Society 5.0 and the Human-Centred Future of Higher Education

QS Higher Ed Summit: Middle East 2025

In April I had the privilege of visiting Kuwait and attending the **QS Higher Ed Summit: Middle East 2025**, which had the theme **"Society 5.0: Higher Education and Skills for a Human-Centred Future."**

There is an awful lot that the Australian higher education sector can learn from the work being done, and discussions being had, by universities and higher education institutes across the Middle East.

The Summit brought together university presidents, policymakers, and industry partners from across the Middle East to discuss how universities are adapting to rapid technological change while keeping human needs at the centre.

The professional regard and relationships conference delegates had with one another was evident. Combined with their generosity in engaging with newcomers this created a notably warm and candid tone for the event, with participants openly sharing both achievements and challenges.

Over the course of the two days, several important themes emerged that resonate strongly with global trends and offer food for thought for Australian institutions.

Here are a few reflections:

Society 5.0: A Human-Centred Vision for Education
The concept of *Society 5.0* was originally developed in Japan, and refers to the next stage of societal development – a "super-smart" society following the information age (Society 4.0). It's a concept I wasn't familiar with previously and one I haven't yet heard being discussed by leaders within the Australian tertiary sector.

Society 5.0 envisions a future where digital transformation (advanced AI, IoT, big data, robotics) is harnessed to balance economic advancement with the resolution of social challenges. Unlike previous industrial revolutions that prioritised efficiency and growth, Society 5.0 is explicitly human-centred: technology is there to serve humanity's needs, and progress is measured by inclusivity, well-being, and sustainability.

This vision formed the summit's central thread, reinforcing that technology and innovation should improve quality of life and uphold human values rather than undermine them.

Throughout the summit, speakers stressed that higher education has a pivotal role in realising Society 5.0. Universities are not only imparting cutting-edge digital skills, but also ensuring that graduates possess the ethical grounding, creativity, and sense of social responsibility to use those skills for human benefit. This means curricula and campus strategies must evolve in tandem with technological advances, always asking: How do we leverage tech to better serve students and society?

The Society 5.0 theme encouraged attendees to reimagine educational outcomes beyond just academic knowledge or economic productivity, towards fostering "wise," well-rounded graduates who can navigate and humanise a high-tech future.

Panel: Learning, Employment and Career: Setting up Success Before Orientation

This was one of the early Summit sessions and it shared a number of themes that were repeatedly returned to throughout the Summit – including the importance of holistic skill sets for employability. In addition to digital skills, universities in the region are focusing on strengthening students' soft skills (communication, teamwork, critical thinking) and adaptability.

Several Middle Eastern university leaders described initiatives to better integrate practical experience and career preparation into the student journey. For instance, one institution has introduced *"transition" foundation programs* for new students, aimed at building character, collaboration skills, and a mindset for independent learning before students even begin their core degree coursework. Others have overhauled their final-year curriculum to include extended industry placements or capstone projects co-designed with employers.

An illustrative outcome was shared: one university in the Gulf now requires a seven-month cooperative placement in industry prior to graduation – and as a result, nearly 90% of those students secure job offers directly through their placement experience.

By co-creating curricula with input from employers and exposing students to real-world work environments, universities ensure graduates are "work-ready" and often already vetted by companies, thereby easing the school-to-work transition.

Panel: Human-Centred Learning in a Tech-Driven World

This panel session focused on how teaching and learning can remain human-centred amid an influx of educational technology and AI tools.

Panellists acknowledged a tension in modern universities: on the one hand, students need to learn through failure and challenge to build resilience; on the other hand, institutions face pressure (e.g. from satisfaction surveys and rankings) to prevent failure and keep students comfortable. One speaker noted that "learning to fail safely" is essential training for the real world – and outlined how AI can assist in this. AI-powered tutoring systems and interactive courseware can provide individualised practice, allowing students to experiment, get answers wrong, and learn from those mistakes without the high stakes of formal assessment.

In this way, technology can create "safe fail" experiences that help students develop grit and problem-solving skills, rather than using technology only to make life easier. Building student resilience was highlighted as a key outcome, given that adaptability and perseverance are qualities increasingly sought by employers in a fast-changing job market.

Another aspect of human-centred learning is the focus on active engagement over passive attendance. Speakers shared strategies to boost student engagement: for instance, one university deploys regular low-stakes quizzes (facilitated by AI) to keep students interacting with material in real time. The same institution even limits the availability of recorded lectures online – rather than posting videos indefinitely, they make them accessible only for a short window. This counterintuitive measure encourages students to engage deeply with content on a schedule, discouraging procrastination or endless re-watching. It was noted that this approach particularly helps neuro-diverse and anxious learners who can be a significant minority of students (around 25% at the university in question) reporting mental health conditions and learning differences, and they can be hindered by the temptation to repeatedly review lectures. By structuring access, the university

guides these students to focus on *understanding* rather than overanalysing, thereby reducing stress and improving learning efficacy.

Such examples underscore a broader point: that even as digital tools have become integral to education, we should be ensuring their use is enhanced by cognitive science and an emphasis on student well-being.

Crucially, "human-centred" also means cultivating the human qualities of learners. A university leader from the Gulf region emphasised instilling *compassion* in students – not just technical know-how or even basic empathy, but active compassion as a graduate attribute. This reflects a philosophy that universities should produce not only competent professionals but also good citizens and ethical leaders.

Other Summit Takeaways:
A dominant theme at the summit was the need to redesign curricula and skill-development pathways in light of AI, automation, and the fast-evolving demands of the workforce. Across multiple sessions, participants highlighted that digital literacy and AI skills are becoming foundational for graduates of all disciplines – not just IT specialists.

An example came from the United Arab Emirates, where the government, in partnership with universities has established an AI and data science hub to develop educational modules that can be embedded into programs from engineering and business to arts and healthcare. The aim is to ensure students in every field will graduate with at least a basic competency in AI applications relevant to their profession.

The message is clear: in the era of ChatGPT and ubiquitous automation, every profession will use and be changed by technology, so higher education must ensure graduates are fluent in these technologies' use and implications. The idea of working collaboratively to ensure all graduates have the same key AI skills irrespective of the university they study with is commendable.

The crucial role of tertiary education in delivering economic visions and national strategies – summit participants frequently connected the educational reforms they were undertaking with the wider economic transformations in their countries. Many Middle Eastern nations are actively diversifying their economies (for example, moving away from oil dependence) and investing in innovation and knowledge industries. University leaders from the region spoke about feeling both responsibility and pressure to produce graduates who can drive economic innovation at home, rather than relying on imported talent. This has led to an era of ambitious curriculum transformation across many universities in the region with programs being updated to include *entrepreneurship, digital transformation, and interdisciplinary problem-solving.*

A much bigger transformation is underway in Kuwait with the establishment of Abdullah Al Salem University in 2019. Conceived and funded by the government, this new public university has been explicitly designed to foster *innovation in teaching, world-class research, and entrepreneurship.* It was born from a recognition that Kuwait's youthful population will need to drive economic diversification as oil revenues decline. The university's mission includes nurturing job creators and innovators who can sustain the nation's prosperity in the long term. The university's Vice Chancellor noted that this requires a cultural shift as well – encouraging parents and students to see

entrepreneurship and private-sector careers as attractive, whereas in the past a stable government job was the ultimate goal for many.

Another key topic of discussion was how universities can better support students' success and well-being in a time of change. The COVID-19 pandemic's aftereffects – especially on mental health and academic engagement – were mentioned as a continuing challenge worldwide. Middle Eastern institutions reported implementing a range of data-informed support systems to enhance student outcomes. One compelling example came from a university in the UAE that has developed an in-house AI-driven early warning system to identify students at risk of failure or dropping out. By tracking patterns such as low attendance, poor early assessments, or disengagement signals, the system flags at-risk students and triggers timely interventions. Importantly, these interventions include personalised mentoring and the results speak for themselves. The university saw 80% of flagged students improve their grades and remain in their programs.

One of the recurring conclusions across many sessions was that no single entity can solve the big challenges alone. High youth unemployment, skills gaps, and the need to shift economies toward new industries were on the minds of so many of the leaders who spoke at the Summit. They were frank that in some countries, youth unemployment remains extremely high (in some cases approaching 40%), and that this is a critical risk to social stability and growth. The consensus was that addressing such issues requires a tight triad collaboration between government, industry, and universities. Each has a distinct but interlocking role in preparing the next generation and enabling new economic opportunities:

Regional Innovations and Institutional Strategies: Lessons from the Middle East
Throughout the summit, leaders from various countries shared innovative approaches and reforms underway at their universities. Many of these initiatives were shaped by local contexts but carry inspiration for the global higher education community, including Australia. Notable examples include:

- **Lebanon – Resilience in Adversity:** University leaders from Lebanon (even with everything their country has faced in recent times and, as recently as the days after the Summit, their country again being bombed by the Israeli air force) talked with passion and determination about how their universities are doubling down on preparing students for the changing world of work. This includes updating curricula to align with global industry trends and focusing on practical skills that can help graduates secure opportunities at home or abroad. The mere fact that Lebanese universities continue to push forward with forward-looking educational strategies despite immense challenges was an inspiration and a reminder of the resilience and commitment of educators to their students' futures.
- **United Arab Emirates – Innovation Hubs:** The UAE demonstrated a high level of coordination between government and universities to drive a knowledge economy. Universities are positioned as engines of innovation and entrepreneurship in line with national development plans. For instance, Khalifa University (one of the country's leading science and technology institutions) has created a dedicated enterprise company to develop a *Science and Technology Park* – an innovation hub that incubates startups, supports deep-tech research commercialisation, and helps retain talented graduates within the country.
- **Jordan – Entrepreneurship Out of Necessity:** In Jordan, where natural resources are limited, higher education has inherently taken a more entrepreneurial and innovative approach than in other countries in the region. The University of Petra, for example, has oriented much of its programming toward start-up creation and innovation. Students and faculty are

encouraged to collaborate on solving real-world problems, often leading to marketable inventions and business ideas. A concrete anecdote shared was a student-faculty team that developed a small device which can instantly stop people from stuttering, highlighting how academic projects are translating into impactful products.

- **Oman – Balancing Innovation with Values:** Omani representatives at the summit emphasised that even as they pursue tech-driven education reforms, they are careful to embed local values and cultural identity in the learning experience. Oman's university leaders spoke of a philosophy where human values, ethics, and cultural heritage are at the heart of what universities do – ensuring that graduates are not only tech-savvy but also grounded in their community and values.

These regional snapshots collectively portray a Middle East higher education sector in flux and fuelled by innovation. From cross-sector partnerships in the UAE, to new entrepreneurial institutions in the Gulf, to survival-driven creativity in the Levant, there is a palpable energy for change.

I found both inspiration and practical ideas in these stories. The common thread was a willingness to break the mould – whether through new curricula, new institutions, or new cultural narratives about education's purpose – all in service of a future where universities are key contributors to economic vitality and social progress.

A few additional points:
1. At least two Middle Eastern higher education leaders who are driving change in their countries have strong Australian ties. For example, Prof. Talal Yusuf, an advisor to Iraq's higher education ministry, is also an Executive Dean at Aviation Australia, an Adjunct Prof. at CQU and completed his (first) doctorate at the University of Southern Queensland, and Prof. Hamdan Sulaiman Al Fazari, the Vice-Chancellor of Sohar University in Oman, also trained in Australia at Aviation Australia. With the strong focus on STEM and aviation in the Middle East, it seems quite likely that Australia may have educated a number more senior higher education figures in the Middle East, and we should be more cognisant of this and more purposeful in maintaining these relationships. In an increasingly globalised education landscape, Australia stands to gain by engaging with the bold ideas and experiments happening in regions like the Middle East, just as they have gained from Australian expertise in the past.
2. Immediately adjacent to the campus of the host university for the Summit (Gulf University for Science & Technology) is the 'Australian University Kuwait'. I have never previously heard of this university, but it has been in operation since 2004 and was one of the first private universities in Kuwait. It recognises CQU as one of its strategic partners, along with the City of Glasgow College.
3. Finally I met a number of wonderful people at the Summit but perhaps none more interesting and inspiring than Dr Tahira Hoke, Aide to the President, Evaluation and Accreditation Director, Sustainability Fellow of Prince Sultan University. And it turns out not only is she a deeply impressive, generous person, but she's also a reviewer on accreditation teams for the national quality assurance agencies in Saudi Arabia (NCAAA) and Dubai (CAA), (and has family in the Blue Mountains). Sometimes the world is very small when you start chatting to the person sitting next to you on the shuttle bus to a conference…