FOUNDATIONS AND THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION: *ACHIEVING IMPACT AT SCALE IN THE ARAB WORLD*

POST-FORUM REPORT

Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education

مؤسسة عبدالله الغرير للتعليم
Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Forum at a glance

Against a background of deepening challenges facing Arab youth in accessing high quality education and preparing for the future of work as well as the limited public resources to address this issue, foundations have a critical role to play in bridging significant gaps along the education-to-employment transition.

The nature of these challenges requires an approach that can achieve deep impact at a wide scale by supporting innovative models, leveraging partnerships, and focusing relentlessly on research and measurement.

6
Panelists from the Arab world

3
International Speakers

38
Attendees

12 Foundations

10 INGOs & NGOs

6 Universities

Held under the theme **Foundations and the Future of Higher Education: Achieving Impact at Scale in the Arab world**, the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education organized a two-day forum on February 25-26, 2019, the main objectives of which were to:

Share lessons learned and emerging practices, both regionally and globally,

Build consensus around what it would take to respond effectively to the most urgent challenges facing the education of young Arabs today, and

Identify areas for potential collaboration.

The Forum brought together the leadership of some of the largest education foundations in the Arab region and offered them an opportunity to discuss and reflect on their respective roles and how to maximize their impact. This report presents the highlights and key outcomes of the discussions that took place throughout the Forum.

SETTING THE STAGE

The CEO of the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education (AGFE), Maysa Jalbout, kicked off the Forum with an urgent call to "**work together more openly, creatively and persistently to address the unprecedented challenges young people and our region are facing.**"
Jalbout invited foundations, NGOs and universities to consider new approaches, including:

▷ Creating alliances that are built on a sense of urgency and clarity of purpose – the purpose of serving young people and our region.

▷ Incentivizing a mentality of abundance where stakeholders combine resources and efforts to address the biggest challenges we are facing.

▷ Challenging ourselves to place our focus on big impact system-wide approaches rather than disparate incremental changes.

"Only when we deploy these approaches, will we be able to work towards three critical shifts needed to drive better results in higher education in our region," noted Jalbout. These three shifts consist of moving:

1 From investing in reputation and financial security of our institutions to
↳ **investing in solving some of the most critical challenges of our time.**

2 From modest efforts to increase inclusion of low income youth to
↳ **making education open for all who need it, regardless of status and financial ability.**

3 From offering skills and tools for the rapid changes in today's workforce to
↳ **preserving and reinforcing our ethics and values amidst radical, inconceivable and long-term impacts of technological change.**

YOUTH VOICES

At the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education, we have always made it a priority to listen to and highlight the voices of youth.

To make sure that their perspectives were addressed throughout the Forum, AGFE CEO Maysa Jalbout launched a social media campaign prior to the meeting asking Arab youth: **"What is your number one hope for the future of higher education?"** They were challenged to submit a 1-minute video sharing their ideas with the world. The two participants with the most powerful responses were then invited to attend and participate in the Forum.

250
videos received from 10 nationalities in 5 days

CLICK HERE

THE WINNERS' VIDEOS

SARAH HAMEED
Bachelor of Science in Physics, American University of Beirut (MEPI Tomorrow's Leaders Scholarship Program)

YAHIA DALBAH
Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering, American University of Sharjah (Al Ghurair STEM Scholar)

TOP STUDENT HOPES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

| Access to education | Digital learning | Job relevance | Experiential learning | Research | Student-centered learning | Solving the world's most critical problems |

THEME 1 - INCREASING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: SCHOLARSHIPS AND BEYOND

The first theme of the Forum addressed the topic of access to good quality higher education, particularly for disadvantaged youth.

Although total enrollment rates at the tertiary level have increased across the world, the share of students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds remains the lowest.

According to data presented by Sean Hobson, Chief Design Officer for EdPlus at Arizona State University (ASU), at the Forum, in the United States, only 9% of youth from low income families attain a university education.

Similarly, according to internal AGFE research on the Arab world, tuition costs can reach up to ten times what an average family of five can expect to earn, making college inaccessible for many.

In the Arab world, tuition costs up to 10X the average income of a family of 5

Yet, this is only part of the access problem. For the most vulnerable, getting into university is only the beginning of an immense challenge. Many who enroll in higher education do not end up graduating with the skills they need to succeed in the labor market, or do not graduate at all.

Design for Better Access

In a keynote speech entitled "**How does the system need to change and what role can foundations play?**" Bridget Burns, Executive Director of the University Innovation Alliance in the United States, discussed innovative approaches to systemic change in higher education, which could hold potential for the Arab world.

The Challenge

For Burns, higher education around the world is failing students and at the root of the problem is a system fundamentally flawed in its design. She further argues that universities were not historically designed around the needs of students; they were designed around faculty.

This is demonstrated by the complex set of processes, such as unclear admissions procedures as well as course scheduling and selection that are hard for all students to navigate, even though they were put in place to help students graduate. This, for Burns, reflects a flawed understanding of the user - or the student - experience.

> **"Universities were not historically designed around the needs of students"**
>
> *Bridget Burns, Executive Director, UIA*

The Innovation

To address these issues, Burns states that universities have to fundamentally reimagine how they design their institutions. They must identify the flaws in their system, which are hindering student success, and be willing to completely rethink the student journey. **It is only when the system is designed around students that they, especially the most vulnerable ones, will succeed from start to finish.**

This change, for Burns, can be achieved only with brave leadership. **University leaders must be bold and look outside of their institutions to find solutions and innovations to the issues they face.** They must also work together and create a space where knowledge and failures can be shared as in the case of the University Innovation Alliance (UIA), which Burns leads.

The UIA is a national consortium of 11 large public research universities in the United States collaborating closely to improve outcomes for students across the socioeconomic spectrum through innovation, scale and experimentation.

As Burns emphasized, **if universities collaborate, students can win and there is no reason that a model like this could not be replicated in the Arab world.**

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE UNIVERSITY INNOVATION ALLIANCE

Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution for increasing access, success and completion, Burns described four practices which have proven effective with disadvantaged students and can work at scale to serve all students.

1 PREDICTIVE ANALYTICS

Using data collected from students over time, predictive analytics can identify at-risk students, build student retention, predict learning processes and engagement to identify students who are not being supported as well as they could be. Although it is a lengthy process, it provides invaluable indicators for universities to keep students on track toward graduation.

2 PROACTIVE ADVISING

Using data from predictive analytics, advisers can reach out to students who display early warning signs, to support them before even they know that they are falling behind. Research finds that only students who are already on track and proactive would visit their adviser, while those who are genuinely in need do not reach out, receiving support either too late or not at all. Students need proactive, not reactive, support.

3 COMPLETION GRANTS

Providing small grants for students who cannot otherwise afford to complete their education has proven to have one of the highest return on investment amongst any form of scholarship. Georgia State University's (GSU) completion grants program, consisting of $900 on average per student, helped 86% of at-risk students graduate (GSU Office of Institutional Research, 2018).

4 PROCESS MAPPING

Mapping out an institutional process from start to finish helps identify flaws and opportunities for improvement. The goal is to understand processes from the perspective of the person benefiting from the service, which in the case of higher education is the student. GSU used process mapping to better understand how it communicates with students. Adjusting their communication about majors resulted in a decline of more than 30% in the number of changes in majors among students at the university (Burns, 2016).

Impact at Scale

Education foundations have used different approaches to create impact, from transformative scholarship programs and innovative tools to system-level programs involving multiple stakeholders.

This section presents some of the lessons learned to date shared by panelists at the Forum, including Ford Foundation, MasterCard Foundation, Sawiris Foundation for Social Development, Hani Qaddoumi Foundation and the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education from their respective scholarship programs.

For the panelists, beyond the importance of being accountable to the community and donors about how their funds are being spent, measuring impact is seen as an opportunity to ensure that they are making the most out of their funds. It also helps them inform their other programs based on the lessons they learn along the way.
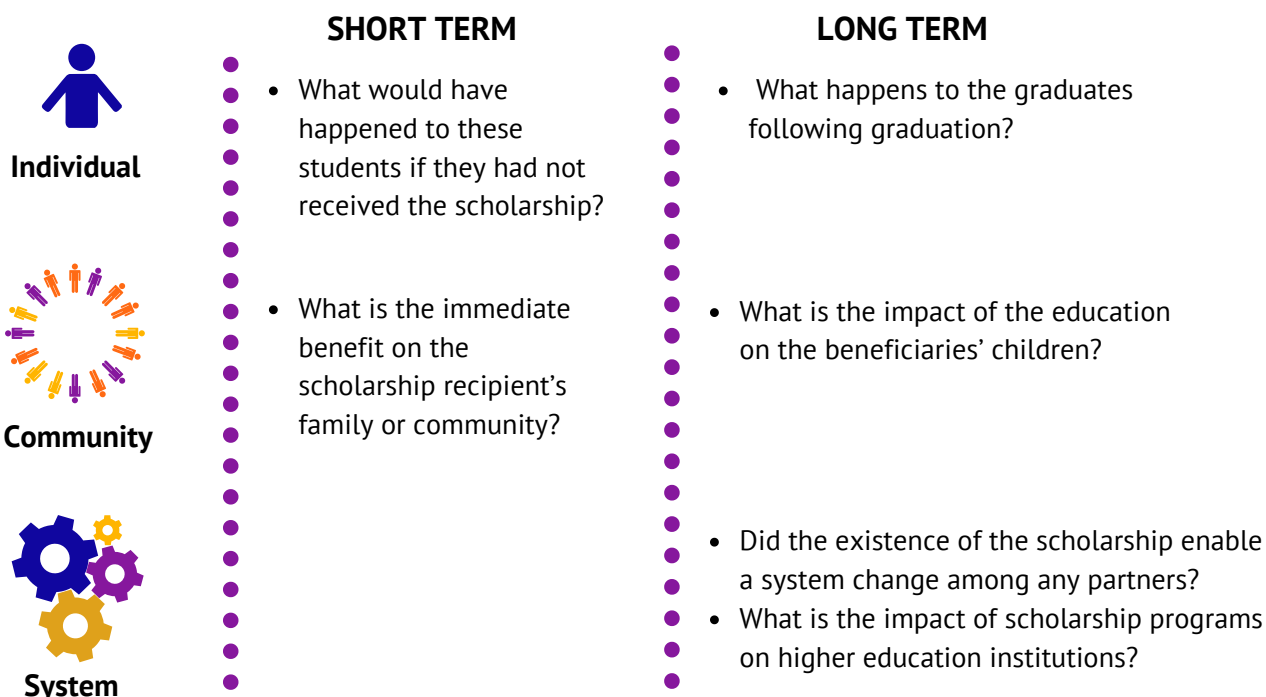
> **"Although it is an expensive and lengthy process, measuring impact is worth it"**
>
> *Noura Selim, Executive Director, Sawiris Foundation for Social Development*

Impact can be measured at a number of different levels and depending on the objectives of the program, there are multiple parameters that can assess whether a program is achieving them or not.

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS AT THREE LEVELS

	SHORT TERM	**LONG TERM**
Individual	• What would have happened to these students if they had not received the scholarship?	• What happens to the graduates following graduation?
Community	• What is the immediate benefit on the scholarship recipient's family or community?	• What is the impact of the education on the beneficiaries' children?
System		• Did the existence of the scholarship enable a system change among any partners? • What is the impact of scholarship programs on higher education institutions?

ARE SCHOLARSHIPS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ENOUGH?

Although panelists agreed on the importance of providing more scholarships in the Arab world, they conceded that a balanced approach of working on both the bigger system changes and on the immediate needs is required. **Scholarships should be seen as an opportunity to create an avenue for other types of institutional change within universities and the broader system.**

Another point that was raised by panelists and participants alike as being needed is support at the **early childhood education and primary education levels.** For many underserved students, by the time they reach higher education, it is too late to intervene. Education support programs that start early could address problems at the root and widen the pipeline of youth that would qualify for higher education and other pathways.

Throughout the sessions, panelists also discussed the challenges of working at scale and achieving large-scale impact in the Arab world. These include:

▶ The heterogeneity in the region makes it difficult to replicate models which may work in one environment, but not in others.

▶ The limited number of quality academic partners and their resistance to change.

▶ The gaps in fundamental skills accumulated by students throughout their primary and secondary education makes it difficult to intervene at the higher education level only.

▶ The lack of data and information from the region to inform the design and implementation of education activities and programs.

> "We need to shift our thinking from 'what did this scholarship do for this student' to 'what did this scholar do for their community'"
>
> *Shona Bezanson, Associate Director, Scholars Program, MasterCard Foundation*

THREE CONSIDERATIONS TO SUPPORT TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE AT SCALE IN EDUCATION

The defining challenge for any foundation is taking 'what works' and applying it to achieve impact at scale. All panelists agreed that there is a need to focus more on what works at scale and identified three considerations to support these efforts:

1 Create and invest in models that can be replicated.

2 Build partnerships between nonprofits, philanthropists, and government. Collaboration is a precondition to grow impact. In particular, if the goal is policy and system change, impact can only be achieved through engagement with the public sector.

3 Leverage technology in design, operations and delivery. For example, online learning has the potential to exponentially scale impact, cut costs, and improve effectiveness.
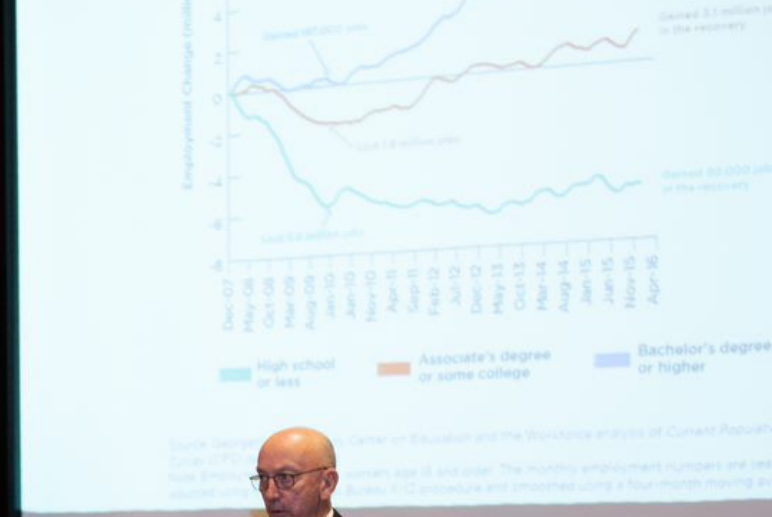
THEME 2 -
FUTURE READY YOUTH:
NEW OPPORTUNITIES
AND PARTNERSHIPS

The second theme of the Forum discussed the future of work and its implications for the education sector. In a keynote speech entitled "**What Challenges and Opportunities Does the Future of Work Hold?**", Dewayne Matthews, Senior Advisor at Lumina Foundation, shared his insights on the global trends on the future of work and their implications for higher education stakeholders and funders.

Future of Work

Work is changing in unprecedented ways. By 2022, almost 75 million of current jobs will no longer exist, while over 133 million new ones will be created (World Economic Forum, 2018).

Short-term contingent work and jobs in the gig economy will increase, with freelance workers estimated to represent more than 50% of the U.S working population within one decade (Morgan Stanley, 2018).

As automation and technological disruption increase, most jobs and industries will be subject to some degree of displacement. The future economy will be increasingly people-centered, and learners will be defined by their skills, rather than their jobs.

In this context, contrary to a wave of questioning whether higher education is still relevant, Matthews argues that **the role of higher education is more important than it has ever been**. Universities will have to reinvent themselves to better prepare youth to turn these challenges into opportunities.

Matthews presented three of the most critical implications that higher educational institutions must fully address to adequately equip learners for the future workplace:

1 **More people must obtain post-secondary learning**

Future workers will need a high foundation level of post-secondary education to survive in a more disruptive and entrepreneurial market and alongside increasingly intelligent machines. More people will need to obtain post-secondary education; short-term or one-time upskilling and retraining will not suffice.

2 **Credentials are the key**

In addition to the acquisition of knowledge, credentials ensure that learners can market themselves in an increasingly competitive economy. Credentials must attest to learners' competencies whether it be a degree, a course or a skill set.

3 **We must meet the needs of student-workers throughout life and careers**

Universities will need to shift from focusing only on graduating students to ensuring that students graduate with a mindset geared towards lifelong learning and with their specific learning outcomes met by the time they graduate. Being equipped with a strong set of technical, soft and hard skills will not suffice anymore. The most successful workers will be those who show their capacity to be flexible lifelong learners, comfortable with continuous adaptation, upskilling and reskilling, as well as be willing to move across industries.

PATHWAYS TO CAREER READINESS: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Preparing students for a complex and ever-shifting labor market requires universities, the private sector, and youth-serving institutions to invest in experiential learning. This involves engaging students in activities and programs that enhance their abilities to take initiative, make decisions, engage creatively with others and help them gain real life experience. Two such examples that were raised by Matthews include:

1 **COOPERATIVE (CO-OP) PROGRAMS**
Structured combination of classroom-based education with practical work experience. At the University of Waterloo in Canada, 96% of co-op graduates find a job related to their degree within 6 months. This model remains largely unexplored in the Arab world.

2 **INTERNSHIPS**
Designed to provide students with a taste of the professional world prior to starting their careers. While students would benefit from starting internships early, in most universities internships are not a requirement for all programs and/or are expected to be completed only in the last year of university.

Youth Career Readiness

In the Arab world, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that, as in the U.S, youth are at a disadvantage when it comes to obtaining a high-quality education that prepares them for the world of work.

Total enrollments have more than doubled in the last decade, and will double again by 2030, with tertiary enrollment rates standing at around 28% in the region, compared to the 35% global average (World Bank, 2017). However, rising enrollments do not mean that youth, and in particular underserved students, have good quality options at affordable rates.

70%

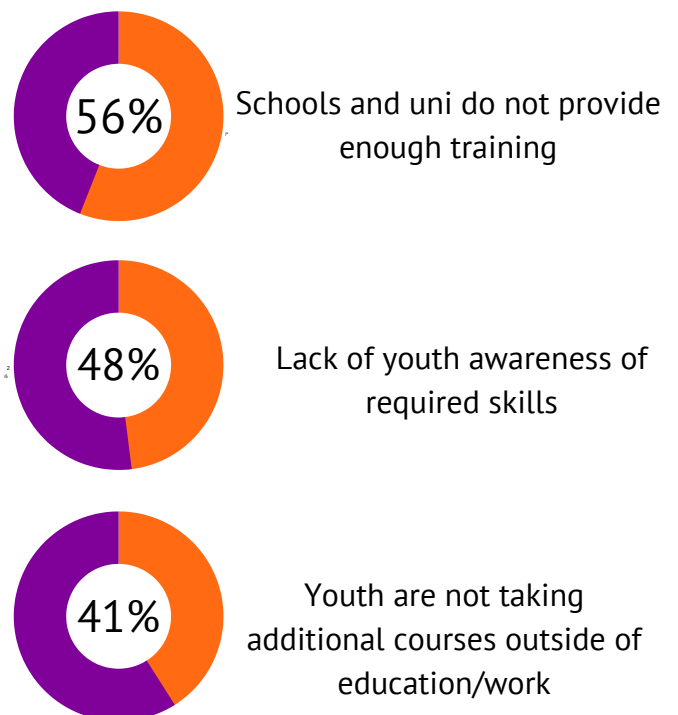**of Arab families cannot (easily or at all) meet their basic monthly needs**

High quality education is too expensive for many, with 70% of surveyed Arab families not (easily or at all) being able to meet their basic monthly needs (Khouri, 2018). This situation is even more dire for refugee youth aged 18-24, **less than 5% of whom are enrolled in tertiary education in Lebanon and Jordan** (Adam El-Ghali et al., 2019). At the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation Education, we saw the magnitude of the need after more than 100,000 youth signed up on our scholarship portal in less than three years of operation.

In our most recent research, we surveyed 57 regional employers and over 1,000 Arab university students regarding their perceptions of how prepared youth are for the future of work.

Preliminary findings from a forthcoming publication illustrate that in addition to limited access to tertiary education, **the education system itself is not preparing youth for the modern world of work.** This is true across all regions in the world, although to varying degrees.

According to our findings, **over one third of the surveyed employers are not able to find graduates with the skills they need**, confirming findings from earlier studies on this topic. They cite the lack of training at school and university and the lack of youth's awareness of the skills required in the labor market as the key reasons for this gap.

PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYERS THINK THAT THERE IS A SKILLS GAP BECAUSE...

56% — Schools and uni do not provide enough training

48% — Lack of youth awareness of required skills

41% — Youth are not taking additional courses outside of education/work

This is further evidenced in the perspectives of students, almost half of whom are worried about finding a job or work experience by the time they graduate. It is not surprising, considering only 44% of surveyed students (consisting of 70% undergraduates in their senior years and 30% master's students) had been able to secure at least one internship to date.

Yet, students in the Arab world are ambitious and see the pursuit of further education as the key to securing a better future for themselves, with 52% of surveyed university students wanting to pursue graduate studies.

They are also increasingly relying on tools such as online learning to enhance their education. More than half of surveyed students (55%) reported that they signed up for at least one online course. The majority (47%) said that they did so because they were interested in the topic and it was not offered at their university. Around 38% said that they wanted to supplement the content they were learning in class. These preliminary findings therefore indicate that online learning is growing as a tool for youth to better prepare themselves for the future.

> **Online learning is an important tool to address some of the biggest gaps; the current systems are already proving insufficient to meet current and future demands.**
> *May Wazzan, Programs Manager, AGFE*

55%

of surveyed Arab university students have enrolled in at least one online course

INVESTING IN ONLINE LEARNING: HOW TO MAKE IT WORK?

The topic of online learning was raised throughout the Forum by panelists and participants alike as one potential approach to achieving access at scale. However, many regional stakeholders are still unsure of whether offering degrees, credentials, and training online is impactful. Among the key concerns raised at the Forum were: quality, recognition by government and employers, student persistence, and the lack of an experiential component.

Building strong capacity to offer quality education online that addresses the concerns of stakeholders is a long-term game for universities and foundations, but the promises of online learning are manifold. Perhaps the most compelling argument is that online learning allows educational organizations to reach populations who would otherwise not have access to high quality education.

However, "**for online learning to work, it must be a means to achieve a set of educational goals, rather than being the goal itself,**" warned Sean Hobson, Chief Design Officer for EdPlus at Arizona State University in his talk entitled "**A Design Approach to Impact at Scale.**" The focus on the student experience should lead the design of online offerings, and learners, as well as faculty, should be involved in the process as much as possible. Hobson also highlighted five key points, among others, to consider when investing in online education:

1 Organizations, whether the providers or the investors, should be crystal clear about what they want to achieve through online learning. The design, strategy and implementation should be defined based on those goals.

2 A design thinking approach is rooted in empathy. In the context of online learning, designers must first consider who are the learners of today and the future and what their needs are, and design programs accordingly.

3 For online learning to work, there must be a strong focus on measurement and evaluation to continuously assess the quality of teaching and learning to improve the process.

4 Institutions must invest in instructional designers (experts in designing learning experiences) to collaborate with faculty on redesigning courses to best fit the needs of online learners. This will not only improve the online offerings of the university, but will fundamentally change the way faculty teach even their residential programs.

5 There is no need to re-invent solutions. Many of the challenges facing an institution newly adopting online learning have been recognized or addressed previously. Educational organizations should not be afraid of adopting, re-working and imitating models and ideas which are in line with what they are hoping to achieve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussions throughout the Forum converged around a set of shared goals and opportunities, which revolve around two key areas for action. They also confirmed the need to have more frequent and focused meetings to collectively discuss these areas:

1 **Creating platforms for collaboration, partnership and knowledge creation and exchange**

▷ Pooling resources and/or coordinating efforts to increase reach and make programs more impactful and scalable.

▷ Collectively engaging with key stakeholders such as governments to achieve systemic change.

▷ Jointly generating and exchanging more data and research on the Arab world, including results of program evaluations, etc.

2 **Aligning on best practices in student support in higher education**

▷ Redefining access to not only focus on enrollment, but also completion.

▷ Exploring earlier and potentially more effective educational interventions by addressing the barriers students face in high school to increase access to higher education.

▷ Rethinking the student journey with students as partners, not just beneficiaries, and involving them in the design, delivery and evaluation of the programs.

▷ Jointly with the private sector, investing in career readiness activities to better prepare students for the labor market (co-ops, internships, etc.).

▷ Leveraging technology, specifically online learning, as one of many tools to promote greater access to high quality education for all students.

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GET IN TOUCH WITH US TO CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION.

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About the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education

The Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education, founded in 2015 and based in Dubai, is the largest privately funded foundation in the Arab world focused exclusively on education. It aims to improve access to quality education for high-achieving, underserved Emirati and Arab youth. Abdulla Al Ghurair pledged one third of his wealth to the Foundation and set out a target of reaching 15,000 youth over the next 10 years via secondary and higher education programs and scholarships valued at over US$1 billion. For more information, please visit: www.alghurairfoundation.org.