

BRITISH COUNCIL APPG

Building Resilience to Radicalisation in the Middle East and North Africa

Written submission of evidence (adapted from [a blog post](#) published on [goodall-foundation.org.uk](#))

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There has been a lot of thinking on the present and the past when looking at the struggles of the next MENA generation. It is of paramount importance to face into the future of the region, to ensure that solutions to the current challenges are centred around access to genuine opportunities for young people in the future. Youth are future-oriented; in planning for their success we need to look up and ahead too.

I am neither an expert on the MENA region, nor on radicalisation or the antidotes to it. My link to this theme of work is through [Taqaddam](#) (which means “Move forward” in Arabic). The programme is delivered in partnership with the charity I founded, Spark+Mettle, the British Council and HSBC. Now moving into its second year, it’s an innovative life skills programme aimed at 15-16 year olds across 8 countries:

- Egypt
- UAE
- Bahrain
- Qatar
- Kuwait
- Oman
- Lebanon
- Turkey

The programme is designed to equip young people with a wide set of enduring personal and professional strengths and skills that will enable them to lead successful and fulfilling lives. For the British Council, it’s a great partnership that has brought “innovation, creativity and relevance” to this area of need, according to Melanie Relton, the British Council’s Regional Vocational Education Manager for the MENA region.

Why does HSBC want to invest in a programme like this? Because, like many private sector employers in the region, they are aware of the skills mismatch.

“We actually helped devise the concept as **we felt there was a disconnect between what skills were on offer in the marketplace and what employers were looking for,**” explains Sabrin Rahman, Head of CSR for the MENA region, HSBC. “Traditional educational systems, especially public schooling just do not focus on the softer and more transferable skills that are needed for the workplace of the future.”

The British Council has similar ambitions. “Taqaddam aligns to the core of the British Councils cultural relations’ vision of creating positive life outcomes for individuals, particularly young people, by giving them the skills for work and life,” says Melanie Relton. “It makes economic and social sense for us to invest in Taqaddam, as social and economic changes can only be achieved through investment and expanding opportunities for young people.”

What are character strengths/soft skills/life skills/social and emotional skills...?

Put simply, they are all the non-technical, non-academic stuff. They are the abilities, habits and character of people you want to be around—your friends, colleagues, family members et al. There are a gazillion definitions. Here's one:

"Soft skills enable the qualities, behaviours and attributes needed to succeed in the workplace. They encompass an individual's ability to listen well, communicate effectively, be positive, manage conflict, accept responsibility, show respect, build trust, work well with others, manage time effectively, accept criticism, work under pressure, be likeable, and demonstrate good manners."

[Backing Soft Skills](#) (research undertaken by Development Economics on behalf of McDonald's UK, January 2015)

Why are they important?

1. **Good for students and young people.** The [Early Intervention Foundation](#) published a series of reports on [Social and Emotional Skills](#), which demonstrated that, in comparison to cognitive ability (assessed at 10 years also), social and emotional skills:
 1. are more important for general mental health wellbeing in adult life, eg greater life satisfaction
 2. are as important for some socio-economic and labour market outcomes, such as being employedAnd, depressingly, in the UK, children growing up in poorer households tend to exhibit worse self-control and emotional health than their wealthier peers, and that these differences are evident by the age of three years old.
2. **Good for teachers.** It's not just about what you teach them, it's who about you help them to become. The word 'education' comes from the Latin *educere*, which means to **bring out** not to pour in. Teachers (mostly) want to bring out the best in their students, but this is often quite hard to know how to do, above and beyond the academic and technical skills they are there to teach. And as the ever-wonderful Martin Luther King Jr once said, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus **character** - that is the goal of true education."
3. **Good for employers.** As mentioned above, there's a skills mismatch between what schools are teaching children and what employers are looking for. This is true in the UK and in MENA, and globally. Interesting facts about re the things people look for in MENA:
 1. Communication, collaboration and leadership—these are the factors most looked for in candidates by MENA employers (according to a 2015 Bayt poll)
 2. The skills that are important to young people (Generation Y) vary by country to country in the MENA region, but are all "character strengths" or "soft skills": People skills come out top amongst youth in Bahrain; leadership skills are number one in UAE; and team skills are favoured in Qatar. Find out more in the 2015 report called [A New Generation: The Success of Generation Y in GCC](#) countries by Dr Carina Paine Schofield and Sue Honoré.
4. **Good for the economy.** Better soft skills development would contribute £88 billion to the UK economy, according to [Development Economics](#). Not sure what the MENA version of this would be, but it's a sizeable sum.
5. **Good for society.** How does this connect to anti-radicalisation? Not directly. But our ultimate outcome for Taqaddam, for example, is for participants to **make a positive contribution to their communities and wider society.**

What is the future?

Before focusing on the MENA region, let's look to the future in general. The [Future Work Skills report](#) from the [Institute of the Future](#) laid out a series of (very overly-complicated titled) skills that were going to be needed in jobs in 2020 and beyond. Figuring out what they actually mean could be an additional skill all in its own right. But the sum of it is this: knowledge doesn't matter as much any more. It's no longer about WHAT you know (computers have got that covered, people), it's now about HOW you apply it and manage it, and yourself. That is everything to do with character and soft skills. Everything. Here are their original ten future work skills (they've [updated the list recently](#), and now include resilience) :

- a. Sense-making
- b. Novel and adaptive thinking
- c. Trans-disciplinarity
- d. Social intelligence
- e. New media literacy
- f. Computational thinking
- g. Cognitive load management
- h. Design mindset
- i. Cross cultural competency
- j. Virtual collaboration

Let's look at tech's role in the MENA region in the future too. Specifically to a great report called [Will the technology disruption widen or close the skills gap in MENA?](#) They've got some important things to note, that tally with the broader future picture. Firstly, they argue that youth in MENA are seen as liability rather than a gift, and that it is vital now to create opportunity and seed hope for them. They note that during the last 15 years there has been good education progress:

- increased universal primary access by 10%
- Increased youth and adult literacy by 22%
- More young people are graduating from second and tertiary education than ever before

Yet 50% of school children are not meeting basic international literacy and numeracy proficiency standards. They also report that the private sector believe that low quality of education is cause of the skills mismatch and impediment to economic growth.

The report identifies five major trends that lead to a great opportunity for MENA to use technology to "leapfrog making educational advances":

1. Longer life expectancy - there will be generations of lifelong learners who will be generalists rather than specialists.
2. More automation, less traditional jobs - there will be highly skilled workers who will need transferable skills such as communication and problem solving
3. Data analytics - higher order analytical skills and digital literacy as well as STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, maths) will lead to more need for computer programming and other related skills.
4. New media - new literacy - new learning. Gaming, animation, virtual networks - this is how people will learn in the future. The four walls of a classroom are going to be become less and less necessary. Collaboration and communication will be key skills to succeed.
5. Interconnected organisations - companies will become more diverse, more flexible, and so their workers need to be adaptable, culturally aware.

A quick check into what skills are needed now.

In October 2016, [LinkedIn published a slideshow on the top skills](#) searched for by country. It's fascinating. 10 out of the top 10 skills searched for in the USA are to do with computers and tech. 9 out of 10 in the UK are the same—things like SEO marketing and mobile development. And even right now 6 out of 10 of top skills searched on LinkedIn for UAE are to do with computer programming, including statistical analysis and data mining, algorithm design and UI.

Melanie Relton of the British Council is looking both to what's needed now and what's needed in the future. "Addressing youth employability in MENA is a pressing challenge and we have a daunting task ahead," she warns. "Education systems are not structured to respond to a rapidly changing economic landscape. The big question is how can we develop and equip young people with the skills to deal with problems we've never seen before and won't see for years? Taqaddam provides a new perspective to education with an emphasis on personal development as a first step."

Returning to Sabrin Rahman at HSBC: "We wanted a programme that evened the playing field between students from affluent and not so affluent backgrounds when it came to seeking employment opportunities in the future," she explains about why they want to develop Taqaddam further. "A lack of such availabilities was one of the core contributors to the Arab spring and we can see escalating tension again."

The future, it seems, isn't far away at all. Governments, both here and abroad, need to look at it, and consider how to set up young people with opportunities that will enable them to be productive, happy citizens. In England, we're lucky that the most engaging alternative for those disengaged in politics is the soft Russell Brand. Other places, there are other people, telling the youth that they can make their dreams come true.

Eugenie Teasley is the CEO of the Goodall Foundation, a UK foundation that seeks to empower people to make positive change in their lives. It has incorporated Spark+Mettle, the youth charity she founded in 2011, into its work. Eugenie has been working in education and youth development across the globe for over 12 years. She holds degrees from the University of Oxford and the University of California, Berkeley. She currently lives in Brighton, UK.

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