



Mind the gap

Student career aspirations
and the future of work



June 2023

KPMG Lower Gulf with the support
of GEMS Education

Introduction

Tomorrow’s leaders are formed today. Current high school students will be entering the workforce in approximately 2030, a crucial deadline for the UN sustainable development goals and a benchmark year for other initiatives aimed at international progress. These students are part of a rapidly changing academic and professional landscape, and their skills, experience and aspirations will be crucial to realizing a future built on innovation and characterized by a high quality of life.

What jobs do these students plan to pursue? What skills are they developing, and who is advising them? How has the Covid-19 pandemic shaped their goals, and how are they preparing for an uncertain future?

To uncover the answers, we partnered with GEMS Education, the world’s largest operator of private Kindergarten-to-Grade-12 schools, to survey more than 800 high school students in the UAE about their career goals, influences and perceived obstacles. We found that 15- to 18-year-olds today are already focused on their professional aspirations, with about 40% planning to pursue majors in business and healthcare.

Many of the students we spoke to are interested in science, but relatively few planned to go into emerging technologies. They know they will need to develop critical thinking and creativity skills, and female students are just as comfortable raising their hands as their male classmates.

Ultimately, the future is bright, but there’s more we can do to help prepare today’s youth for the challenges ahead. This report explains how. We look forward to discussing its findings with you.

“As the leaders of tomorrow, the skills, experience and aspirations instilled in our school students are crucial in realizing a future built on innovation. Education is key to ready students for the future workplace and judging from the confidence displayed by female high school students, we are well positioned to attain gender balance. Employers will however have to focus on a hybrid work set-up to attract the best talent.”



Emilio Pera
CEO and Senior Partner
KPMG Lower Gulf

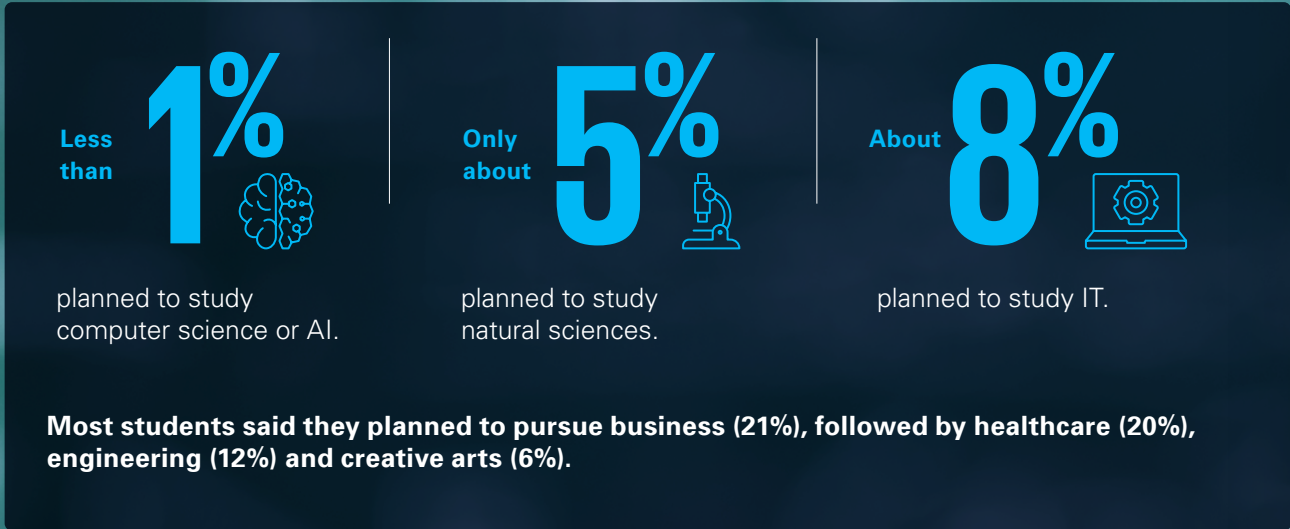


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Executive summary

Students in the UAE are interested in science but most do not plan to pursue careers in the emerging technologies that will be crucial to the country’s future development.



Students gave communication, critical thinking, creativity and innovation, social skills, and leadership high marks for the skills they considered most important for future job success. They also recognized the merits of collaboration, flexibility and initiative, but most did not consider technology, information and media literacy as key to their future success.

Today’s youth are already thinking about their professional futures, with 90% already considering their career goals in high school, and with 72% having a clear idea of their job aspirations. However:

- 53% said their financial situation limited their career choices
- 20% said parental pressure was a barrier to their career choice

The Internet was the students’ primary source of information for academic guidance and career development, ahead of their teachers, families and peers.

 Female students in the UAE today are as empowered as their male counterparts to:

- Describe themselves as ambitious and committed
- Lead group projects
- Proactively answer questions in class
- Volunteer and participate in extracurricular activities
- Speak in public
- Take career risks

Students of different genders reported different learning styles. While about 30% of students of both genders said they were interested in industry experience and internship opportunities, 46% of female students also attended career training programs, compared to 35% of male students.

“Understanding youth aspirations is essential, as their goals will have serious implications for national growth and success. The aspirations of young students are essential to their educational choices, work performance and labor market outcomes. If they are not provided with guidance about their life goals, employers aiming to match labor market demand with available supply will face serious challenges.”



Marketa Simkova
Partner, People & Change
KPMG Lower Gulf

Spotlight on education in the UAE

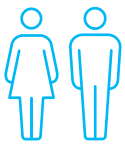
Education has always been one of the UAE’s top priorities. Since 1975, the country has been focused on launching new initiatives at all educational levels, especially K-12, to prepare students to attend and succeed at international universities and in the global marketplace. In 2018, the most recent year for which data is available, about 1,080,000 students were enrolled in 1,219 public and private schools.¹

In addition to universal K-12 education, higher education is free to UAE citizens. The country is home to high quality university education, attracting top students from the Arab world and beyond, with about 295,000 higher education students as of 2021.² Emirati educational institutions partner with some of the best research universities in the world — including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Paris-Sorbonne University.³

The government has also launched a number of funds and initiatives aimed at training the next generation of science and technology professionals, especially emerging technologies. The Future Skills program offers 12 months of training for prospective tech workers, while the National Program for Artificial Intelligence, ICT Fund, One Million Arab Coders initiative, and UAE Hackathon provide academic courses, scholarships, trainings and internships in the knowledge and ICT economy.

In 2020, young people in the Arab world voted — for the ninth year in a row — the UAE as the top country to live in and emulate, demonstrating the wealth of professional growth and early-career opportunities.⁴

In 2018



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students were enrolled in



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public and private schools

The UAE government sees young people as its greatest asset. To achieve the country’s future vision, the UAE needs the skills, energy, enthusiasm and commitment of the country’s young people. Their voices must be heard, their ideas taken on, and their recommendations implemented at all government levels.



“Today’s children learn quicker than ever before, demonstrating remarkable maturity and the ability to absorb information like a sponge. Success for many of us started when we identified our passions at school. As educators, it is our duty to identify and nurture their passions, strengths, and skills.”



Sunny Varkey
Founder
GEMS Education

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Career choices lack diversification

Although many students reported science as their favorite subject, most do not plan to major in the crucial fields of emerging technology. According to the Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week Future Skills 2030 Report, the five drivers of future job skills will be artificial intelligence, robotics, automation and advanced manufacturing, virtual and augmented reality, and big data and data analytics. The ADSW Future Skills 2030 Report further identified alternative energy and sustainable waste management as key employment areas, with the number of green jobs expected to increase from about 49,500 in 2018 to 83,400 by 2030.⁵

Despite these job trends, less than 1% of respondents planned to study computer science or artificial intelligence, and only about 5% planned to study natural sciences. Information technology fared just slightly better, with 14% of male students planning to go into IT, compared with 4% of female students. Most students said they planned to pursue business (21%), followed by healthcare (20%), engineering (12%) and creative arts (6%). Business was the top choice for male students (29%) and healthcare dominated among female students (24%).

These students have lived through a global pandemic for several of their most formative years, so it’s natural and admirable for them to have such a keen interest in healthcare. However, in order to have a sufficiently diversified workforce, they should be exposed to broader opportunities to have a positive impact. Health is just one of seven focus areas in the UAE’s National Strategy for Advanced Innovation, which features ample opportunities to harness technology to serve humankind.⁶ Private industry groups could represent key allies for promoting these strategic sectors. Schools could enhance the effectiveness of partnering with trade associations and other professional groups to educate students and parents about the different career opportunities available across diverse fields.

Female students in particular showed strong interest in science, but not in computers or technology; 29% of female students said science was their favorite subject, but only 4% were interested in computer science, compared to 18% of male students. As a result, just 9% of students overall were interested in computer science. Closing this gender gap would be a good way to increase the overall number of students pursuing careers in AI, data and IT. Educational groups should promote a tech culture that embraces women and girls.

Students’ top five favorite subjects:

Science:

Female: **29%**

Male: **25%**

Overall: **27%**

Math:

Female: **12%**

Male: **18%**

Overall: **14%**

Arts and humanities:

Female: **19%**

Male: **7%**

Overall: **14%**

Languages:

Female: **10%**

Male: **7%**

Overall: **9%**

Technology and computer science:

Female: **4%**

Male: **18%**

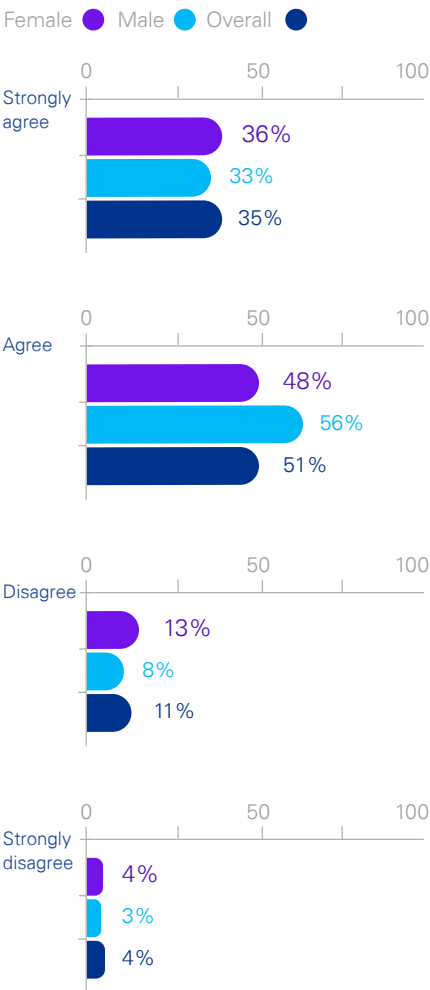
Overall: **9%**

Skill sets align with government vision — with one key omission

Communication, critical thinking, creativity and innovation, social skills, and leadership were all ranked more or less evenly (9% to 12%) as the skills students considered most important for future job success. Collaboration, flexibility and initiative also gained relatively high marks (6.6% to 8.4%). These responses are promising, since they align with the UAE government’s goal of promoting problem-solving skills among today’s youth. “The great challenge is to equip young generations with the skills they will need no matter what future jobs look like,” according to the government, citing a former World Bank Group President. “These skills include problem-solving, critical thinking, as well as interpersonal skills like empathy and collaboration.”⁷ Schools are therefore doing a good job promoting people skills as key to future success.

However, students were less committed to developing technological literacy, information literacy and media literacy (3.4% to 5.7%). This is concerning, because the business world evolves at such a fast pace that the UAE’s citizens and residents must be life-long learners, as per the UAE government.⁸ Information and media literacy will be key for today’s students to continue to grow and evolve, both professionally and personally, throughout their career. Educational organizations and government initiatives should therefore continue to focus on promoting and teaching life-long learning skills alongside problem-solving and innovation.

I am comfortable working in group activities



“The volatile market conditions and changing nature of work have brought upskilling to the forefront. Equipping younger generations with essential skills and aligning their career pathways with the job market is more important than ever to reach equilibrium.”



Gunjan Shroff
Partner, People & Change
KPMG Lower Gulf

“Industry today is evolving at such a rapid pace. We must do more in education to ensure that the support we provide children remains relevant and prepares them to be successful as they step into the world beyond school.”



Matthew Tompkins
Director of Student Employment
GEMS Education Group

Students report barriers to career choice

Today’s students are already thinking about their future careers. Of the high schoolers we surveyed, 90% had already started thinking about their career goals, and 72% had a clear idea of what job they wanted to do. Most said their choices were influenced by their areas of interest (82%), skills and abilities (70%), and academic performance (52%). However, more than half of the students surveyed (53%) also said financial challenges limited their career choices, while about one-fifth reported that their parents’ desires posed a barrier to pursuing their preferred jobs. Schools therefore should be educating parents, not just students, about market trends, career opportunities and financial assistance. Promoting different career paths to parents will transform them from barriers into assets for students’ professional development.

Almost half (47%) of the students we spoke to had started thinking about their goals between ages 13 and 15. About 40% had already attended a career development training or course, and about 18% wanted their schools to offer career fairs and internships.

This means effective career counseling should begin as early as age 13. Most students turned to the internet — not counselors — for academic guidance, followed by their teachers and peers, parents and other family members, and then tutors. Schools and education groups should supplement academic counseling with integrated career counseling, so that students view them as a trusted ally in both their academic and professional careers. Female students were also more likely than male students to seek out career training programs in addition to hands-on experience, with 46% of female students attending career training programs compared to 35% of male students.

Our study also revealed students are not only thinking at a young age about what they want to do — they’re also thinking about how they want to do it. Only about one-third of respondents said they preferred to work full-time in an office.



61% said they were interested in a hybrid work set-up...

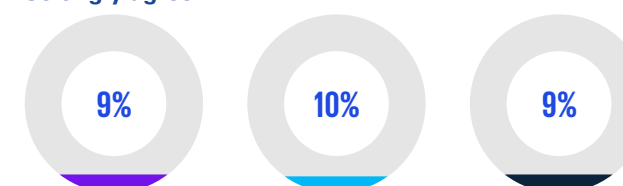


...while 6% wanted to work entirely from home.

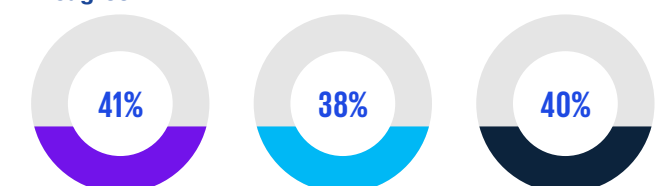
I feel pressured to pursue a certain career path

Female ● Male ● Overall ●

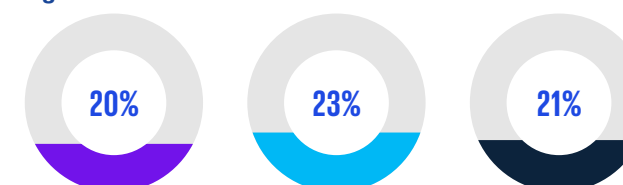
Strongly agree



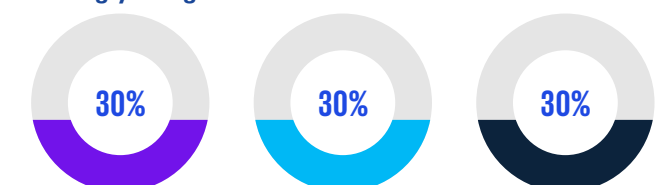
Disagree



Agree



Strongly disagree



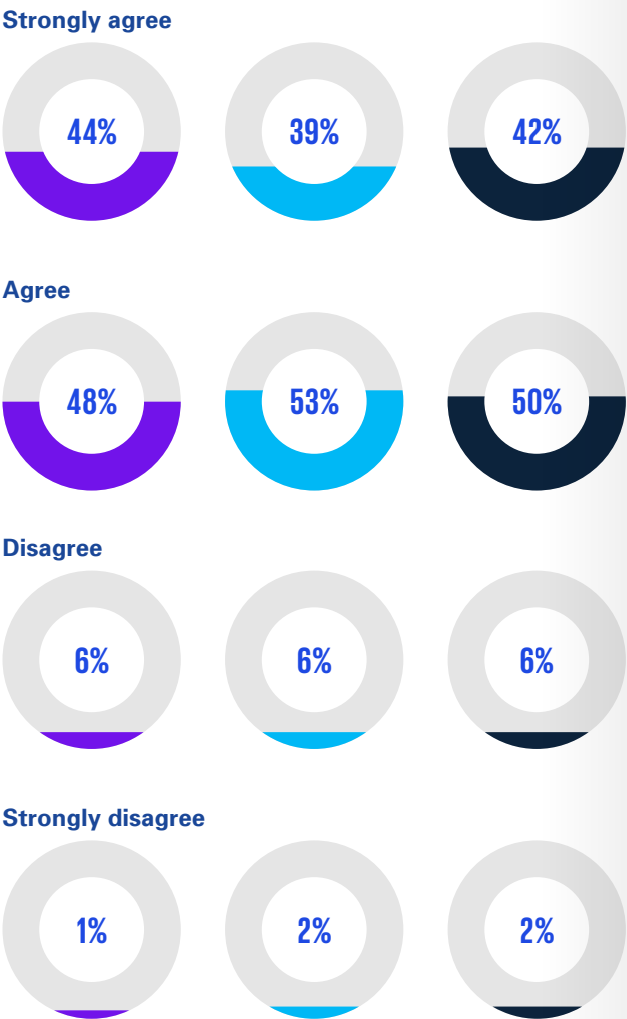
Female students are committed to leadership

Today’s female high school students are as driven as their male classmates. Female students described themselves as ambitious and committed at the same rates as male students (21.3% and 22.7%, respectively) and were nearly as likely to lead group projects, proactively answer questions in class, and volunteer and participate in extracurricular activities outside classrooms. In fact, slightly more female students were comfortable speaking in public compared to their male classmates (58% and 55%, respectively), and the vast majority of students of both genders were comfortable taking careers risks (84% of girls and 89% of boys).

The UAE government has proactively sought to elevate and empower women in education, STEM and government affairs. The UAE Gender Balance Council was established in 2015 to reduce the gender gap across government sectors, achieve gender balance in decision-making positions, and promote the UAE’s benchmark status for women’s participation in business, government, and science and technology. The government’s efforts have paid off, as 77% of women in the UAE enroll in higher education, and 70% of all Emirati university graduates are female.⁹

I am planning to work and progress in my career for a long period of time.

Female Male Overall



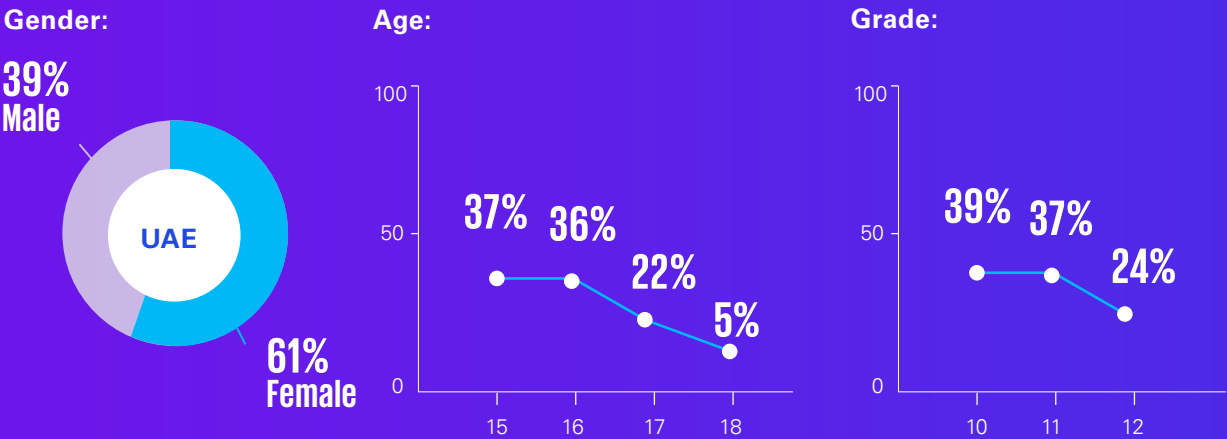
Women’s progress can’t happen without empowerment, and the confidence shown by female high school students is an encouraging sign for a gender balanced future.

Demographics

We surveyed 818 students ages 15 to 18, at eight different schools, between October 31 and November 14, 2022. The students represented 78 nationalities; 15% of respondents were Emirati.



Student demographics



Sources

¹ <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/society/education-in-the-uae#:~:text=The%20education%20system%20of%20the,and%20secondary%20level%20is%20universal.>

² <https://gulfnews.com/uae/education/uae-has-over-295000-higher-education-students-says-new-report>

³ <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/society/education-in-the-uae#:~:text=The%20education%20system%20of%20the,and%20secondary%20level%20is%20universal.>

⁴ <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/society/education-in-the-uae#:~:text=The%20education%20system%20of%20the,and%20secondary%20level%20is%20universal.>

⁵ <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/jobs/future-skills-for-youth>

⁶ <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/jobs/future-skills-for-youth>

⁷ <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/jobs/future-skills-for-youth>

⁸ <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/jobs/future-skills-for-youth>

⁹ <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/society/women-in-the-uae>






About KPMG Lower Gulf

KPMG Lower Gulf is proud to be celebrating its 50th year in the UAE, providing audit, tax and advisory services to a broad range of domestic and international, public and private sector clients across all major aspects of business and the economy in the United Arab Emirates and in the Sultanate of Oman. We work alongside our clients by building trust, mitigating risks and identifying business opportunities.

KPMG Lower Gulf is part of KPMG International Cooperative’s global network of professional member firms. The KPMG network includes approximately 236,000 professionals in over 144 countries. KPMG in the UAE and Oman is well connected with its global member network and combines its local knowledge with international expertise, providing the sector and specialist skills required by our clients.

KPMG is widely represented in the Middle East: along with offices in the UAE and Oman, the firm operates in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, the Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq. Established in 1973, the Lower Gulf firm now employs approximately 1,780 people, including about 190 partners and directors across the UAE and Oman.

As we continue to grow, we aim to evolve and progress, striving for the highest levels of public trust in our work. Our values are:

-  **Integrity:** We do what is right.
-  **Excellence:** We never stop learning and improving.
-  **Courage:** We think and act boldly.
-  **Together:** We respect each other and draw strength from our differences.
-  **For Better:** We do what matters.

To meet the changing needs of our clients, we have adopted an approach aligned with our global purpose: Inspiring Confidence, Empowering Change. Our three pillars – exceptional quality of service, an unwavering commitment to the public interest, and building empowered teams – are the foundation of our firm.

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