



AI Readiness: Building the Bridge from Higher Education to Work in Saudi Arabia

How institutions and employers can reduce friction and deliver AI-ready graduates

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Foreword

The transition from higher education to the workforce is a significant milestone. It shapes the trajectory of individual lives and the competitiveness of global economies. In Saudi Arabia, that transition now carries even greater importance. The Kingdom's ambition through Vision 2030, to build a knowledge economy powered by human capability, has placed higher education at the center of national transformation.

This research is the product of a deliberate collaboration between Pearson and Amazon Web Services. Pearson brings decades of experience in learning science, curriculum design, credentialing, and assessment. AWS brings direct insight into how AI is deployed inside the organizations that graduates are entering, and the skills those organizations now require. Together, we set out to understand how higher education and the workforce are aligning in an AI-driven world.

Across six countries, we listened to 2,711 learners, educators, university leaders, and employers. Saudi Arabia stands apart in what the data reveals. It is the one market in our study where high institutional investment, high learner confidence, and high employer satisfaction with new graduates move in the same direction. That alignment is rare, and it is worth recognizing.

It does not mean the work is done, because friction remains. The pace of AI at work continues to outrun the cadence of the classroom, the demand for AI-ready graduates continues to outpace their supply, and awareness of the rules has yet to mature into trust. These are the questions every market is navigating. Closing them will require more than what a single organization can deliver alone: shared evidence, common standards, and sustained collaboration between those who drive learning and those who shape work.

Saudi Arabia's higher education system is doing what few others have managed. We hope this report contributes to that momentum.

Tony Lteif

Global Revenue Officer ELL and Saudi Country Ambassador for Pearson

Valerie Singer

General Manager
AWS Global Education



Reduce friction. Build the bridge.

AI readiness is not owned by higher education or industry alone. It is built — or broken — in the transition between them.

Read the full report: pearson.com/ai-readiness

Introduction

The social contract between higher education and the workforce has always been structured by a key principle: higher education (HE) institutions will equip graduates with workforce readiness. Across the globe, the rapid integration of AI into workplaces is outpacing the adaptive capacity of higher education presenting institutions with a critical choice. They must either accelerate the cadence of curriculum transformation or risk graduating cohorts of students who are not properly equipped for the AI-enabled workforce. The distance between institutional intent and graduate outcomes remains one of the most consequential challenges in education today.

For Saudi Arabia, this challenge carries particular urgency. The country is undergoing one of the most ambitious economic transformations of any nation in the world. Vision 2030, launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2016, provides a fundamental reimagining of the Saudi economy. Central to that vision is a recognition that AI is a competitive necessity. Based on an analysis of the relationship between labor and production, it is estimated that use of generative AI to supplement work activities could help unlock USD133.6 billion of productive capacity across the economy.¹ The national Strategy for Data and AI, launched in 2020,² set an explicit goal of making Saudi Arabia one of the world's leading AI nations by 2030. The Human Capability Development Program, one of Vision 2030's core pillars, places the development of an educated, skilled, and globally competitive Saudi workforce at the heart of the national agenda.³ Consequently, higher education in Saudi Arabia is being actively shaped to drive AI-enabled change.

Saudi Arabia occupies a unique position on the global stage. The national context helps explain much of what the data in this report reveals. In the accompanying cross-market AI Readiness report,^{*} Saudi Arabia is categorized as a High Velocity Strategist in view of a number of patterns that surface in the dataset. It is a market where AI is treated as core to the mission of HE institutions, backed by substantial, state-led investment designed to synchronize educational programs with national goals. However, even in a market where 88% of HE leaders characterize their institution's AI investment as significant or moderate, frictions persist. These frictions are not unique to Saudi Arabia and are present in every high-performing ecosystem. Understanding and addressing them is both an institutional concern and a national strategic imperative.

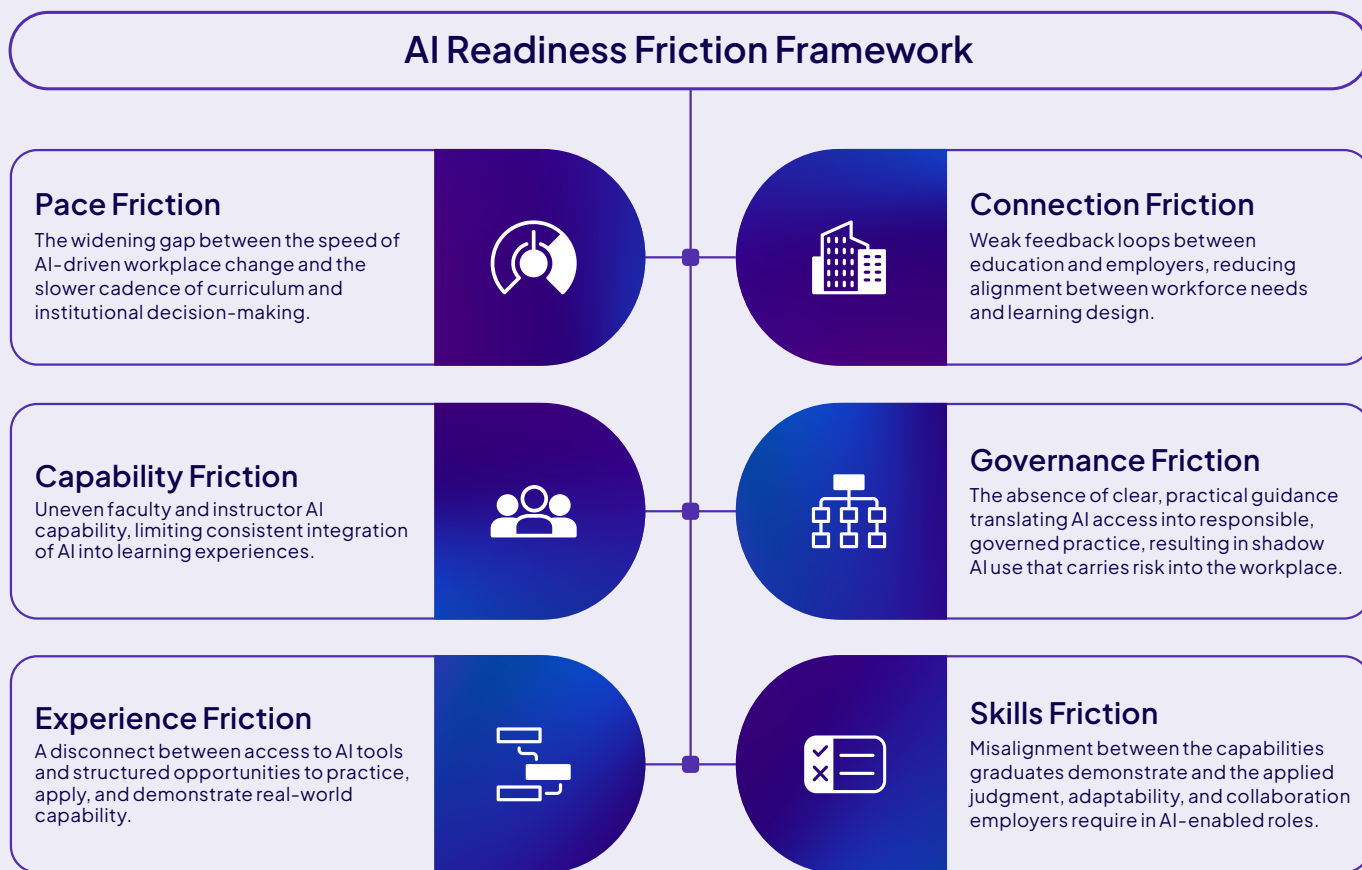
¹Access Partnership (2024) *The economic impact of generative AI use: The future of work in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. Available at: <https://accesspartnership.com/reports/the-economic-impact-of-generative-ai-use-the-future-of-work-in-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia> (Accessed: 20 May 2026).

²The establishment and launch of the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority (SDAIA) and its three sub-entities: 1) the National Centre for AI (NCAI); 2) the National Data Management Office (NDMO); and 3) the National Information Centre (NIC) has ushered in significant regulatory development impacting the emerging-tech ecosystem in the country.

³ Saudi Vision 2030 (2025) *Human capability development program*. Available at: <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/explore/programs/human-capability-development-program> (Accessed: 20 May 2026).

* <https://www.pearson.com/en-gb/power-of-learning/ai-readiness.html>

This report examines what this means across the full ecosystem from higher education to work in Saudi Arabia. This research synthesizes survey and interview data along with secondary research to introduce the AI Readiness Friction Framework.⁴ The evidence shows that success is not random, but it clusters around six compounding friction points that enable progress precisely when speed matters most:



⁴The findings in the report are based on a survey of 402 stakeholders in Saudi Arabia, comprising learners (n=302), HE leaders (n=50), and employers (n=50). Given the sample sizes involved, the data should be read as directional patterns across the market. Where cross-market comparisons are provided, these draw on the total global sample of 2711 respondents across all markets.

These frictions reinforce one another across education and workplace systems. Rather than prescribing one-size-fits-all solutions, this framework enables leaders to diagnose where friction is most acute in their context and target intervention at root causes rather than symptoms.

What follows is a snapshot of contemporary indicators in Saudi, with guidance to support every university, regardless of its current status, to synchronize its AI readiness pathway with speed.

Chapter 1

examines how fast AI is transforming the education-to-work pathway in Saudi Arabia, where university responses are in need of development, and what the most consequential misalignments are between university priorities and employer expectations of a graduate's experience and skills. It concludes with a consolidated portrait of the AI-ready graduate.

Chapter 2

shifts the analysis to four dimensions of the AI readiness divide: the scale and focus of university investment in AI; faculty capability as the primary vehicle for graduate AI readiness; the relationship between institutional behavior and student confidence; and, the governance challenges created when rules and practice are misaligned.

Chapter 3

details the AI Readiness Friction Framework consisting of six points at which the education-to-work transition most consistently breaks down. This includes a friction-based analysis of the Saudi market's specific readiness profile.

Taken together, the evidence points toward the considerable progress Saudi Arabia has made in delivering the AI-ready graduates it is investing in to produce, while also highlighting the specific challenges hindering full realization of this ambition.

Chapter 1: The landscape of AI-driven education-to-work transformation

The accelerating pace of AI-driven change and institutional response

Stakeholders in Saudi Arabia are in little doubt about the pace of AI-driven change. Seventy-two percent describe this change as ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ fast, above the cross-market average of 67%; this view is strongest among HE leaders at 78%. Moreover, 70% of all Saudi respondents expect this pace to accelerate over the next two years.

What distinguishes Saudi Arabia from most other markets is that this urgency is matched by institutional confidence. Across markets, only 24% of stakeholders believe universities are keeping pace with most or all AI developments. In Saudi Arabia, that figure is significantly higher. HE leaders have the highest level of confidence with 62% stating that they believe their institutions are keeping pace with most or all changes, compared to 32% across markets. Additionally, nearly half of employers (48%) agree, far ahead of their global peers at 28%. This alignment between the pace of change and institutional confidence is, in part, consistent with the level of coordination of national investment behind the country’s AI transformation.

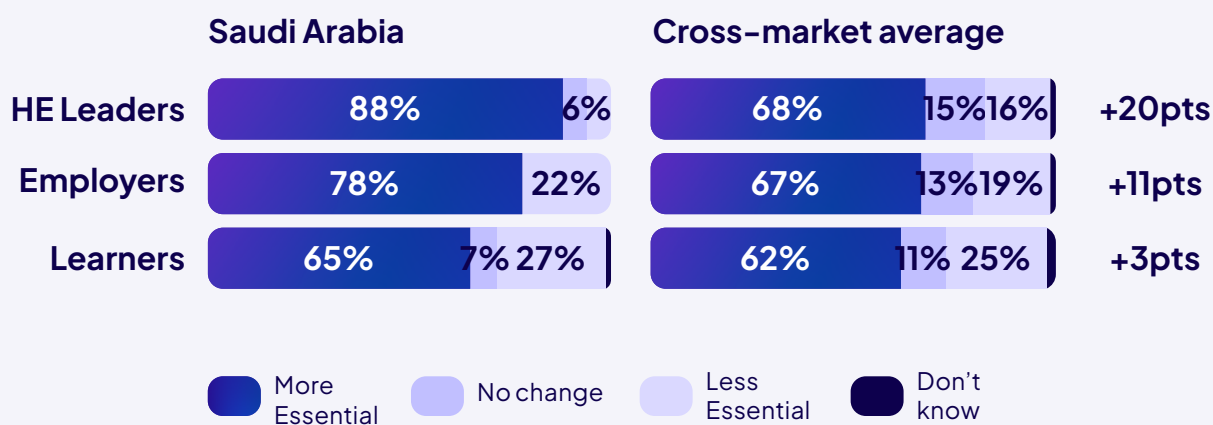
The perspective of Saudi learners introduces an important note of caution. While HE leaders and employers are broadly confident, nearly a quarter of Saudi learners (23%) believe universities are falling behind. Although this proportion is lower than the cross-market average, it still signals that student experience is not fully aligned with institutional ambition. The distance between leader confidence and learner experience is an important facet of today’s education-to-workplace transition that will be covered in greater detail later in this report.



The evolving value of higher education

Few stakeholders question the value of a university education in Saudi Arabia. There is overwhelming consensus across all stakeholder groups that AI makes a university education more essential, not less. HE leaders are the most likely to hold this view, outpacing their peers in other markets. Saudi employers are also more likely than their peers in other markets to believe in the increasing value of a university education. In fact, students are the most likely group to question the value of a university degree, although they do so at lower rates than their UK or US peers.

Views on the importance of university education



- Q.** Which of the following statements is closest to your view about higher education in the context of AI:
- AI developments make university education MORE essential - graduates need the deep knowledge and human skills that higher education provides
 - AI developments make university education LESS essential - practical skills and experience matter more than formal degrees
 - AI developments haven't changed the importance of university education?

While the conceptual value of a degree is high, the demand for demonstrable, job-ready AI capability is higher still. The ideal foundation, according to 72% of HE leaders and 44% of employers, is a combination of a formal education with practical AI skills. Isolated pathways, of either purely formal education or purely practical skill experience, find significantly less traction. Ultimately, the demand is for an evolution of the degree framework, rather than an alternative to it. And, the university continues to be seen as the institution best placed to develop the compound skillset that an AI-enabled economy demands.

Connecting the AI-ready Saudi graduate with the workforce

Although the university remains a vital foundation for career readiness, the perception of why it is valuable is shifting. The current moment presents higher education in Saudi Arabia with a historic opportunity to lead in equipping graduates with the compound skillset that employers value. Delivering on that role requires clarity about what employers need. In Saudi Arabia, alignment is closer than in most markets, but it is not yet complete.

HE leaders in Saudi Arabia are highly confident in the quality of graduates that they are producing. This confidence is largely echoed by the labor market. Approximately 90% of Saudi employers say graduate workplace readiness is much or somewhat better than it was five years ago, substantially above the cross-market average of 60%. Moreover, half of those employers rate recent graduates as excellent, the highest employer satisfaction rate in the study. Across all skill dimensions measured in the study, Saudi employers rate recent graduates as excellent at a rate higher than employers in any other market. The breadth of this alignment between institutional confidence and employer experience in Saudi Arabia suggests that the country's investment model is translating into verifiable graduate outcomes.

However, this confidence does not always translate into clarity about which skills employers most value. Although there is general agreement between HE leaders and employers that a blended skillset is what the workforce demands, the two groups are not fully aligned on the relative ranking of capabilities and skill competencies. Saudi Arabia is the only market where functional AI tool use ranks as an employer's top skill priority. In contrast, HE leaders underestimate the value of this skill to the workforce, prioritizing adaptability and innovative thinking as more vital.

Saudi employers share the cross-market view that communication and collaboration skills are among the most important graduate skills, ranking them as the second in their hiring priorities. Yet, Saudi HE leaders, like their global peers, underestimate this as a much lower employer priority than it actually is. Instead, Saudi HE leaders believe that employers primarily value 'adaptability' and 'creativity and innovative thinking'. In reality, Saudi employers rank both of those skills considerably lower than HE leaders incorrectly assume.

Key competencies for AI-ready graduates: employer vs educator views

AI skills
 Human skills

Market	Perspective	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3
Overall	HE Leaders	AI tool use	Human judgment + AI capabilities	Adaptability
	Employers	Communication and collaboration skills	Adaptability	Human judgment + AI capabilities

Saudi Arabia	HE Leaders	Adaptability	Innovative thinking	AI tool use
	Employers	AI tool use	Communication and collaboration skills	AI risk awareness

Q. HE Leaders: Based on your understanding, which THREE of the following are MOST IMPORTANT to employers hiring graduates today?

Q. Employers: Which THREE of the following are MOST IMPORTANT when hiring graduates into your organization today?

Question asked among HE Leaders & Employers

As with other markets, an internal divergence within Saudi HE institutions may be contributing to this picture. Across the study, educators and administrators have reported different views of what employers need. For example, educators tend to prioritize AI tool use and communication, while administrators are more likely to emphasize adaptability and human AI judgment. Where this internal divide is unresolved, institutions risk operationalizing a skills profile that fails to reflect employer demand.

Saudi HE institutions are investing in building graduates who have strengths in AI execution and are well-regarded by employers. Nevertheless, the specific capabilities that employers rank most highly after functional tool use are the kind of relational, strategic, and ethical skills that are prioritized in their view of the optimal AI graduate. Addressing this skills gap is essential in translating the workforce demands of Vision 2030 into full graduate AI-readiness.

Saudi employers recruit from a limited pool of qualified graduates

Saudi employers' assessment of recent graduates is positive overall, with strong appreciation for their adaptability, functional AI tool proficiency, as well as their enthusiasm and motivation. These employers' concerns are more practical. Most frequently cited are limited experience, weak application skills, and insufficient hands-on AI tool use. When looked at together, these deficiencies point to a pattern of Saudi graduates who arrive with strong foundational knowledge and enthusiasm, but limited in their ability to apply that knowledge to a professional context.

These concerns, however, are smaller in Saudi Arabia than in almost any other country. Against a cross-market average of 41%, only 24% of Saudi employers cite the theory-practice gap as a hiring barrier.⁵ Instead, the top hiring gap cited by Saudi employers is the limited availability of suitable graduate candidates, the highest rate in the study. In a market where employer satisfaction with graduate readiness is high, the primary constraint on talent acquisition is quantity rather than quality.

This is reinforced by learner responses. Saudi students report among the highest rates of AI coverage in their curriculum of any market surveyed, with one-third (34%) receiving extensive or regular AI instruction compared to one-fifth in the US and the UK (21% and 19%). But coverage is not the same as practice. Saudi students are least satisfied with the extent of structured, authentic, workplace-relevant practice with AI tools in the context of their education.

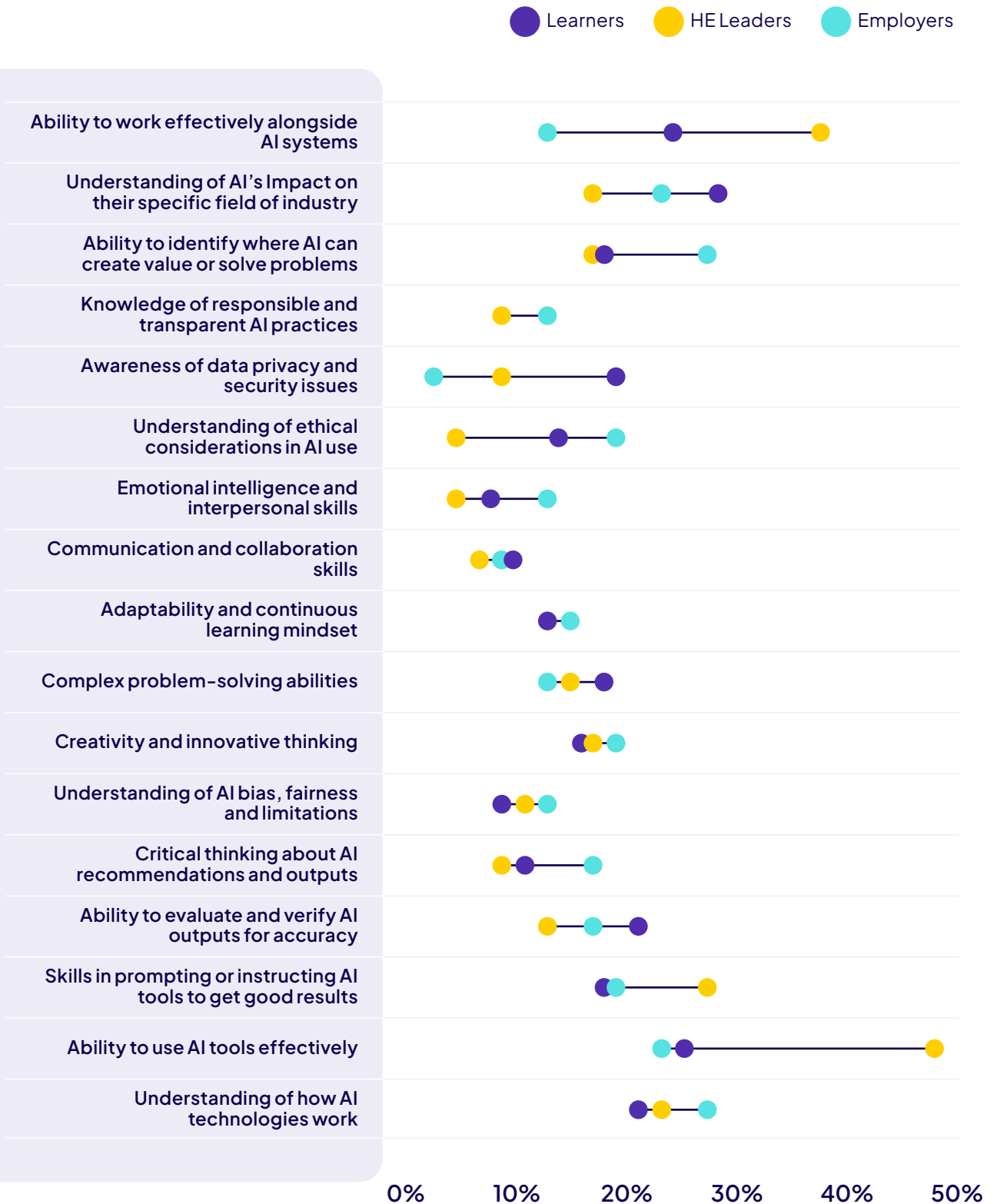
Addressing this friction requires more than access to AI tools or integration into university curriculum. The kind of authentic, work-integrated learning that graduates need, and employers demand, is only possible when institutions and employers co-design this capability together. In Saudi Arabia, where the infrastructure for industry partnership is more developed than in other markets in the study, the conditions for this partnership already exist. The task is to activate them more systematically and at scale.

⁵This divergence is, in part, due to industry partnerships with companies like AFI Robotics. Founded in AlKhobar in 2020 and focused on robotic inspection technologies for the energy sector, the company entered a formal joint venture with King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) in 2022, embedding its research team within the university's Interdisciplinary Research Center for Intelligent Manufacturing and Robotics. Students and researchers co-develop advanced robotic systems with a mandate to serve the local energy sector – a model of industry-HE co-design that has been recognized with KFUPM's Vision to Venture Award.

<https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/companies-news/afi-robotics-drives-industrial-innovation-by-empowering-saudi-youth-10jx86a>

Comparative ranking of AI ready skills by Saudi stakeholders⁶

Q. From this list, please select the THREE you believe are MOST IMPORTANT for graduates to be considered AI ready



⁶Q2_7: Below is a list of different knowledge areas, skills, and capabilities that might be considered part of being "AI ready" as a graduate entering the workplace. From this list, please select the THREE you believe are MOST IMPORTANT for graduates to be considered "AI ready".

A portrait of the optimal AI-ready graduate

“

AI is not only about coding and programming. Whether you come from business, the humanities, or any other social sciences discipline, you can still benefit from the opportunities AI offers without being a core programmer. You can generate insights, visualize data, develop forecasting and prediction models, and analyze human behavior, all without coding. Applied AI is everywhere, even in law. The key is to raise this awareness”

Professor Tanzila Saba, Prince Sultan University, Riyadh

As universities struggle to keep pace with the changes driven by the AI-enabled workplace, the readiness of graduates to enter the workforce is at risk. The term AI Readiness is increasingly used but rarely defined with consistency across the education-to-workforce spectrum. Drawing on our understanding of the demands of employers, the strategic priorities of HE Leaders, and the current behaviors of today's students, we have constructed a portrait of the ideal AI-ready graduate as a practical brief for what Saudi Arabia's institutions are expected to produce.⁷ For a contemporary graduate, AI readiness is a multifaceted construct that combines:

⁷For a full discussion of the optimal AI-ready graduate framework, see Pearson and Amazon Web Services (2026), Chapter 1.

1. Functional Proficiency

This set of skills represents the type of human-in-the-lead aptitude that employers demand. From day one, graduates must arrive functionally fluent in workplace-specific tools. They are able to apply AI technologies directly to professional workflows with the ability to enhance their contribution productively. In Saudi Arabia, 42% of learners report that AI tool use is currently covered extensively or quite a lot in their studies. Nearly three-quarters of students report using AI for research frequently or very often. These figures compare favorably against other markets in the study. Saudi employers rate effective AI tool use as their top priority in hiring, but only 17% of current Saudi learners report that they have achieved a high level of skill in the absence of extensive university training.⁸

2. Strategic Intelligence

This set of skills represents a graduate's ability to move beyond being a user of tools to a strategic operator within a business context. This ranges from identifying precisely where AI adds value to an understanding of its potential impact, a skill that 40% of Saudi employers today report is of high importance when hiring.⁹ They will have an appreciation for how AI can be deployed as something more than a productivity or efficiency shortcut with a macro-level understanding of how AI impacts an industry vertical to transform workflows. In Saudi Arabia, while HE leaders place emphasis on functional AI tool use, Saudi employers report that the ability to combine human judgment with AI skills is among the most important and least reliably present in graduates.

3. Ethical Stewardship

This set of skills involves a graduate's ability to serve as an ethical filter and a risk mitigation manager for employers, focusing on safety, integrity, and the ethical deployment of technology. More than half of Saudi HE leaders report that ethics is extensively covered in curricula, while only 1 in 8 Saudi learners report the same. Across markets, the specific ability to critically verify AI outputs is cited as a significant weakness by employers who rank it as graduates' weakest competency. However, more than one-third of Saudi employers rate today's graduates' in this skill competency as excellent. In Saudi Arabia, 86% of learners are aware of their university's AI policies and 84% report confidence in their compliance, among the highest rates in the study.

4. Critical Human Skills

This set of skills represents a graduate's competency to provide what no AI model can: human judgment, creative thinking, collaborative and emotional intelligence. Whereas AI automates execution, the AI-ready graduate possesses the relational and cognitive capabilities to bring purpose and direction. They will bring an adaptable, agile mindset ensuring they remain relevant as the pace of change accelerates.^{10,11} More than half of Saudi employers (58%) state that critical human skills are equally valuable to functional AI proficiency and nearly half (46%) rank communication and collaboration as their top requirement for hiring graduates.

⁸ Q3_4RI: How to use AI tools effectively: To what extent are each of the following covered in your university studies? By this we mean taught in the context of your academic program vs any independent learning you might do separately.

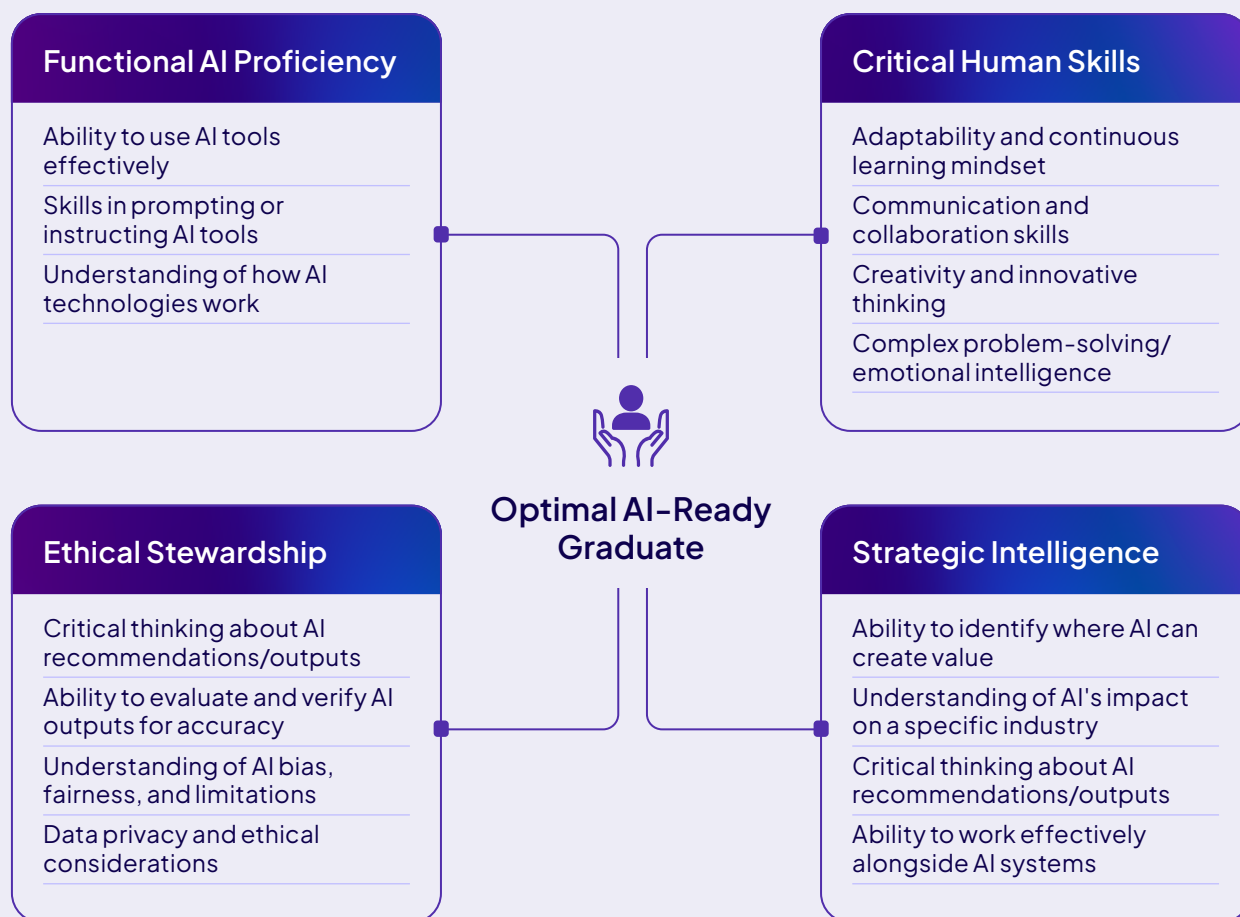
⁹ Q3_8EMP: Which THREE of the following are MOST IMPORTANT when hiring graduates into your organization today?

¹⁰ Stanford University Institute for Human-Centered AI (2026) AI Index 2025: State of AI in 10 Charts, 12 March. Available at: <https://hai.stanford.edu/news/ai-index-2025-state-of-ai-in-10-charts> [Accessed: 12 March 2026].

¹¹ OECD (2025) *OECD Skills Outlook 2025: Building the Skills of the 21st Century for All*. Paris: OECD Publishing. DOI:10.1787/26163cd3-en. [Accessed: 24 March 2026]

The Optimal AI-Ready Graduate¹²

Key capabilities and skill competencies



This portrait represents a consolidated vision that runs from matriculated student to workforce-ready graduate. Building a more effective path from the classroom to the workplace requires alignment on these core skill competencies. Far from rendering university education obsolete, the advent of AI reaffirms its critical role in fostering the technical, strategic, ethical, and adaptable talent the workforce expects.

However, developing the AI-ready graduate is at risk due to compounding frictions across the education-to-work ecosystem. Saudi graduates are strongest in functional AI proficiency and where investment, coverage, and engagement are most aligned. The greatest distance between current Saudi graduate ability and the ideal composite skillset is in areas of strategic intelligence and critical human skills. These are the areas where sustained co-design between universities and employers is most required. The chapter that follows examines the institutional conditions that are shaping this outcome.

¹²N.B. Some key skill competencies are essential across more than one domain of capability. For example, critical thinking about AI recommendations/outputs is a core skill required to generate strategic intelligence as well as to perform as an ethical steward of AI technologies.

Chapter 2: Progress toward institutional AI readiness: investment, faculty capability, graduate confidence and governance

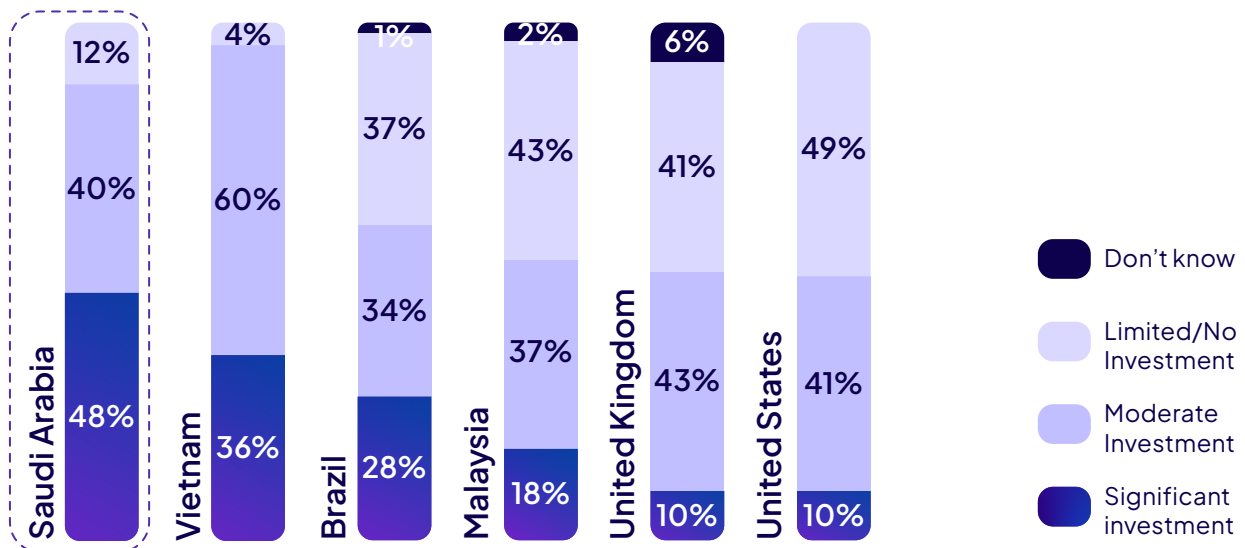
As Saudi institutions and learners continue to adapt to a shifting technological landscape, the data reveals a picture that is different from other markets in the study. Unlike those markets which face significant challenges in terms of underinvestment, Saudi Arabia faces specific second-order challenges that emerge when foundational investment has been made and where there is still a distance between institutional ambition and optimal graduate outcomes. The focus of our analysis in this chapter is on four dimensions of institutional readiness: the scale and focus of AI-investment; the capability of faculty as the primary vehicle for graduate AI readiness; the relationship between institutional behavior and student confidence; and the challenge of AI-governance even where awareness of policy is high.

Institutional investment: scale, focus, and friction

Saudi Arabia's HE institutional leaders report a climate of high investment and strategic commitment that is unmatched in this study. Nearly half of Saudi HE leaders characterize their institution's AI investment as significant, which is more than double the cross-market average. A further 40% describe their institution's investment as moderate. In total, 88% of Saudi HE leaders regard AI as either a major or important institutional priority. Only 12% describe investment as limited or minimal, a figure that contrasts sharply with the 37% of US HE leaders who say the same. And does this investment adequately meet the challenge? According to 92% of Saudi HE leaders it does, with nearly one-third also describing it as more than adequate. This level of confidence in institutional commitment is unmatched by leaders in Malaysia, the UK, and the US.

But the scale of the investment only tells part of the story. Equally important is where that investment is directed. In Saudi Arabia, the investment profile is distinctive. Like in many markets, faculty training and professional development is where investment is highest. What sets Saudi Arabia apart most from other markets is the priority placed on computing infrastructure and industry partnerships. In fact, investment in industry partnerships is 20-points ahead of the cross-market average. Saudi HE leaders recognize their institutions for investing in both the internal improvements and broader ecosystem of external connections that a rapidly changing AI-enabled workforce demands.

Reported university AI investment levels



Q. How would you characterize your institution's current level of investment in AI?

Question asked among HE Leaders

Sample Size: HE Leaders - 452

Unlike in other markets, Saudi leaders do not rank budgetary resources as a primary constraint to better preparing graduates. Nor do Saudi HE leaders cite inadequate computing infrastructure as a barrier (4%, compared with a cross-market average of 21%). Instead, the barriers that Saudi HE leaders identify as greatest include insufficient faculty AI expertise, which is compounded when coupled with a stated difficulty of keeping pace with the speed of AI developments. Even with robust investment and established industry partnerships, one-third of Saudi leaders cite unclear or changing employer expectations as a challenge. The velocity of AI innovation is exerting a pressure on HE institutions that requires both real-time agility as well as long-term strategy.

In line with national AI strategies and economic priorities,¹³ levels of institutional commitment vary dramatically across the markets surveyed. However, these divergences cluster into three recognizable archetypes, with some markets sharing broad similarities. As high velocity strategists, both Saudi Arabia and Vietnam treat AI as core to their institutional mission, backed by significant state-led investment designed to synchronize higher education with national development goals.¹⁴

Whether institutions move aggressively or cautiously, they remain challenged by a labor market that is innovating at pace. The implication is not simply that more investment is needed, though in many markets it clearly is. It is that this investment needs to be more precisely triangulated for greater effectiveness in bridging the education-to-work transition. Saudi Arabia's profile demonstrates both how much that principle is being applied as well as where the enduring frictions stem from.

¹³Microsoft AI Economy Institute (2025) *Global AI Adoption 2025*. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation. Available at: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/corporate-responsibility/topics/ai-economy-institute/reports/global-ai-adoption-2025/> [Accessed 25 March 2026]

¹⁴ See main report and individual country reports for extended discussion of the market friction archetypes.

Faculty capability is a key determinant of graduate AI readiness

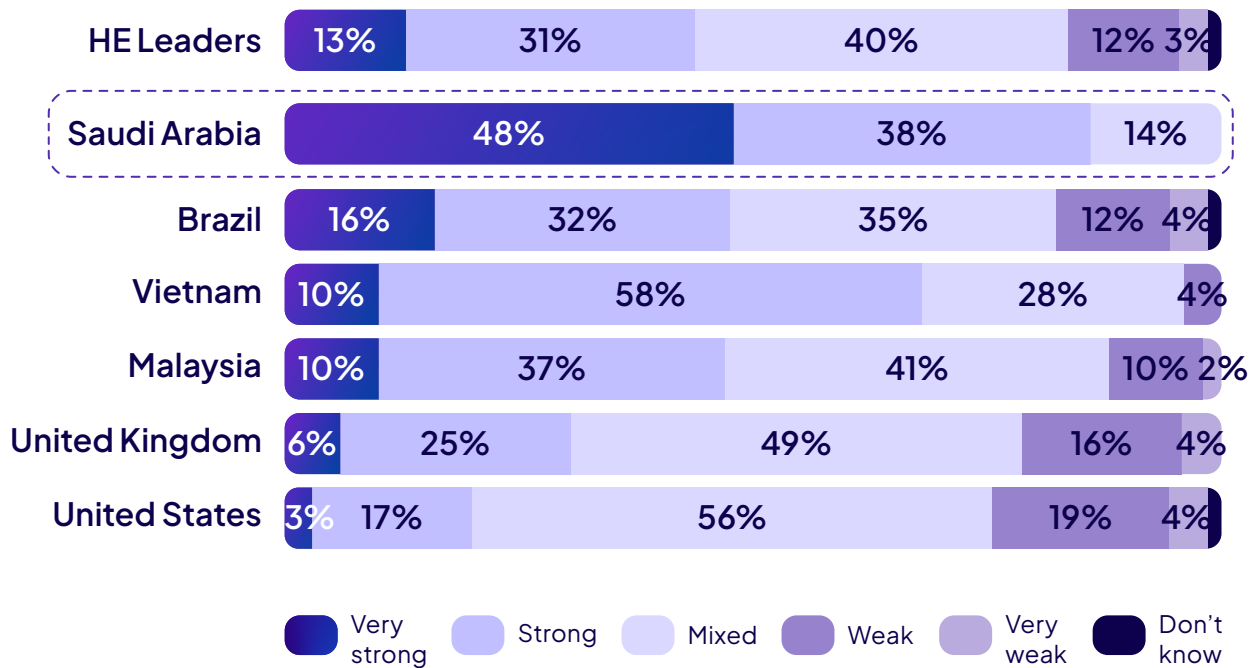
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You can have sophisticated tools, strong infrastructure, and excellent labs, but if people are not emotionally, mentally, and behaviourally ready, these resources will not achieve their full impact. The first step is to bring people to a stage where they feel at ease and are prepared to accept change. With this approach, we are already observing a significant transformation”

Professor Tanzila Saba, Prince Sultan University, Riyadh

Investment in tools and infrastructure is undeniably important, but the primary driving force of graduate AI readiness is faculty capability. If the scale of investment is where Saudi Arabia leads, faculty capability is where that investment reveals an instructive paradox. Saudi HE leaders rate their faculty's AI capability more highly than any other market in the study. Nearly half (48%) describe faculty capability as very strong, compared with a cross-market average of 13%. In total, 86% rate this capability as strong or very strong, well above the study average of 44%. This exceptional self-assessment is supported by a comprehensive program of professional development. Nearly half (44%) of Saudi HE leaders describe faculty training as extensive and comprehensive, with another 42% reporting regular opportunities. Combined, 86% of Saudi leaders report substantial ongoing faculty training. Only Vietnam comes close to matching this rate (80%). By contrast, the US and UK report the lowest levels of comprehensive training in the study, with 25% of US HE leaders and 37% of UK HE leaders describing it as extensive or regular.

Perceived faculty AI knowledge and capability



Q. Overall, how would you assess the AI knowledge and capability of faculty at your institution?

Question asked among HE Leaders

Sample Size: HE Leaders – 452

But the Saudi data reveals a paradox. In a high-velocity environment, where the bar is high for success, even the most capable faculty are challenged by a moving target. Despite leading all markets on reported faculty capability and training provision, lack of AI expertise is the single most cited barrier to preparing AI-ready graduates. Faculty development at the pace that AI innovation demands is a friction that requires investment be coupled with an equally innovative pedagogical strategy. Saudi Arabia is already doing more than most in terms of educator training, but the nature of the training must continuously evolve alongside technological developments.

Institutional capability and graduate confidence

In the Saudi sample, higher reported institutional AI investment is associated with greater student confidence in personal AI readiness. And, uniquely in this study, Saudi student confidence is echoed by employer satisfaction rankings. Saudi learners report the second highest personal AI readiness in the study, with 43% rating themselves as highly ready versus a cross-market average of 31%. Their confidence is also reflected in how they evaluate their education experience: 71% of Saudi learners feel their university is preparing them very or moderately well for an AI-enabled workforce, well above the cross-market average.

Saudi Arabia is the only market in this study where high learner confidence aligns with high employer satisfaction. Fifty percent of Saudi employers rate recent graduate hires AI tool use as excellent which is the highest single skill rating in the study. Across all eight skill dimensions measured, Saudi Arabia leads with 44% of employers giving an average excellent rating, compared with 26% in the UK, 21% in the US, and 15% in Vietnam. An impressive 90% of Saudi employers say graduate readiness is much or somewhat better compared to five years ago, compared to a cross-market average of 60%. **Taken together, these findings suggest a comparatively strong alignment between institutional investment, learner confidence, and employer satisfaction in Saudi Arabia, representing the greatest degree of alignment of the education-to-work pipeline anywhere in the study.**

An essential contributor to learner confidence is the degree to which AI instruction is integrated into the curriculum. Where faculty are most capable and most actively engaged with AI in their own teaching, learners are most confident and feel better prepared for an AI-enabled workforce. Nearly one-third of Saudi learners report that their instructors use AI regularly, compared to 15% in the UK and approximately 20% in the US. The Saudi data is consistent with a strong associative chain running from institutional investment to faculty capability, then to learner experience and, ultimately, to graduate workplace readiness.

The governance challenge: shadow AI and the ungoverned student experience

In most markets, the governance challenge is obvious; rules do not exist, learner awareness is low, or policy has not kept pace with innovations and behaviors. The challenge is different in Saudi Arabia. The surface indicators of robust governance are strong with 86% of Saudi learners aware of their institution's AI rules. A further 84% of learners report confidence in their own compliance with those rules.

Yet, governance friction is exposed in the distance between learner awareness and learner behavior. Only 27% of Saudi learners would be fully comfortable with teaching staff knowing about their AI usage. The majority of learners (56%) would be comfortable disclosing their AI use for some tasks but not others, while another 17% of learners are not comfortable with any level of disclosure. These limitations around trust and transparency suggest that although governance is understood, it is not fostering a culture of open, collaborative AI usage.

Like in other markets surveyed, a shadow AI culture exists. Saudi learners predominantly rely on tools they have sourced independently. For example, 46% use self-sourced tools for writing as opposed to just 22% who use the tools provided by their institution. Despite high awareness of rules, the reported behavior of Saudi learners suggests that institutional tool provision is not keeping pace with learner needs.

The impact of shadow AI usage is consequential and a risk in the long-term. The habits of ethical stewardship that students develop during their education will shape how they behave in professional contexts. Governance frameworks that fail to cultivate trust, transparency, and responsible use are insufficient for building AI-ready graduates. This governance friction is one that Saudi institutions should prioritize as they look to bridge the distance from education to work.

Ultimately, the goal of institutional governance should be to build trust, not through rule awareness alone, but through behavioral change. When rules move from being formulaic or punitive boundaries to becoming integral to the development of ethical stewardship, universities can foster the conditions for students to engage with AI openly, critically, and with the confidence that will shape their professional lives in an AI-powered economy.¹⁵

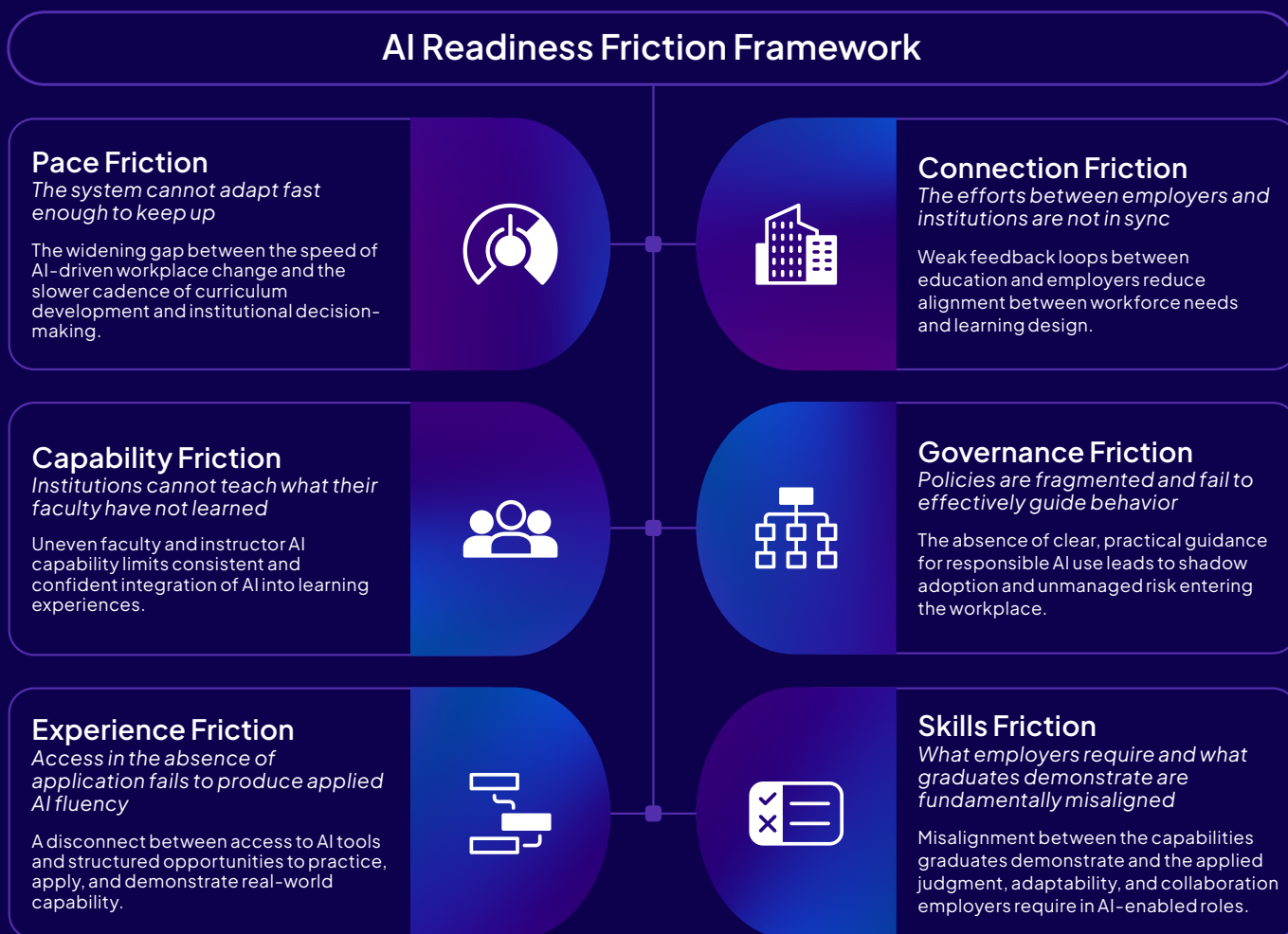
The broader lesson is that institutional capability depends on alignment. Markets where investment, strategic priorities, faculty capability, curriculum, and governance are pulling in the same direction are more likely to produce graduates who are confident and prepared. Where there is friction (e.g., policies vs. experience, tools vs. training, ambition vs. ethics), learners bear the cost as they transition from education to work.

¹⁵World Economic Forum (2025) 'Responsible AI in higher education: Building skills, trust and integrity', World Economic Forum, 4 September. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/09/responsible-ai-in-higher-education-building-skills-trust-and-integrity/> [Accessed 24 March 2026]; Legatt, A. (2026) 'Here's how college leaders can close the AI governance gap in 90 days', Forbes, 19 March. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivalegatt/2026/03/19/heres-how-college-leaders-can-close-the-ai-governance-gap-in-90-days/> [Accessed: 19 March 2026].

Chapter 3: A framework for a shared direction

The AI Readiness Friction Framework

Bridging the distance between higher education to work, from institutional intent to graduate AI readiness is real, measurable, and widening. The AI Readiness Friction Framework provides a tool for identifying where the most consequential interventions lie. It illustrates where the education-to-work transition most consistently breaks down. These frictions reinforce one another but are not fully dependent on one another. This report has outlined how the dynamics that underpin the six frictions operate in compounding procedural relationships impacting graduate AI readiness. This diagram illustrates a hierarchy that moves from macro-systemic drivers to institutional implementation and finally to individual learner outcomes.



Faculty capability defines the extent of a student's applied experience, while the pace of institutional investment and transformation informs the development of effective governance. The frequency and quality of employer engagement determines how well the curriculum and educational experience reflects workforce reality. Ultimately, high friction in any single area will result in bottlenecks elsewhere in the education-to-workforce ecosystem that begins with global technological shifts and concludes with a deficit in individual graduate AI readiness. But these frictions are also discrete and addressable. Reducing friction at any single point has the potential to generate benefits across the ecosystem.

Saudi Arabia's friction profile

No market is friction free. Saudi Arabia is no exception and has a distinctive friction profile that positions it as a high velocity strategist alongside Vietnam. Saudi Arabia, however, is characterized by strengths in investment and national coordination as well as specific challenges in areas that require behavioral change.

Pace Friction: tempered but undeniable

This friction reveals the structural misalignment between the exponential speed of AI innovation and the linear, multi-year cadence characteristic of institutional curriculum design and accreditation cycles. Seventy-two percent of Saudi stakeholders describe the pace of AI-driven change as extremely/very fast, somewhat above the cross-market average, and 70% expect this pace to accelerate. However, this urgency is accompanied by institutional confidence. Saudi HE leaders are twice as likely to believe their institutions are keeping pace with most or all AI developments (62% vs 32%).

Nevertheless, Saudi HE leaders explicitly cite the difficulty of keeping pace with the speed of AI development as their second most significant institutional barrier, followed closely by rapid evolution of employer expectations. Even in a market with low connection friction and robust investment, pace friction cannot be eliminated. The pace of AI innovation exerts a permanent pressure that demands agility alongside long-term vision and strategy. Despite moving fast to build strong foundations, Saudi institutions must continue to keep pace with a moving target.

Connection Friction: a leading example of ecosystem integration

This area of friction refers to the absence or underdevelopment of feedback loops and partnership infrastructure between industry and academia leading to misaligned views on graduate AI readiness. This is Saudi Arabia's most notable systemic advantage. More than half of Saudi HE leaders report very frequent ongoing interactions with employers, and a further 42% report frequent interactions.

At a total of 94%, Saudi HE leaders report the highest rate of regular employer engagement in the study. More than half of these leaders cite comprehensive formal mechanisms for gathering workplace intelligence, while another 44% cite some formal mechanisms. Industry partnerships in Saudi Arabia are given nearly double the rate of importance of other markets. HE leaders report that they operate with access to current and structured employer insight. The data suggests that this results in a higher rate of employer satisfaction with Saudi graduates. Saudi Arabia's efforts to overcome connection friction are worth examining as a model for markets experiencing high connection friction.

Capability friction: aligning professional development with industry demands

Capability friction highlights the uneven distribution of AI knowledge and skills among faculty, which prevents the consistent integration of AI into the student learning experience. Saudi HE leaders report exceptional strength in AI capability. 86% rate their faculty as strong or very strong, compared to 44% across markets. This is ostensibly due in part to the extent of ongoing training, with 86% receiving comprehensive or regular development. Yet, this does not fully alleviate the high expectation for faculty AI expertise. Nearly half of Saudi HE leaders cite this as their single greatest barrier to better preparing graduates.

What appears to be a contradiction in the data is actually an indicator of the compounding relationship that frictions have on one another. When the standard of what faculty AI readiness is continuously updated by technological change, even institutions with robust training programs will continue to encounter friction. Capability friction requires both ongoing practical training as well as a continuous commitment to industry partnerships that will keep educators at the cutting edge of technological development.

Governance Friction: learner shadow AI usage outpaces policy

This friction is driven by limitations in translating AI tool access into governed, equitable infrastructure and guardrails. Rule awareness and learner compliance is reported to be high in Saudi Arabia, among the highest in the study. However, only 1 in 4 Saudi learners are comfortable with teaching staff knowing fully about their AI usage, with the majority only comfortable with limited disclosure. Further, Saudi learners report that they predominantly rely on self-sourced tools rather than those provided by their institution. This is reflected in employer ratings of recent graduate hires who cite the overreliance or inappropriate use of AI tools as their biggest challenge.

These conditions of a shadow AI culture are smaller than in some other markets, but are significant given the scale of governance infrastructure that Saudi institutions have implemented. Yet, that governance infrastructure has not fostered a culture of open, transparent AI usage. High awareness governance models may be perceived as punitive or restrictive rather than supportive of ethical, collaborative application, potentially leading to the long-term risk of academic integrity violations and the formation of habits that carry into professional life.

Experience Friction: enduring disconnect between access and application

Despite extensive investment and infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, experience friction is an acute friction point in the country. Saudi learners report higher levels of satisfaction with most dimensions of their learning experience than their cross-market peers, ranging from tool access to support and guidance on AI usage. However, when it comes to hands-on practice, Saudi learners rate this dimension lowest, with 1 in 3 Saudi learners dissatisfied with their experience.

Employers in the market say a lack of practical applied experience is among their top three challenges in hiring graduates. While Saudi learners have good access to tools and regular instruction, they lack structured, authentic workplace relevant practice. Readiness is thwarted when access isn't paired with sandboxes, pilot projects, and work-integrated learning that turns tool usage into applied, work-ready competency.

Skills Friction: balancing functional AI proficiency with broader capabilities

This area is the downstream manifestation of all preceding frictions. It reflects how systemic constraints ultimately surface as gaps in graduates' applied capability at work. In Saudi Arabia, this friction manifests most evidently in the imbalance of functional AI proficiency and the strategic, ethical, and human skills that employers value.

Across markets, working alongside AI is the least-taught topic, and although Saudi marginally outperforms its peers, the gap remains. HE leaders in the country underestimate the value that employers place on this skill, with an 8-point gap, while the priority given to communication and collaboration shows a 12-point gap between HE leaders and employers. Saudi institutions are graduating students who are functionally proficient, but lacking the strategic and relational intelligence that employers expect. Overcoming this friction will require curricular reform and more robust connections to workplace environments.

Overcoming AI readiness frictions: case studies in action

Contributors to this report have provided useful case studies of how their institutions are overcoming AI readiness frictions. These innovative bright spots demonstrate that when institutions and employers embrace shared data, shared uncertainty, and shared accountability, the AI readiness gap begins to close.

A snapshot of each is presented below — full case studies are provided in the **full report**.



Pace

To close the gap between fast-moving markets and slow-moving curricula, **Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV)** replaces periodic curriculum reform with semesterly immersion weeks and executives-in-residence keeping course content market-current.



Connection

To close the feedback loop between employer needs and curriculum design, **University College London (UCL)** runs the Industry Exchange Network (IXN), matching live company challenges directly to students working under joint industry and academic supervision with 40 to 45 percent of participating students subsequently recruited by their industry partners.



Capability

To address uneven AI capability across the institution, faculty at the **University of Pittsburgh** run AI Across Disciplines to train colleagues across subjects and sustain PASTA, a cross-institutional peer network for sharing practical integration experience, building the consistent faculty capability that confident AI integration requires.

To build faculty AI capability across disciplines, **Prince Sultan University** addressed the human dimension before the technical one, treating emotional and behavioral readiness as a prerequisite and using low-code approaches to enable teaching staff from law, business, and the humanities to integrate AI into their own teaching and research.



Governance

To replace fragmented policy with practical guidance, **British University Vietnam's (BUV) AI Assessment Scale (AIS)** provides a tiered framework shifting focus from policing student behavior to deliberately designing assessments around AI.



Experience

To convert AI access into applied fluency, **Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation (APU)** provides frontier computing infrastructure including Malaysia's first NVIDIA-powered AI supercomputing lab, and designs assessment around authentic workplace tasks, creating structured conditions for students to practice with real tools on real problems.

To bridge the gap between AI access and applied competency in healthcare, **Illinois Institute of Technology** launched the Health Tech Talent Institute, partnering with Leap of Faith to place students directly on live health informatics challenges using industry-supplied AI tools.



Skills

To move graduates beyond technical proficiency toward applied judgment, **Illinois Institute of Technology** builds its curriculum around an explicit humans-in-the-lead philosophy, treating critical thinking, systems thinking, and ethical reasoning as equal priorities alongside technical and data skills – producing graduates with the adaptability and collaborative judgment employers require in AI-enabled roles.

Conclusion: Bridging the AI-readiness divide, from insight to execution

“

It is always good to move quickly, but it is even better to begin with a deep study: to understand whether the initiative is feasible, and whether the required resources are available in terms of infrastructure, software, hardware, and expertise. Sometimes organizations want to align with national-level strategies, but the realities on the ground may be different. We must be fully aware of what we need, what we already have, and how much time implementation will require. Only then can progress lead to success”

Professor Tanzila Saba, Prince Sultan University, Riyadh

AI-ready graduates do not emerge by chance. They are deliberately built through an ecosystem designed to foster applied capability. The evidence provided in this report is a resource for determining what is required by institutions, employers, and learners.

What this means for Saudi as a high velocity strategist

Saudi Arabia's friction profile shows strong investment, limited connection friction, high faculty capability, and high employer satisfaction. Viewed against its peers, the country's profile is instructive. Vietnam shares the high-velocity archetype but leads on faculty capability and learner confidence, while Saudi Arabia leads on connection and employer satisfaction. The lesson is consistent across all six markets in that these frictions are not evenly distributed. The markets making the most progress are those that identify their highest friction points and direct resources accordingly. For Saudi Arabia, this means completing the work by building trust in governance models, embedding applied experience in the curriculum, and sharpening the skills signals that employers are sending to higher education.

What this means for HE institutional leaders

To deliver AI-ready graduates at the pace at which the Vision 2030 workforce demands, action is required across all six friction points. Use the Friction Framework Self-Assessment Questions* to diagnose where friction is most acute in your institution, then prioritize action accordingly.



Pace

Accelerate the cadence of curriculum and institutional decision-making through modular design, stackable credentials, and faster review cycles that keep learning aligned with workplace change. Saudi Arabia is already moving faster than most markets, but the challenge is agility as AI evolves faster than curriculum. Industry advisory boards are a direct mechanism for keeping signals current.



Connection

Saudi Arabia leads all study markets on the frequency and formality of employer engagement. The next step is deepening that engagement from intelligence-gathering into robust co-design. Build ongoing feedback loops with employers and industry bodies so workforce signals directly inform learning design, assessment standards, and graduate outcomes. Conduct employer surveys and needs analyses.



Capability

Saudi Arabia's HE leaders report more comprehensive faculty training than any market in the study, yet still cite faculty AI capability as their top barrier to graduate readiness. The nature of training must evolve. Faculty development should connect educators to live industry contexts through embedded partnerships, secondments, and employer-hosted professional development rather than one-off experimentation or clinical training.



Governance

Rule awareness is high in Saudi Arabia. The governance challenge extends beyond visibility into trust. Effective governance is about creating the conditions for transparent, ethical, and confident AI use that students will carry into professional life. Consult accreditation bodies in professional fields for externally validated standards. Replace punitive or restrictive governance with a culture that positions AI use as an ethical, positive, shared practice modeled by faculty and integrated into assessments.



Experience

This is the most acute friction in the Saudi market. The infrastructure for authentic, workplace relevant learning exists, the task is activating that infrastructure for applied learning experiences. Move beyond access to tools by embedding structured, credit-bearing opportunities to practice, apply, and demonstrate AI capability in authentic workplace contexts. Co-design assignments, degree apprenticeships, and industry-sponsored micro-credentials.



Skills

Saudi graduates are strong in functional AI proficiency. The curricular priority is building out the other dimensions of the AI-ready graduate: strategic intelligence, ethical stewardship, and critical human skills. Institutions that prioritize any single knowledge area at the expense of others are not producing the graduates the workforce needs. Explore the development of a Graduate AI Attribute Framework in active partnership with Saudi employers.¹⁶

¹⁶ See also the Optimal AI-Ready Graduate profiled in chapter 1 of this report.

* <https://www.pearson.com/power-of-learning/ai-readiness/diagnostic.html>

What this means for business leaders

The graduate readiness needed for the AI-enabled workforce is not for HE institutions alone to determine. Leaders should prioritize actions that directly reduce friction, rather than adding new layers of strategy or policy. Start by diagnosing where friction is most acute in your context; then, prioritize action accordingly.



Pace

The pace of AI-driven change in the Saudi economy is among the fastest in the world. Move quickly to diagnose the AI capability needs your organization is facing now. Communicate them to university partners with specificity, regularity, and intentionality. Industry Advisory Board participation is an efficient channel for this.



Connection

Deepen systematic, ongoing relationships with university partners that extend beyond graduate recruitment or career fairs. Provide clear, continuous signals to education partners about role-level expectations, validating assessments, and sharing feedback earlier and more often than annual cycles allow. Contribute to employer surveys and skills analyses.



Capability

Support universities in understanding the practical implications of AI for your sector by opening your organizations to educators. Faculty who are unfamiliar with the impact of AI in professional contexts cannot teach its application credibly. Embed practitioners, share case materials, and treat faculty development as a strategic investment in the pipeline of talent and opportunity your organization depends on.



Governance

Communicate what AI governance looks like inside your organization and what will be expected of graduates from day one. Refer to accreditation bodies where available; contribute where no such body exists.



Experience

Purpose-built co-designed programs are the most effective way to address the shortage of practical experience. Work with universities to co-design and host authentic workplace scenarios. Sponsor degree apprenticeships. Publish case studies to support universities in their curricular development strategies. The limits of practical experience is the most acute friction point in the Saudi market and it is one that employers are in the position to address.



Skills

Communicate the specific skills your sector needs directly with universities. The more precisely employers articulate what AI-ready skills competencies look like in practice, the better institutions can deliver it. Co-design Graduate AI Attribute Frameworks with institutions. Communicate hiring needs using common skills frameworks in job specs and postings.

Meeting this moment in Saudi Arabia requires educators and employers to work together with the same urgency and ambition that characterizes the country's national AI transformation. The foundation has been built; the task is to remove the remaining frictions and deliver graduates who are fully ready for the AI-enabled workforce.

Supporting information

Methodology

This report is based on a comprehensive multi-market study designed to capture a 360-degree view of the AI transition within the higher education ecosystem. Data was gathered through a mixed-methods approach, combining extensive quantitative surveying with targeted qualitative insights across six strategic markets: Brazil, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, the US, the UK, and Vietnam. All fieldwork was conducted by PSB Insights.

Quantitative survey

To ensure the findings reflect the complexities of the current labor market and academic landscape, the survey engaged three distinct stakeholder groups:

Learners: Undergraduates currently enrolled in higher education, representing a diverse range of institutional types and academic disciplines, from STEM to the humanities.

Higher Education (HE) Leaders: comprising both Senior University Administrators and Educators. This includes faculty with 3+ years of experience and responsibility for curriculum development and/or wider strategic decisions for a department, faculty or institution and administrators with decision-making responsibility for budgets, strategy, and course design.

Employers: Business Leaders with responsibility for strategic decisions and talent strategy. To ensure relevant data, participating organizations must have hired graduate-level employees within the past two years.

Market	Learners	HE Leaders	Employers	Total
Overall	1,955	452	304	2,711
United States	351	101	51	503
UK	351	100	51	502
Brazil	350	100	50	500
Saudi Arabia	302	50	50	402
Vietnam	301	50	51	402
Malaysia	300	51	51	402

Fieldwork was conducted via online survey which ran between the 7th and 28th of January 2026.

Qualitative interviews

To contextualize the survey data, the research included a series of 7 in-depth qualitative interviews with key leaders and innovators in AI adoption from the Higher Education sector. These sessions allowed for a more nuanced exploration of the friction points in the transition from education to work, and how institutions are overcoming them, along with the shifting value of the university degree.

The views and opinions expressed by the interviewees during this project are their own and were shared in their capacity as individual professionals. These insights do not necessarily reflect the official policies, positions, or endorsements of their respective institutions.

Interviews were conducted through February 2026.

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