and industry. These hubs would serve as direct communication channels, support relationship-building, and provide tailored pedagogical guidance to course coordinators designing new WIL programs.



Theme 5:

Graduates Are Digitally Skilled, but Future Skills Alignment Requires Agile Academic-Industry Collaboration.



Evidence from the survey



Graduates are digitally skilled, but academic-industry alignment requires both sides to be agile to meet the latest trends head on.

- 01

82% of students reported access to modern digital tools during their studies. However, only 69% agreed that their university integrated digital skills into its programmes.
- 02

87% of businesses agreed new graduates are able to use up-to-date digital tools and technologies relevant to their sector.

87%

of employers say **Dubai graduates are digitally fluent** and equipped with the latest tools and technologies needed in their industries.

Key Takeaways



Dubai universities do well in ensuring that students are equipped with strong digital foundations before joining the workforce. The challenge now is ensuring that these skills evolve as quickly as the industries they serve. As technologies like AI reshape industries and the future of work in real time, universities will be defined not just by their current strengths, but by how agile they are in adapting to these shifts. Case studies show promising steps in this direction:

the University of Birmingham Dubai is embedding AI into its Computer Science programmes and partnering with Dubai Municipality on delivering an Urban Analytics and AI for Planners MSc, while Middlesex University Dubai has continued to grow in relevant areas such as robotics, data science, fintech, cybersecurity, and AI. These examples demonstrate that universities are moving to meet the demand for future skills, but they also underline the importance of continuous renewal to stay ahead.

//

New graduates and interns are often aligned with our industry's needs because **they bring up-to-date academic knowledge, fresh perspectives, and strong digital skills."**

Dubai based business

Turning Insight into Action



Future-Ready Curriculum Design

Regularly update curricula to align with emerging technologies such as AI, by working closely with employers in relevant industries to anticipate future skill needs. This can be done by deepening the role of university advisory boards (currently only 21% engagement) to guide this process.

Utilise the strengths of Dubai's TVET sector

Leverage Dubai's strong TVET sector as a platform for lifelong learning, enabling graduates to return and reskill as industries evolve.



Summary and Recommendations

Over the past two decades, Dubai’s higher education sector has experienced a profound transformation. Since the early 2000s, the Emirate has emerged as a leading global hub for international higher education and is now home to more than 40 international branch campuses from a wide range of countries.

This evolution has been supported by a dual-track regulatory framework, led by the KHDA and CAA, and enabled by key stakeholders such as the TECOM Group, which has played a pivotal role in providing infrastructure support for investors in its multiple business districts. As detailed in Chapters 1–3, this growth has been shaped by three key trends:



Rapid market expansion and global positioning.

The number of licensed higher education providers in Dubai has grown by a third in just two years, from 30 in 2022-2023 to 41 in 2025. Student enrolments have also increased rapidly, with enrolments on course to double from existing numbers by 2040. As recognised by key stakeholders such as the KHDA such an increase in demand will require 10-15 new branch campuses to be built in Dubai over the coming years to meet this increased demand.

01

Evolving programme provision to align with Dubai’s changing economy.

Over the past two decades, Dubai’s higher education sector has developed in response to the Emirate’s unique market demands. Despite this growth, programme offerings remain largely concentrated in traditional fields like engineering and business. With the launch of Dubai’s D33 Agenda, which spans multiple sectors of the economy, new programmes are now emerging in areas such as health, sport, and the creative industries. This reflects Dubai’s broader economic vision and evolving workforce requirements.

02

An increasingly diverse provider landscape.

Alongside comprehensive international branch campuses and specialised (single discipline) international branch campuses, Dubai has a TVET sector deeply entrenched and embedded in the local business ecosystem. TVET plays a vital role in equipping lifelong learners with future-ready skills. Meanwhile, TECOM Group’s role in clustering higher education alongside global industries further strengthen collaboration and engagement between academia and industry.

03



The quantitative analysis of survey data reveals five overarching themes, summarised below in the context of academic-industry alignment:



Careers as a primary motivation.

Students primarily choose Dubai to further their career prospects. For both undergraduates and postgraduates, employability is the primary motivation, supported by the city's reputation as a global business hub.



Industry engagement remains uneven.

Businesses hire graduates and engage with institutions in other ways, but fewer contribute to curriculum design or sustained academic partnerships. Engagement can still be seen as transactional rather than strategic.



Students gain valuable skills but want stronger support.

Students and alumni reported that their universities equipped them with useful skills, but many feel that career services, and access to structured work placements could be improved.



Employers endorse graduate quality.

Business overwhelmingly agree that Dubai's graduates possess strong soft skills, digital literacy, and general work readiness. However, employers emphasise the need for more applied learning to ease the transition into work.



Digital skills are strong, but agility is critical.

Both students and businesses recognise digital competence as a strength, but future readiness will depend on how quickly curricula evolves in areas such as AI, data analytics, and emerging technologies.

Based on these insights, the following recommendations can be made:

- 01

Balance Growth with Quality

As enrolments continue to grow and new campuses are established in Dubai, quality assurance will be paramount. Dual KHDA-CAA oversight should continue to safeguard academic standards. Meeting the projected need for 10–15 new campuses by 2040 requires equal investment in teaching capacity and student services, especially careers support, which students identify as most important to them.
- 02

Deepen Industry Integration

Collaboration between academia and employers should extend beyond just graduate recruitment. Universities should consider increased levels of employer input into curriculum design, establish advisory boards with strong industry partners, and invite business leaders to co-deliver teaching. These mechanisms also help ensure curricula are continuously refreshed to incorporate emerging skills, technologies, and evolving economic priorities. Some Dubai-based universities are already adopting these practices, but they should be scaled across the sector.
- 03

Scale Work-Integrated Learning

Work placements, internships, and project-based collaborations should become standardised and embedded as important, credit-bearing features of degree programmes. Dedicated Work-Integrated Learning hubs on campuses with access to careers professionals who understand the local business ecosystem could act as a way to further collaborate with industry and deepen relationships, ensuring that students have access to the latest opportunities.
- 04

Strengthen the Student Experience and Employability Services

Universities should invest in high-quality career services, mentoring schemes, and international student support. Institutions should pay close attention to graduate employment outcomes, internship conversion rates, and employer satisfaction. To help with this, greater investment in data collection and analysis is required to enable evidence-based decision-making. Transparent reporting in these areas would further strengthen Dubai’s reputation as a career-focused education hub.

Future Outlook

Dubai’s higher education sector is already a global leader in diversity, international appeal, and academic-industry alignment, as evidenced throughout this white paper and the case studies. Students, alumni, and businesses recognise Dubai as a destination for high-quality learning and meaningful career opportunities. The next phase is moving from rapid expansion to system maturity, cementing Dubai’s position as a recognised education hub that not only delivers excellent teaching but also equips graduates with the skills and opportunities needed for the jobs of the future. By aligning with the D33 and E33 agendas, Dubai’s higher education ecosystem can strengthen its role as a global leader in combining academic excellence with workforce readiness in a city that champions innovation and future skills.

Acknowledgement

Times Higher Education Project Team

- Boris Remes, Director Consultancy
- David Prentice, Senior Education Consultant
- Christine Pickup, Senior Education Consultant
- Allison Cheung, Data Analyst
- Shivani Bhola, Senior Designer

For any enquiries, please reach out to TECOM Customer Care at:
Tel: +971 4 360 2060 / +971 4 390 1111



