



Bridging the gap between youth unemployment and entrepreneurship in the United Arab Emirates

Sunette Scanlen¹ and Lindall Elaine Adams PhD² 

¹ Swiss Business School, Zurich, Switzerland

² University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa
sunettester@googlemail.com

Abstract. The study examines the role of entrepreneurship in addressing youth unemployment and the skills required for young people to succeed as entrepreneurs, particularly within the Arab region, including the UAE, between 2015 and 2024. In many countries, youth unemployment poses a significant socioeconomic challenge, and entrepreneurship is increasingly viewed as a potential solution for this problem. The methodology involved a systematic review of studies between 2015 and 2024, with a particular focus on research conducted in the Arab world. Studies were selected based on their relevance to the research questions: (1) What role does entrepreneurship play in addressing youth unemployment? and (2) What skills are required for young people to succeed as entrepreneurs? In this study, entrepreneurship was found to offer a promising avenue for reducing youth unemployment. To accomplish this, young people are provided with the opportunity to create their own employment opportunities and exercise a greater degree of professional autonomy. The governments of the UAE and Saudi Arabia have implemented a variety of initiatives to promote youth entrepreneurship, including mentoring programs, entrepreneurial training, and access to capital. Furthermore, the study identified key skills that are important to the success of entrepreneurs, such as entrepreneurial skills and mentoring skills. It was also determined that young entrepreneurs require access to financial support and social capital. The study concludes by emphasizing the potential of entrepreneurship as a solution to youth unemployment, as well as the need for targeted skills development and enhanced support mechanisms to promote entrepreneurial success.

Keywords: youth unemployment, entrepreneurship, skills mismatch

1 INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment is a global problem that affects millions of young people (Organization, International Labour, 2024; United Nations, 2024). By 2030, over 1.3 billion people aged 15–24 years will be part of the growing youth population (United Nations, n.d.). Nonetheless, the ILO's 2024 data show that job opportunities for people aged 15 to 24 have greatly increased in the four years since the COVID-19 pandemic

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(ILO, 2024). The ILO report underlined strong economic growth rates and a large recovery in labour demand, which has improved the chances of young people joining the labour force since the crisis. Thus, youth unemployment globally dropped to 13% in 2023 (ILO, 2024). However, for the years 2023-2024, youth unemployment in the UAE was the highest of all Arab countries (ILO, 2024). Fatima and Elbanna's (2024) study found that young people were underutilised in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Furthermore, the findings highlighted the issue of female youth unemployment in the region. Mina (2023) considers youth unemployment in Arab States as a major concern that needs to be addressed. The author found that in both Arab and non-Arab countries, state-led development, as quantified by government consumption, leads to higher rates of youth unemployment. In Arab countries, the author argues that youth unemployment is the result of an overburdened government. The author emphasised the quality of education students receive, as well as the skills mismatch that poses challenges, and perceptions that employment in the private sector would result in earning of lower wages (Mina, 2023). Nonetheless, similar rates of youth unemployment exist on the African continent. Unemployment among graduates has become common in Africa, with young people with higher levels of education struggling to find acceptable jobs (Njifen & Meungwe, 2024). According to ILO Statistics (2023), approximately 72 million young people in Africa, are not employed. The majority, or two-thirds, are young women (Karkee & O'Higgins, 2023). Furthermore, Mwakalila (2023) believes that if the population continues to grow, youth unemployment will become a major issue on the African continent. The study presents empirical data on how income disparities are aggravating the problem. The study used panel data from 42 African countries spanning 29 years, namely 1991 to 2020.

1.1 Skills mismatch

Research has already identified a skills mismatch as the common cause of youth unemployment. These skills mismatch negatively impacts the youth employment market, even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Bergin, et al., 2019; Cukier, 2019; Liu, Salvanes, & Sørensen, 2016). The post-pandemic world, which has increasingly embraced artificial intelligence (AI) exacerbates the challenge (Partington, 2024). In addition, the emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) courses may inadvertently exacerbate the issue of youth unemployment (Katwala, 2017; Pandey, 2024; Wells, 2024). Given the importance of these subjects for economic growth and technical advancement (Buchholz, 2023), an excessive number of STEM graduates in the job market may lead to an excess of candidates with similar qualifications, exceeding the need for such positions. The existing discrepancy could result in increased battle for limited job opportunities, therefore causing difficulties for many young individuals seeking employment in relevant STEM disciplines (Blake, 2020; Cheeseman Day & Martinez, 2021). The mismatch between the qualifications attained and the job abilities required is a significant factor. This is contributing to the problems faced by today's young people in finding employment. The study conducted by Habiyaemye, Habanabakize, and Nwosu (2022) reveals that employment is significantly hindered by a continuous vertical skills mismatch resulting from either excessive or insufficient acquisition of education or qualifications. The study revealed that

the enhancement of non-technical skills correlates with the probability of securing employment as compared to technical talents. Habiyaremye, Habanabakize, and Nwosu (2022) research findings confirm the significance of soft skills in securing employment. The authors propose a need for a more pronounced focus on this set of skills in upskilling initiatives tailored to tackle the issues of unemployment. The study conducted by Karymshakov and Sulaimanova (2017) posits that the levels of youth employment are influenced by the problems of education-job mismatch. The authors elaborate by asserting that failure to align formal education with the demands of the job market can result in a decrease in labour supply performance. Karymshakov and Sulaimanova propose that the education system of Kyrgyzstan should undergo reforms to more effectively meet the demand for employees in the job market. The research conducted by Tählin, and Westerman (2020) examined the decrease in youth unemployment, contributed by the transformation in skill structure. The authors formulated two hypotheses. The first hypothesis suggested that skill upgrading has a negative impact on young people by diminishing the percentage of occupational opportunities that are particularly relevant to their age group. The second hypothesis posits that a discrepancy between skills aggravates the decrease in chances for young people by intensifying the competition based on skills in positions that need low levels of skill. The findings showed a robust correlation between improved skills and overeducation and the employment prospects of young people. The study's results supported the hypotheses. The authors found that when individuals advance their level of education, the level of competitiveness increases. These findings indicate that excessive schooling maybe hinders the job prospects of young people. The authors propose a review of policies to specifically tackle the skills mismatch. Undoubtedly, people always pursue further education in order to improve their competitiveness in the labour market. While both undereducation and overeducation contribute to the vertical mismatch, the horizontal mismatch may also result in youth unemployment. The study conducted by Eymann and Schweri (2015) investigates the discrepancy between the competencies obtained through formal education and those demanded in the employment market in Switzerland, with a specific emphasis on vocational education. The results revealed that skills obtained through vocational education possess a higher degree of transferability. Findings indicate that ongoing training and practical learning in the workplace mitigate the adverse effects of skills mismatch. The study's results reaffirmed the efficacy of vocational education and urged governments to implement comparable vocational training strategies. The study conducted by Poplavskaya, Karabchuk, and Shomotova (2023) examines the issue of unemployment faced by young people in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in relation to other Gulf countries. The findings indicated a notable deficiency in skills and a dearth of professional attributes among young people, which is a contributing factor to widespread unemployment. Moreover, young women encounter greater challenges in securing employment as a result of their family obligations and geographical limitations. Furthermore, the results revealed that the primary avenues for job seeking among young individuals in the UAE are personal connections and university affiliations. In answer to skills mismatch, work-based learning has been identified by the ILO as effective in enabling jobseekers with skills

mismatch to fulfil the skills requirements of a rapidly evolving labour market (ILO, 2024).

1.2 Shift to entrepreneurship

In answer to youth unemployment, the focus should shift from STEM to entrepreneurship and skill development in mitigating the risk of youth unemployment. The UAE (Aamir & Nashar, 2024; Elcheik, 2023), and several countries have seen entrepreneurship as a potential remedy for youth unemployment (Cheeseman Day & Martinez, 2021; Matala, Tony, & Agila, 2024; Ndlovu et al., 2024). Therefore, entrepreneurship has become increasingly significant for the social and economic development of nations (Chahine, 2020). Without addressing these challenges, economic and social instability will increase. Entrepreneurship opportunities have the potential to alleviate youth unemployment (Halid et al., 2023). The focus of this study is to investigate the relationship between youth unemployment and to understand the context in which entrepreneurship is seen as a solution to alleviate youth unemployment, a Prisma systematic review is conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What role does entrepreneurship play in addressing youth unemployment?
2. What skills are required for young people to succeed as entrepreneurs?

2 Methods and analysis

This study gathered secondary data in order answer the research questions. The required data was retrieved by doing searches on online databases such as Eric, EBSCO, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Web of Science. Our analysis focused on peer-reviewed scholarly articles, conference papers, ILO reports and other reliable web sources to examine the problems of young unemployment and entrepreneurship. The authors subsequently reviewed the abstracts of relevant studies to ascertain their relevance in supporting the aim of the study. This analysis incorporated the studies relevant to this research. PRISMA was used as it reports on the validity of the studies included in this current research.

2.1 Search strategy

Based on the research questions, the following key concepts and terms were developed for the search strategy:

2.1.1 Entrepreneurship

Boolean search strategy: (entrepreneurship" OR "entrepreneurial activity" OR "self-employment" AND "youth unemployment" OR "youth joblessness" AND "youth employment").

2.1.2 Entrepreneurship key terms

Boolean search strategy: (entrepreneurship" OR "entrepreneurial activity" OR "self-employment").

2.1.3 Skills mismatch

Boolean search strategy: ("skills mismatch" OR "skills gap" OR "vertical mismatch" OR horizontal mismatch" OR overeducation" OR undereducated" " AND "youth unemployment" OR "youth joblessness").

2.1.4 Youth entrepreneurial skills

Boolean search strategy: ("entrepreneurial skills" OR "business skills" OR "youth training" AND "entrepreneurial education" AND " youth unemployment" OR "youth joblessness").

2.1.5 Youth entrepreneurial skills

Boolean search strategy: ("entrepreneurial skills" OR "business skills" OR "youth training" AND "entrepreneurial education" AND " youth unemployment" OR "youth joblessness").

2.1.6 AI role

Boolean search strategy: ("artificial intelligence" OR "AI" AND "youth unemployment" OR "youth joblessness")

2.1.7 Geographical focus

Boolean search strategy: ("United Arab Emirates" OR "UAE" OR "GCC" OR "Arab countries" OR "MENA").

2.3 Filtering of results

1. Time range: Limit published studies from 2018 to 2024
2. Language: English
3. Study type: peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, ILO reports

2.3.1 Inclusion criteria

1. Time range: Limit published studies from 2018 to 2024
2. Language: English
1. Study type: peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, ILO reports

2.3.2 Exclusion criteria

1. Articles that do not address youth unemployment or entrepreneurship directly.
2. Studies published before 2018

- 3. Literature focusing solely on regions outside your study’s scope.
- 4. Studies not full-text or PDF

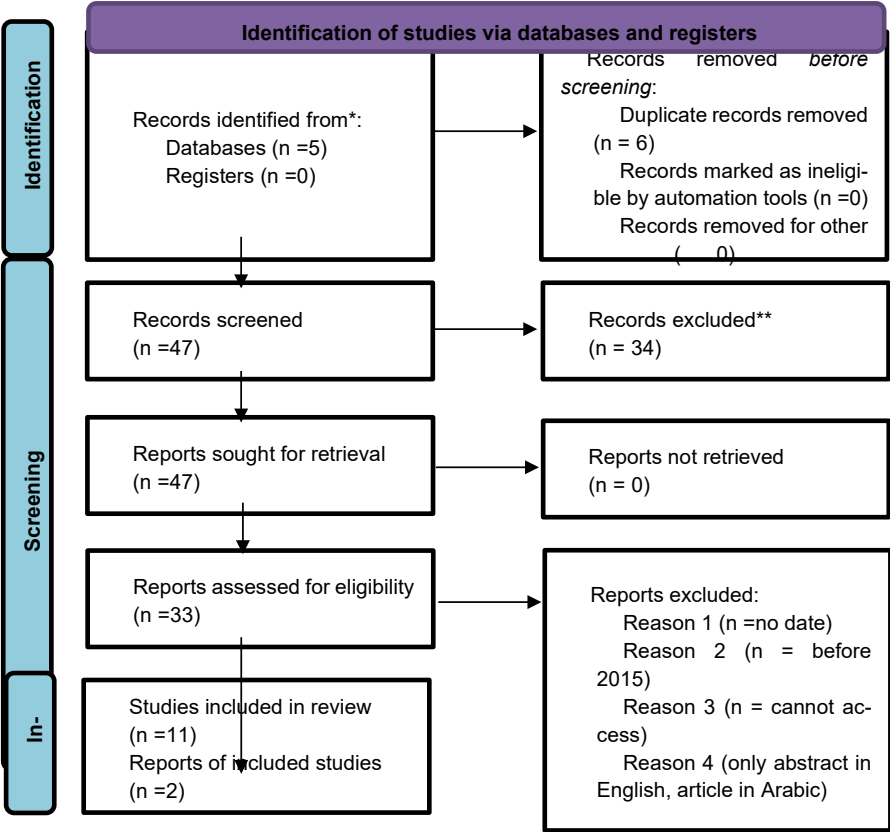
2.4 Data extraction

- 1. Sample, research design, findings, country

3. Results

PRISMA flow diagram, Table 1, illustrates the databases and number of studies included and excluded from this study.

Table 1. PRISMA flow diagram



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Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers). **If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

1. Study characteristics

The characteristics of the studies included in Table 2 can be seen in the table below. This is a simplified table since the primary aim of the systematic review is to explore the relationship between youth unemployment and entrepreneurship. For this reason, the columns only concentrate on the geographical context, purpose, study design, and the key findings relevant to the research questions.

Table 2. Study characteristics

Study	Region	Purpose	Methodology	Key Findings
Suljeman (2020)	MENA	Relationship between entrepreneurship and youth unemployment.	Systematic review	Entrepreneurship reduces youth unemployment; young entrepreneurs face financial and systemic barriers.
Al-Sayyid (2018)	Arab region	Examines youth unemployment over two decades in Arab countries.	Quantitative (surveys)	Lack of job-related skills causes unemployment; entrepreneurship initiatives are emerging in some countries.
Kabbani (2019)	MENA	Policy briefing on youth unemployment challenges.	Policy brief	Financial and skill mismatches hinder youth entrepreneurship; focus needed on

Poplavskaya et al. (2023)	UAE	Examines youth unemployment challenges in UAE and Gulf countries.	Qualitative (case study)	technical and soft skills. Skill gaps, gender-specific barriers, and reliance on personal connections impact employment outcomes.
Mina (2022)	Arab countries	High youth unemployment linked to state-led development in Arab countries.	Quantitative (GMM)	Education quality correlates with higher unemployment; flexible labor markets are essential for reducing unemployment.
Bakry et al. (2019)	Saudi Arabia	Evaluates effectiveness of entrepreneurship programs in reducing unemployment.	Qualitative (case study)	Entrepreneurship programs boost job creation; funding challenges and cultural barriers remain issues.
Mina (2024)	MENA (GCC countries)	Examines labor market flexibility and female youth unemployment.	Quantitative (FE panel data)	Employment flexibility benefits males more than females due to traditional gender roles and norms.
Maliki et al. (2022)	MENA	Assesses entrepreneurship's role in economic development of	Policy paper	Innovation, governance, and monetary policy are key to

		nine MENA economies.		entrepreneurship's success; self-employment alone does not drive development.
Al Saiqal et al. (2018)	UAE	Examines entrepreneurial intentions among UAE youth.	Quantitative (surveys)	Entrepreneurial intentions influenced by attitude and perceived control; education has minimal impact.
Hashim (2023)	Gulf States	Systematic review of women entrepreneurship in the Gulf region.	Systematic review	Highlights gendered barriers and masculine bias in entrepreneurship literature.
Adely et al. (2021)	MENA	Investigates origins and implications of the skills mismatch narrative.	Quantitative	Skills mismatch narrative blames education, perpetuates inequality, and overlooks systemic challenges.
Dibeh et al. (2019)	Lebanon	Analyzes employment factors and skills mismatch in Lebanese youth.	Quantitative	Age, gender, vocational training, and socioeconomic status strongly influence youth employment and skill mismatch perceptions.

Reyad et al. (2020)	Egypt and Bahrain	Examines how account- ing students develop en- trepreneurial skills.	Quantita- tive	Private universities foster entre- preneurial skills more effectively than public universities.
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4 Findings

Based on the characteristics of the studies addressing youth unemployment and entrepreneurship, we address the research questions in this systematic review using the results of the included studies.

4.1. Research question 1: What role does entrepreneurship play in addressing youth unemployment?

The current study provides evidence that youth unemployment is a significant concern that impacts both the current and future of several countries and regions. Within the Arab regions, Al-Sayyid (2018) documented that the rate of youth unemployment is the most elevated. The author acknowledged that young people who have received an education face more difficulties in obtaining employment in comparison to their peers who lack education. The pursuit of entrepreneurship offers young people a mechanism to create their own job opportunities and exercise more independence in their professional development. According to Bakry, Khalifa, & Dabab (2019), the Saudi Arabian government has explicitly emphasized entrepreneurship as a means to stimulate economic growth. To reduce unemployment in Saudi Arabia, the government implemented two employment policies. One proposal was to merge the concept of unemployment with self-employment. The secondary objective was to enhance entrepreneurial prospects and, thus, generate additional employment alternatives for unemployment. Moreover, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) provides a comprehensive training and mentoring program specifically designed for entrepreneurs. The university particularly focusses on Saudi individuals who are interested in embracing an entrepreneurial mindset. Furthermore, the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) specifically designs an entrepreneurship program for youth aged 10 to 15, aiming to cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset at an early stage. Suljeman's (2020) research validates the effectiveness of entrepreneurship in integrating young individuals into the workforce in transitional and MENA countries. Moreover, the UAE creates a startup sector to tackle this problem by creating new employment prospects for young people. Thus, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) boasts one of the most noteworthy levels of entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area, since over 20% of its population is involved in various entrepreneurial endeavors (Elcheik, 2023).

4.2 Research question 2 What skills are required for young people to succeed as entrepreneurs?

According to existing research, a skills mismatch is the primary cause of youth unemployment. As a result of the skills mismatch, youth employment is negatively impacted, even prior to the onset of COVID-19 (Bergin et al., 2019; Cukier, 2019; Liu, Salvanes, & Srensen, 2016). Kabbani (2019) underscores the importance of prioritizing both soft and technical skills. Nevertheless, this study affirms that entrepreneurial training (Kabbani, 2019) and mentoring (Suljeman, 2020) are essential skills for young people to thrive as entrepreneurs. Ho et al. (2018) conducted a study to examine the efficacy of entrepreneurship educational courses. According to the authors, the implementation of entrepreneurship training programs among secondary school students could serve as a successful strategy for enhancing entrepreneurial skills in young people. As shown in the study by Gangi (2017), entrepreneurial training plays a key role in enhancing the skills of entrepreneurial awareness at an appropriate age and will enhance Qatar's economic diversification. The Entrepreneurship Challenge, initiated by the UAE Ministry of Education under the Graduate Fund, aims to enhance the competency of Emirati university students and graduates by providing them with essential training and resources for achieving entrepreneurial success (Ministry of Education, 2024). In addition, the UAE offers a University Entrepreneurship Program that fosters an opportune environment for innovation and entrepreneurship, enabling young students to develop entrepreneurial skills for the future (Dubai Future Foundation, 2024).

5 Discussion

The current study highlights youth unemployment as a pressing issue that affects both the present and prospects of several countries, particularly in the Arab region. However, while entrepreneurship offers a potential solution to youth unemployment, overcoming the structural, financial, and cultural barriers remains a critical challenge, particularly for young women, and gender disparities further complicate the youth unemployment and entrepreneurship landscape. Young women often encounter additional obstacles, such as family responsibilities and societal expectations, limiting their access to employment opportunities (Poplavskaya, Karabchuk, & Shomotova, 2023). The study by Mina (2024) also underscores the impact of traditional gender roles and conservative norms, which restrict labour freedom for women. In contrast, men tend to find employment more quickly and face fewer cultural limitations. These barriers, coupled with the systemic challenges of skills mismatch and limited social capital, highlight the complex interplay of factors influencing youth unemployment and entrepreneurship in the region. The framing of skills mismatch as the primary cause of unemployment, as noted by Adely et al. (2021), can serve to justify policies that perpetuate inequality rather than addressing its root causes.

6 Recommendations

The recommendations obtained from this systematic review emphasise the need of effectively implementing focused initiatives to address the issues of young unemployment and entrepreneurship. At the outset, it is crucial for governments and educational institutions to give primacy to the integration of entrepreneurial training into secondary and higher education curricula. This will facilitate the acquisition of fundamental skills necessary for attaining success in self-employment among young individuals. Enhancing the availability of financial resources and mentorship programs is of utmost importance, particularly for aspiring young entrepreneurs who may lack the essential social capital and financial support. Therefore, it is necessary to prioritise the reduction of gender-based disparities by developing comprehensive policies and programs that assist women in overcoming cultural and public obstacles. Moreover, the promotion of collaboration between corporate organisations and government organisations has the potential to enhance entrepreneurial ecosystems, therefore providing more opportunities for young people to innovate and make significant contributions to socioeconomic progress. To address the skills mismatch and improve the preparedness of young individuals to fulfil the evolving demands of the labour market, it is necessary to adopt updated educational policies and labour market reforms.

7 Limitations

However, the systematic review has specific limitations. The efficacy of systematic reviews, which provide comprehensive summaries of current research, is limited by the quality and scope of the papers included. This review was conducted using available literature, which may have excluded recently released or geographically specific data, leading to potential limitations in understanding the complete scope of problems concerning youth unemployment and entrepreneurship.

8 Conclusion

This study presents significant evidence that the issue of youth unemployment continues to be a major concern in many countries, especially in the Arab world. In the context of youth employment, educated young people encounter distinct obstacles, and entrepreneurship has emerged as a highly promising avenue to generate job prospects and foster economic self-sufficiency. Governments in Saudi Arabia and the UAE have acknowledged the capacity of entrepreneurship to tackle unemployment and, as a result, introduced several measures to assist young people in their pursuit of self-employment. Nevertheless, obstacles such as disparities in skills, financial limitations, and gender-based inequalities continue to exist, underscoring the need for formulating comprehensive policies and initiatives to tackle these issues. Moreover, the success of young

entrepreneurs is contingent upon the need for focused entrepreneurial training and mentoring, as well as the significance of social capital. The study emphasises the need to tackle these complex problems by promoting cooperation among educational institutions, governments, and the private sector to cultivate an entrepreneurial atmosphere that facilitates youth employment and sustains economic development.

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