



Back to School Summit 2026

Insights pack

Back to School Summit 2026

The **Back to School Summit 2026** convenes university leaders, industry experts and government officials in **New York City** on **September 15-17 2026**. This year's Summit will foster transformative discussions on the talent, ideas, and innovations shaping the future of education, skills, and workforce development.

This Insights Pack explores complementary insights on the topics and themes explored across the Summit, in panel discussions, roundtables, workshops and presentations.

At QS, our trusted higher education data powers rankings, insights, and strategic planning worldwide, enabling university partners to take a data-driven approach with billions of data points generated through our global network of employers, academics and prospective students.

Key insights and data points

- In the new frontier of global competition, talent will be defining skills, economic values and mobility, and AI readiness will determine who leads and who lags
- While the US may likely see a decline in overseas students, it is still well positioned to engage with emerging markets like Vietnam, Nepal, and Ghana
- Gen Z graduates and future leaders must be equipped with both the technical and human skills to thrive in the AI-shaped workforce
- With stronger coordination between government, industry and higher education, academic excellence can translate into economic value as evident by markets like Germany, the US, Switzerland and Denmark (QS World Future Skills Index 2027)
- Problem solving has the biggest skill gap score globally, followed by communication, and critical thinking skills, indicating that human skills are still valuable in an AI-driven workforce
- Hiring in the age of AI has brought more emphasis on skills, both technical and human, and higher education must respond accordingly

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The New Frontier: Defining the Next Decade of Global Opportunity

The next decade offers a rare opportunity to reimagine higher education, industry, and government around a shared ambition: a race for talent. As AI becomes part of the infrastructure for learning and working, it will create not only new productivity models, but also new possibilities for more inclusive and adaptive systems.

We will also see pressure building for youth-rich regions to convert population growth into economic and social opportunities. Meanwhile, as skills evolve faster than traditional pathways can keep pace, employability will depend more on how quickly talents can learn, adapt, and contribute.

In this changing landscape, mobility becomes a powerful force of progress. The institutions that thrive will be those that see talent not as something to be managed, but as something to be nurtured and scaled.

AI as infrastructure

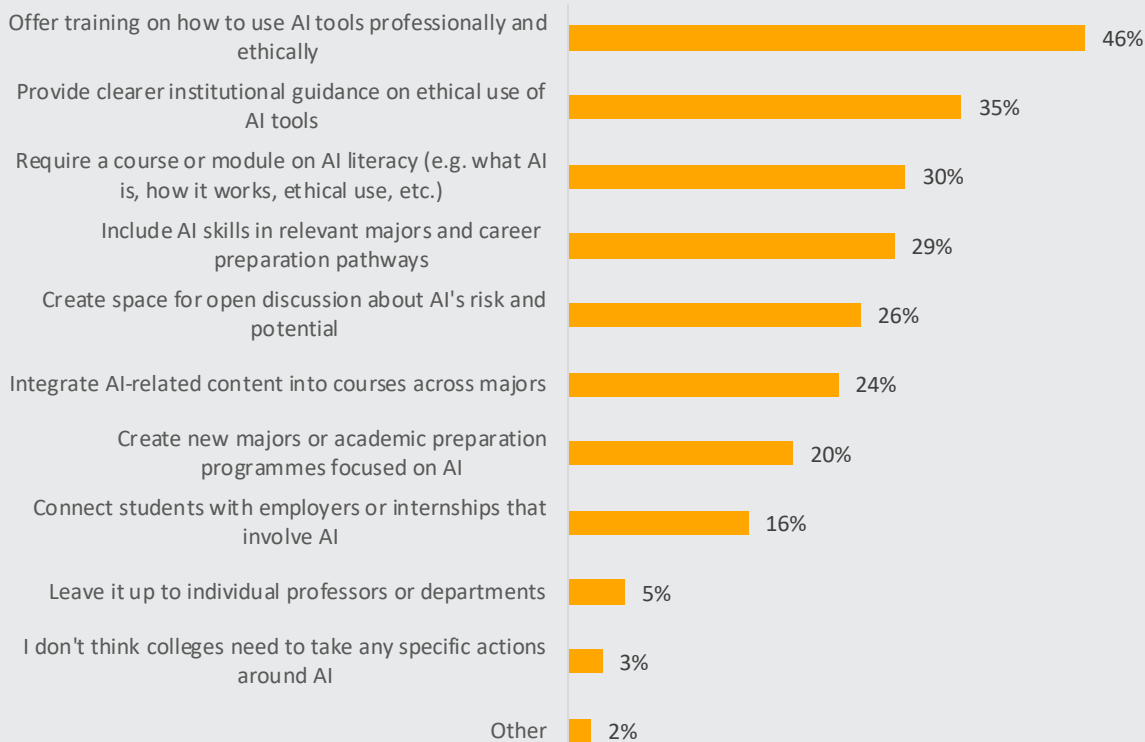
AI is becoming a core operating layer across teaching, assessment and student support and capacity is being built through partnerships, national initiatives and the smart use of data. HolonIQ by QS' 2026 Annual Education Outlook Report highlights South Korea's and India's efforts in testing tutor-style AI tools to see how structured practice can scale under strong oversight, as well as the tractions gained by K-12 solutions such as MagicSchool AI for helping teachers and students use AI safely. Across higher education, AI is

becoming central to improving student experience, driving research innovation, and increasing institutional efficiency, all underpinned by a commitment to ethical and responsible implementation.

As Generative AI becomes more embedded in the workforce, institutions must equip graduates not just to use AI, but to work with it responsibly and effectively. The QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025 reveals that the strongest signal amongst students is the demand for practical, professional AI training, with 46% wanting help using AI tools ethically. This suggests students value immediate, applied capabilities and expect universities to translate AI from concept into employable skill.

There are also needs for guardrails and curriculum integration. More than one third want clearer guidance, while around 30% of students want AI literacy as a required module. Notably, 29% want AI skills embedded in majors and career pathways, indicating demand for AI as a cross-disciplinary graduate competency.

What do you think your college or university should do to help students prepare for a future shaped by Generative AI?



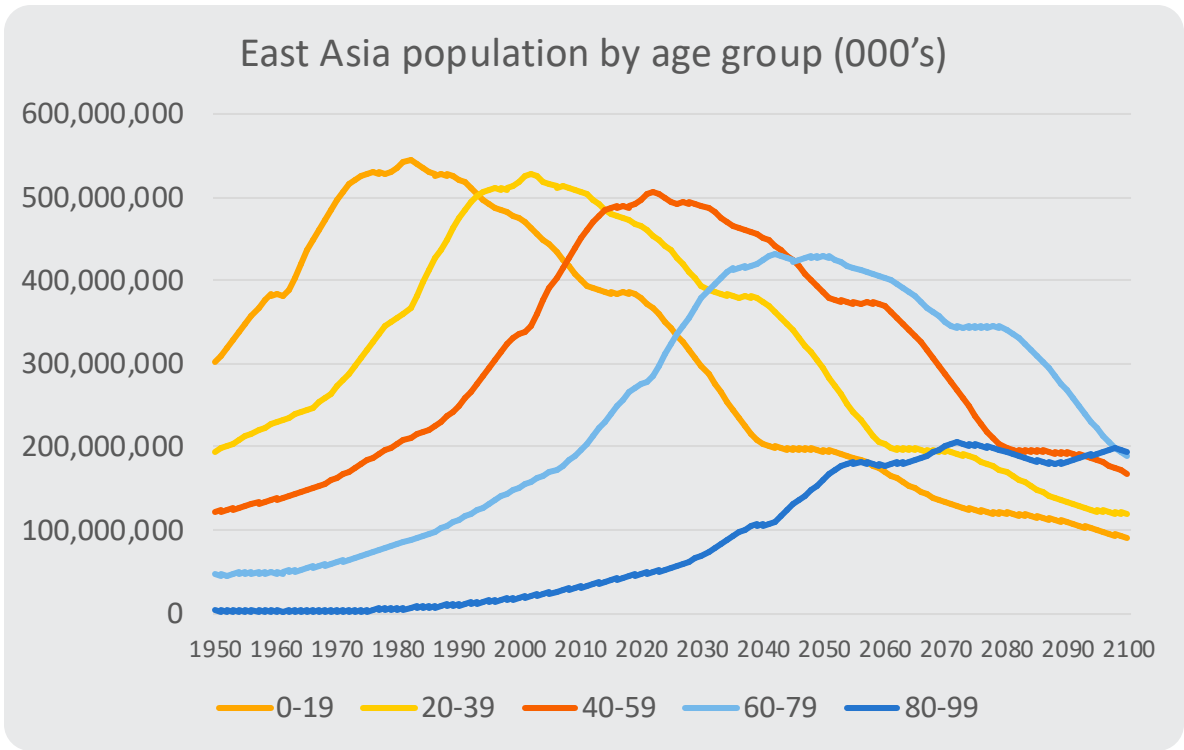
Source: QS Generative AI Student Pulse Survey 2025

The next talent powerhouses may be not be the traditional ones

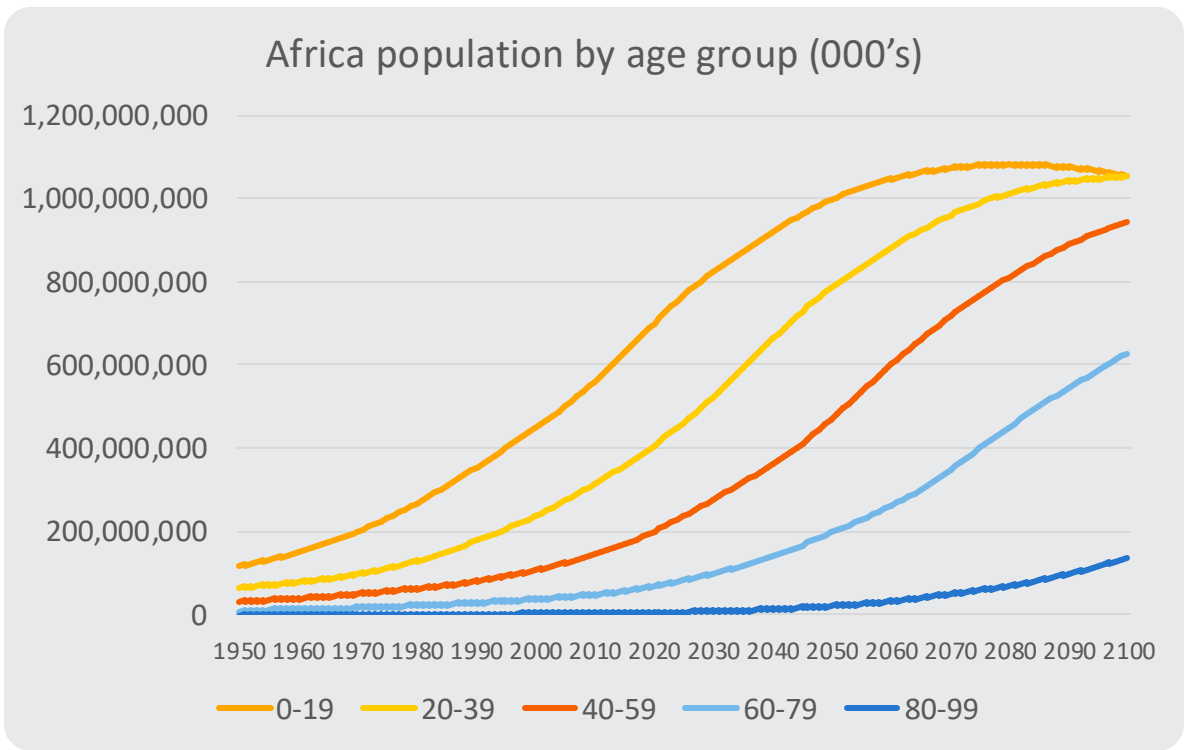
As the continent looks to host more than 670 million population with post-secondary education qualification, Africa is arguably the next talent powerhouse, while countries like India, Pakistan and Indonesia are also in the mix.

At the same time, East Asia is on track to become one of the world's most highly educated regions, with more than 80% of its population projected to hold a degree by the end of the century.

For policy makers, the challenge will not simply be expanding access to education but creating enough job opportunities to absorb this rising pool of talent.



Source: UN Population Projection and Wittgenstein Centre for Human Demography



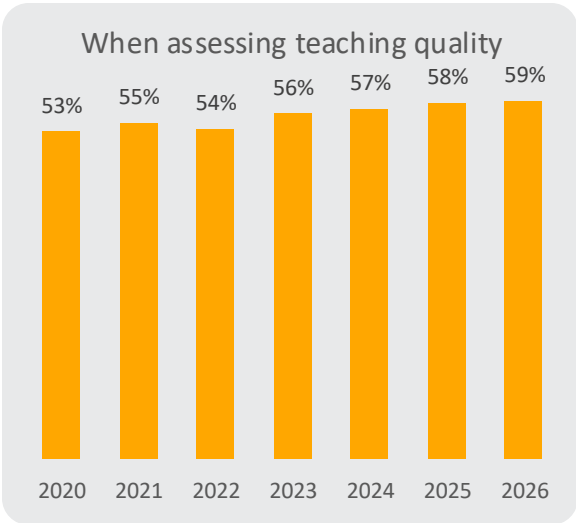
Source: UN Population Projection and Wittgenstein Centre for Human Demography

The next global talent map is concentrating in the Global South. In South Asia, nearly 100,000 young people enter the workforce each day, and the region is projected to account for more than 26% of the global workforce by 2050. The UAE has already demonstrated how digital infrastructure can accelerate education system transformation, with near-universal internet access supporting responses to evolving economic demands.

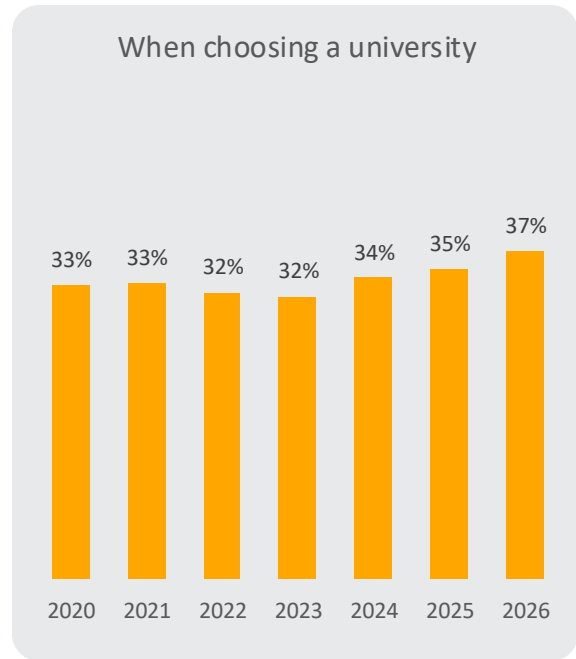
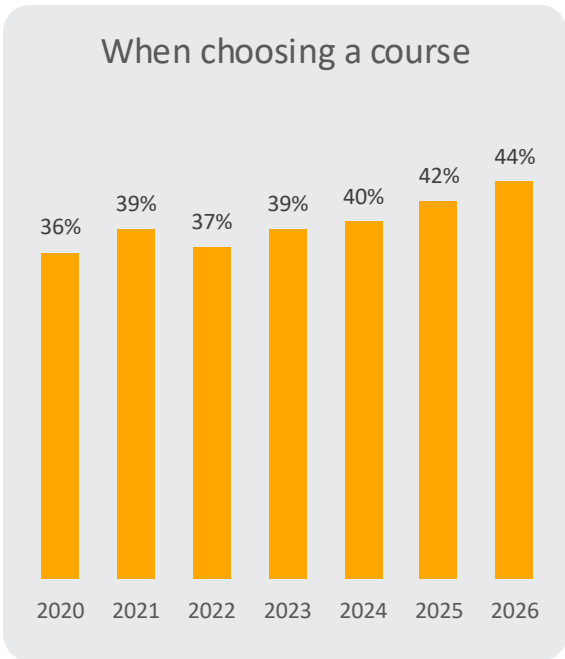
Furthermore, across Southeast Asia, a young population is creating a strong demographic dividend, with post-secondary attainment expected to double by 2060. In Nigeria, growth in the school-age population will make connectivity, skills development, and employability critical priorities.

Mobility as a strategy

Beyond costs, quality of education, and a sense of welcome, internationally mobile students are placing high importance on the graduate employment rate. When assessing a university's teaching quality, they are increasingly assigning more weight to employability as a measure of quality. Similarly, a high graduate employment rate is growing in importance as a factor when they choose a course and a university over the years.



Source: QS International Student Survey



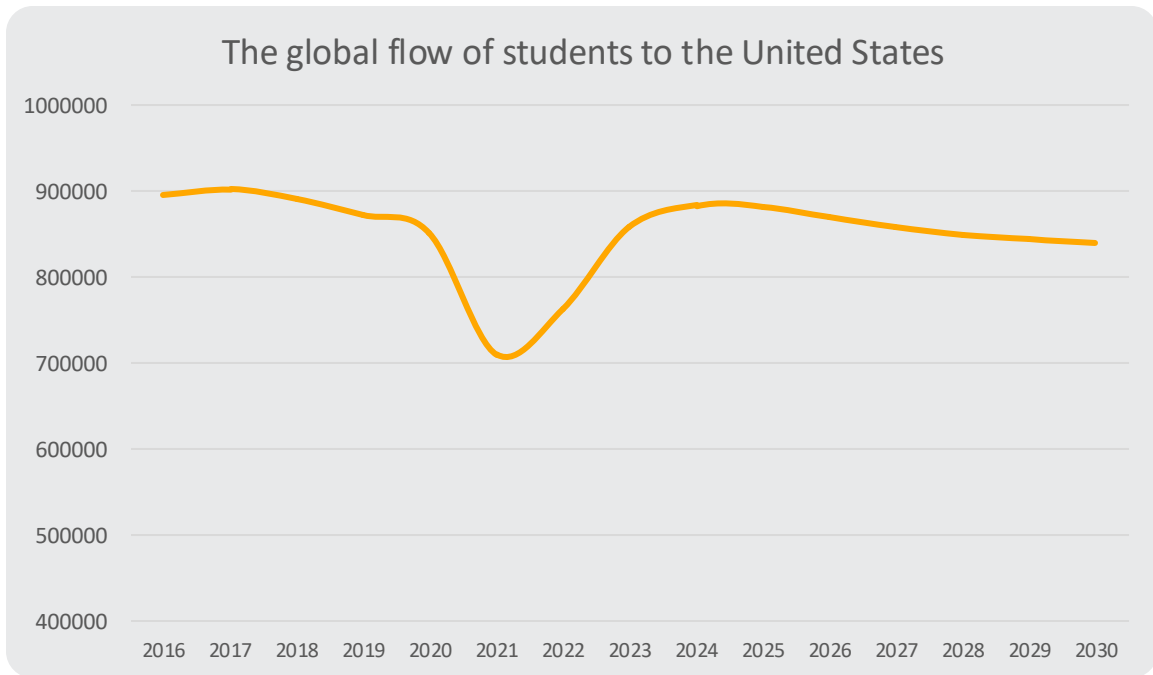
Source: QS International Student Survey

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Global Student Flows: Is the US still winning?

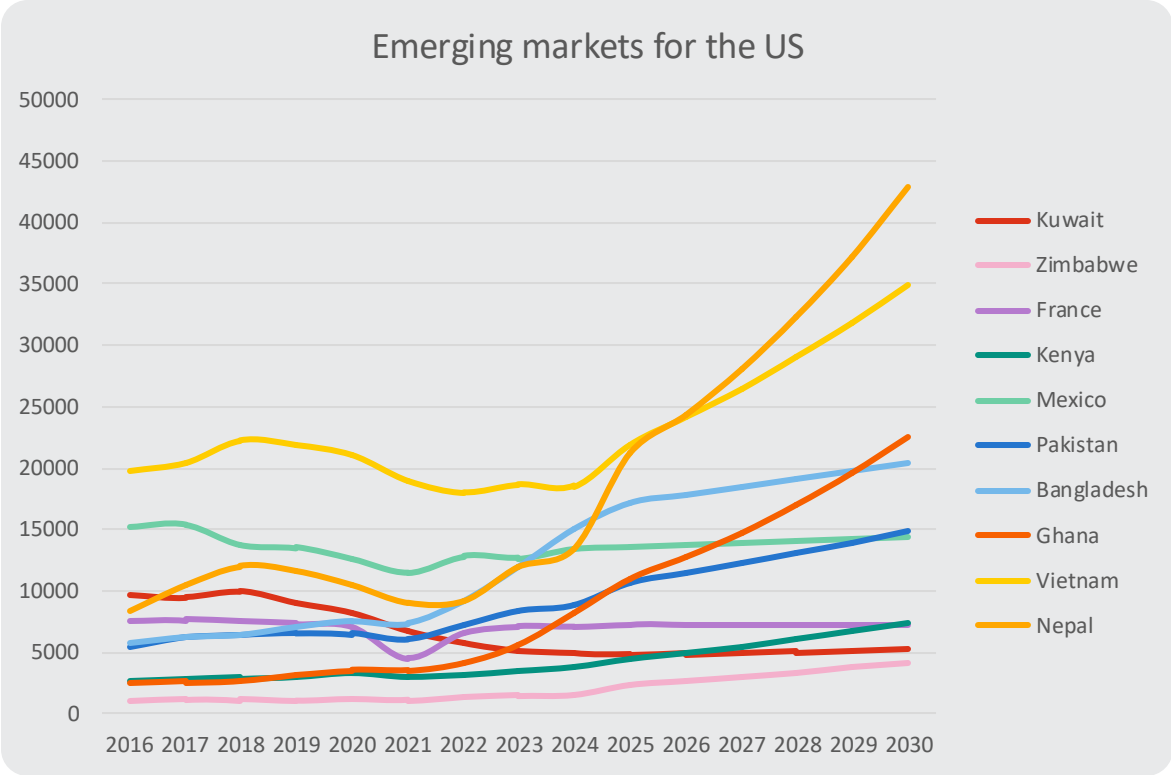
After a strong recovery post-pandemic, the US is likely to see a decline in overseas students, according to the QS Global Student Flows projection. The market was already slowing before the pandemic, with overseas student numbers declining by 1.3% in the run-up to 2020. This was followed by a further 5.3% fall during the pandemic, before a recovery period in which numbers grew by 7.6%. However, the outlook still points to a 2% decline in international students by 2030.

The projected decline is potentially driven by shortfalls from two of the biggest source markets for the US: China and India. The US must start identifying more growth markets, looking at other South Asian source markets like Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and building relationships with Vietnam, as well as African markets like Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Ghana.



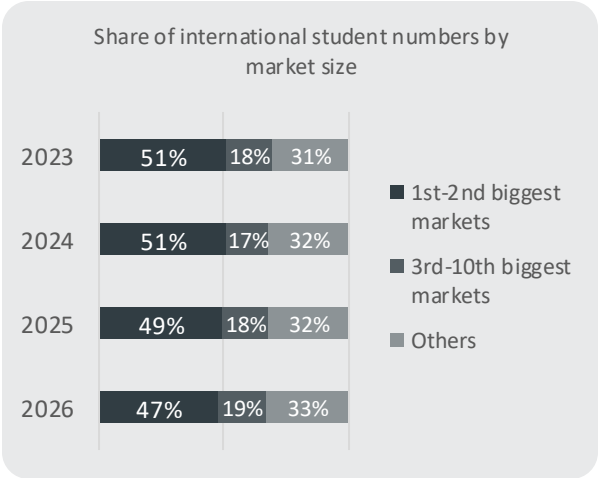
Source: QS Global Student Flows

Nepal is projected to bring in the biggest number of overseas students to the US by 2030 with over 40,000 students. This is followed by Vietnam (almost 35,000 students by 2030). Ghana, on the other hand, posts the biggest growth of internationally mobile students to the US in the last three years, with 22.3% CAGR. The market is also third in terms of projected growth.

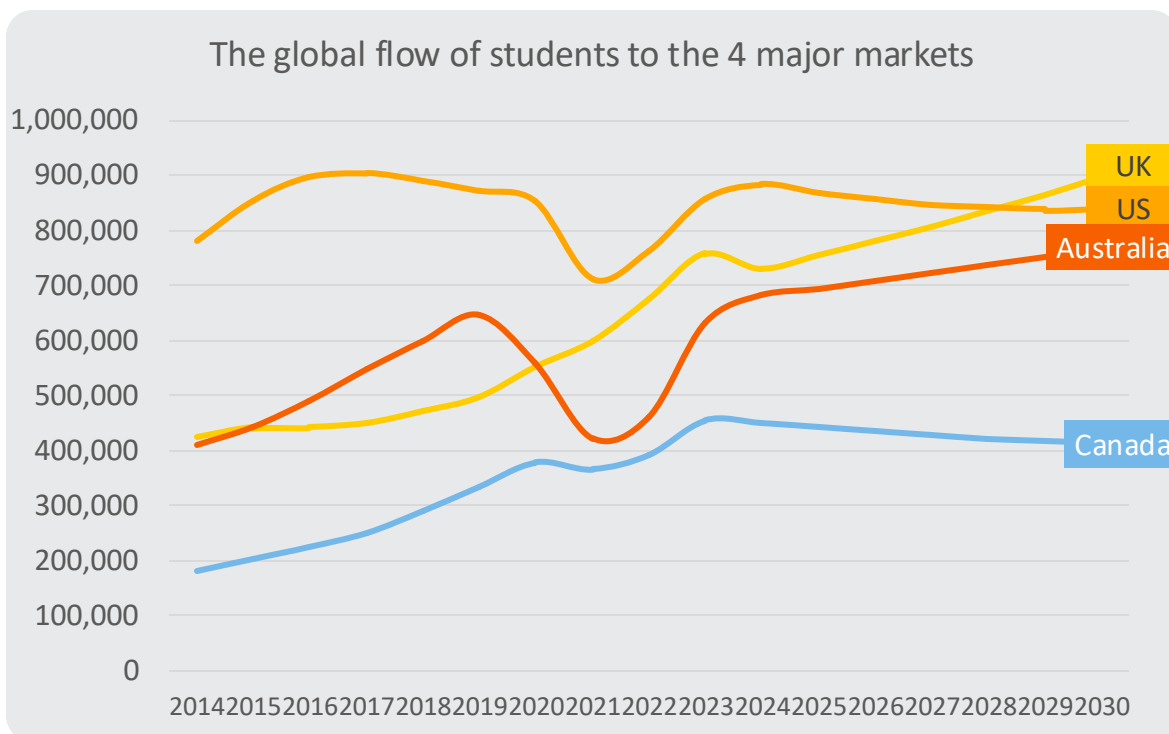


Source: QS Global Student Flows

In fact, the United States' reliance on China and India will erode further. In 2023, the two biggest markets to the US held the share of around 51% of the total international student numbers. By 2026, the percentage has dropped to 47% while mid-sized markets, from the third biggest to the 10th biggest, continue to improve in market share.



Source: QS Global Student Flows



Source: QS Global Student Flows (excluding OPT)

Looking at the forecast until 2030, the UK is projected to overtake the US to become the most popular destination for international students.

While the US is still well-positioned to deepen its reach across a broad set of emerging markets, it must also engage now through building institutional relationships, expanding recruitment channels, and creating clearer

pathways that support student mobility over time.

With regards to attracting international students to the US, the country's institutions must know the key factors for these students when they are choosing the US as a study destination.

Choosing a course

1. Affordable fee options
2. It offers high-quality teaching
3. High graduate employment rate

Choosing a country

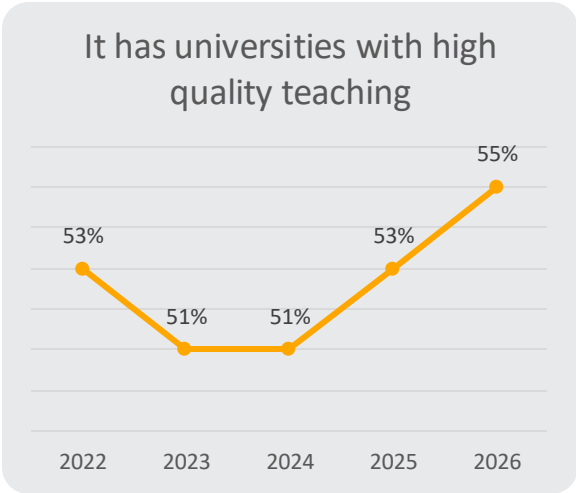
1. Welcoming to international students
2. Universities with high-quality teaching
3. Access to build network

Choosing a university

1. It offers scholarships
2. Welcoming to international students
3. It offers high-quality teaching

Whether choosing a course, university or country, international prospective students to the US prioritize teaching quality. They place high importance on a course that can provide them a quality teaching and learning experience. They also prefer to go to the country whose universities offer high-quality teaching.

In fact, preference to study in country that has universities that can provide quality teaching gets more prominent over the years.



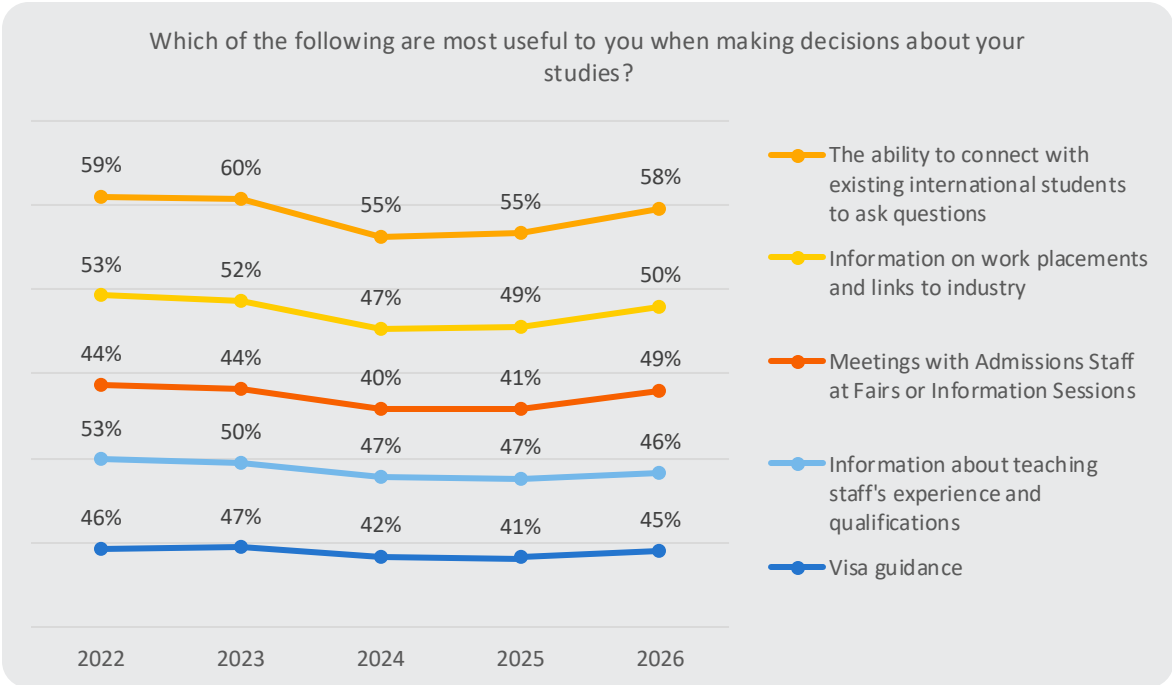
Source: QS International Student Survey 2022-2026 (Question: What five things that are most important to you when choosing a country to study in; Base: Interested in the US)

Prospective international students also want to feel welcome in a country that they choose to study abroad in. The US’ restrictive immigration posture can have an impact on perception, so it is important for the country to continue to communicate clear policy signals and consistently sharing positive international student experience.

According to the latest QS International Student Survey, connection is important for international students considering the US as a

study destination. They want to connect with existing international students so that they can ask questions about their experience (58%).

There is also a growing interest among prospective students in wanting to speak to Admissions staff at fairs or information sessions, further indicating the importance of connection for this cohort.



Source: QS International Student Survey 2022-2026 (Base: Interested in the US)

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Gen Z: The Next Generation of Leaders — or a Generation Left Behind?

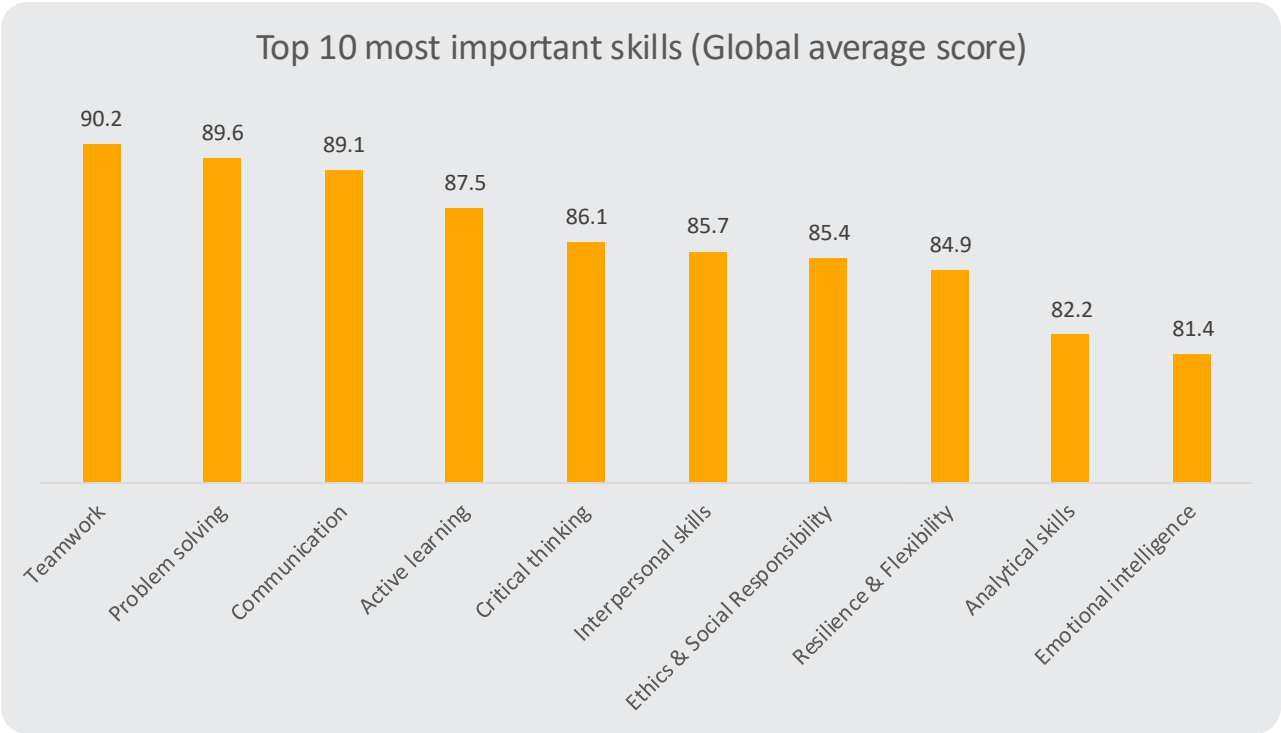
Redefining leadership for an AI-shaped world

Gen Z is coming of age in a world where AI and digital tools are no longer add-ons to work and life, but they are now part of the environment in which they live. As digital and AI natives, many are already comfortable navigating new technologies, but leadership in this era will require more than digital fluency. Gen Z leaders will need to combine that comfort with AI with human skills like teamwork and critical thinking.

teamwork is the most important graduate skill perceived by employers globally. This is followed by problem solving skill and communication.

As AI continues to reshape the future workforce, the ability to work in teams, solve problems, communicate clearly, learn continuously, and think critically will become the qualities that distinguish effective leaders from merely tech-savvy ones.

According to the QS Global Employer Survey,



Source: QS Global Employer Survey 2026

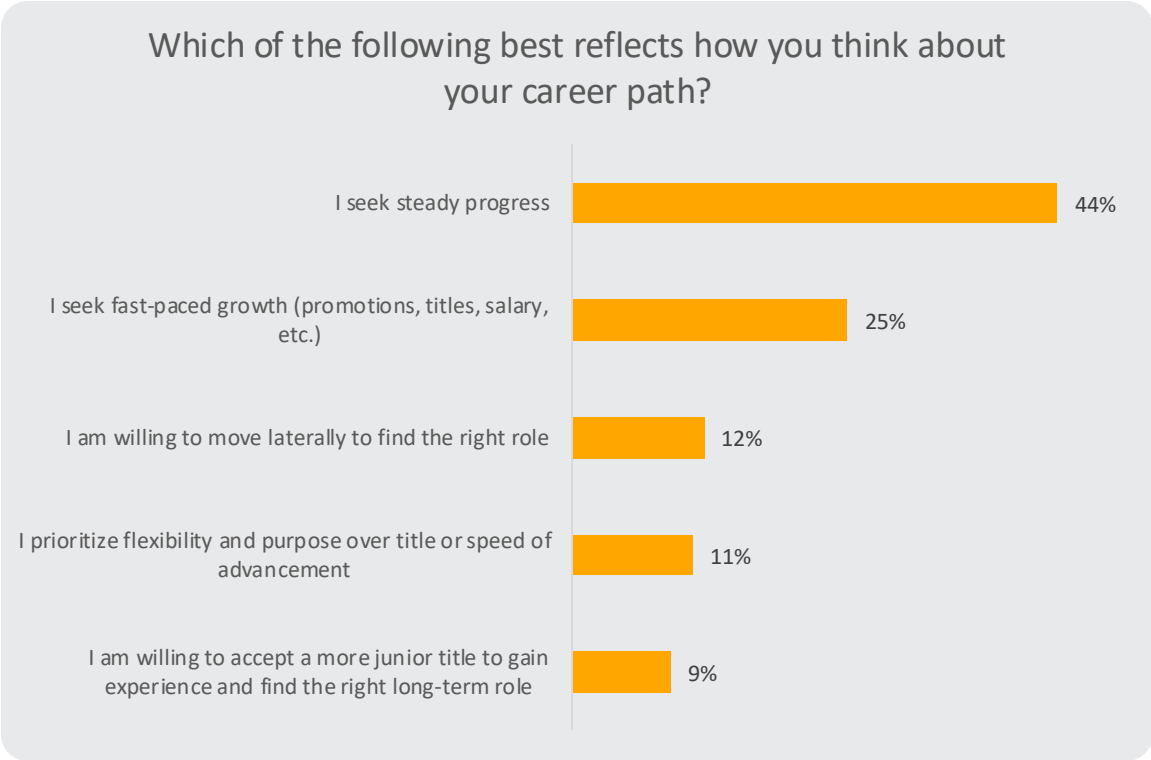
Bridging the gap between education and future skills

A recent survey on Gen Z and Millennials by Deloitte on workforce reveals that almost half of Gen Z seeks steady progress in their career path (44%). This suggests that they prefer a more sustainable career development. In an AI-driven workforce, where roles and required skills are changing quickly, this answer may reflect Gen Z's more pragmatic side., choosing to continuously build relevant skills to achieve longer-term success.

By contrast, the 25% who seek fast-paced growth point to a meaningful segment that remains motivated by promotions and rewards. This cohort is likely to be more motivated to

learn quickly, picking up new skills required by the ever-changing workforce, as well as lead through those changes.

Gen Z graduates and future leaders are likely to view careers as something to build intentionally, valuing both growth and resilience in a world where AI is reshaping what advancement looks like.



Source: Deloitte 2026 Gen Z and Millennial Survey

Ensuring that the education system is aligning with employer demands so that a country can equip their future graduates and leaders with the necessary skills required by employers and the industry is crucial.

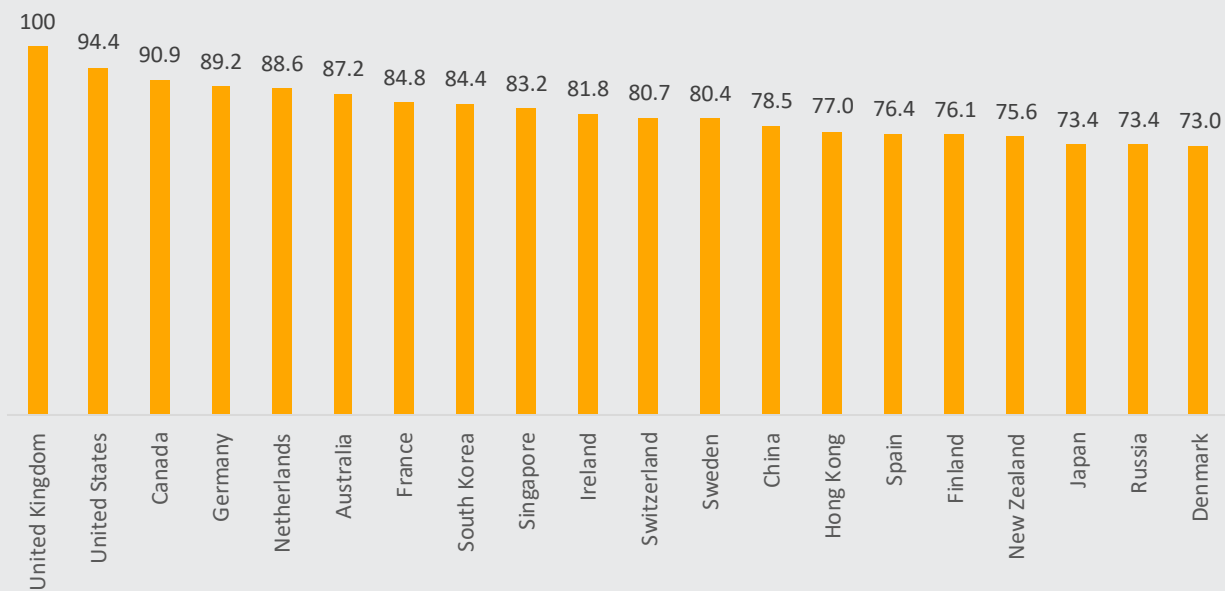
This is what the Skills Fit indicator of the QS World Future Skills Index quantifies. Understanding which country’s universities are providing graduates with the skills that employers need is key to understanding a nation’s future readiness.

According to the Index, a country with a high Skills Fit score has an education system that is well-aligned with the needs of industry and employers, helping close the skills gap. The latest Skills Fit rankings from the QS World Future Skills Index 2027 point to a European

dominance, led by the UK with a score of 100. With five of the 10 economies coming from Europe – including Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Ireland – the data suggests stronger integration between education, industry, and applied skills development within these economies, particularly in increasingly popular sectors like AI, digital and sustainability.

The presence of major Asian economies like South Korea (8th), Singapore (9th), China (13th), Hong Kong (14th), and Japan (18th), shows that the region is also making progress in aligning their education systems with evolving workforce needs.

Top 20 economies in Skills Fit Index



Source: QS World Future Skills Index 2027

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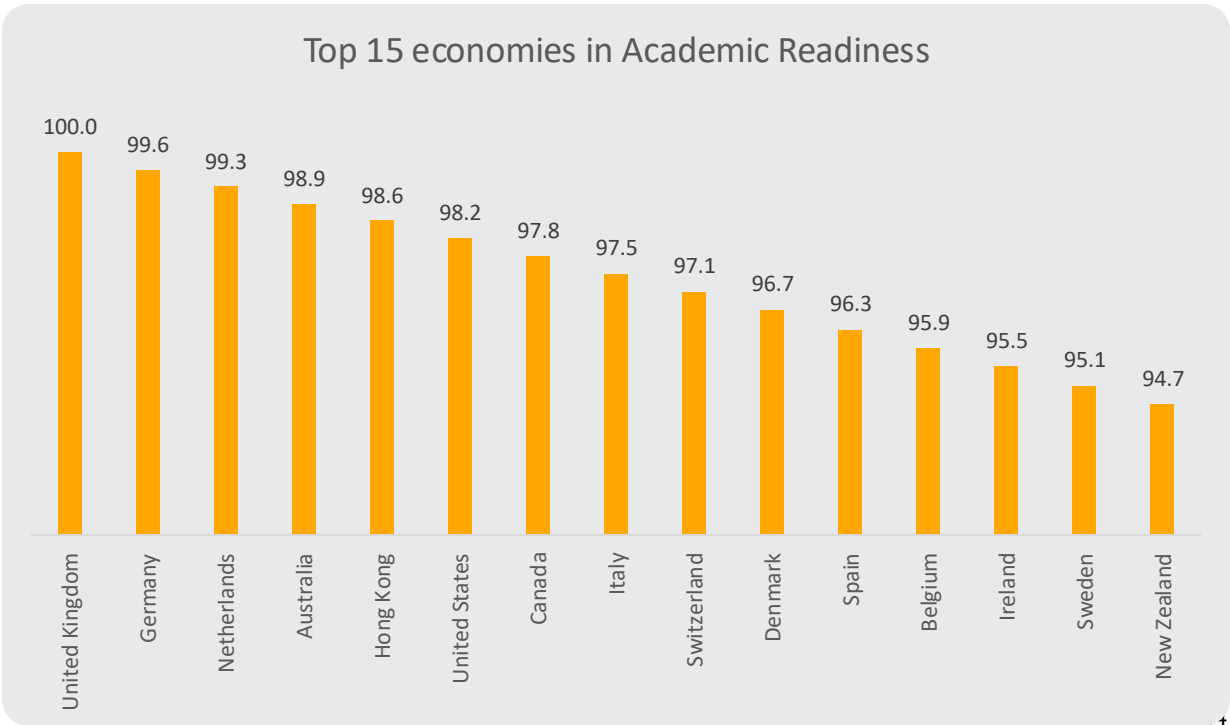
The Human Capital Imperative: Why Education Is the Highest-Return Investment in Economic Growth

The Academic Readiness indicator from the QS World Future Skills Index measures how well a country is positioned to deliver the skills necessary for future industries. It is important for a country’s higher education system to support high-quality learning and skills development.

Countries that excel in AI, digital, and green subject areas are better prepared for the evolving job market. These subjects are critical for future economic development, as they enable innovation in sectors that will dominate in the coming decades.

By far, Europe dominates this indicator, where six of the top 10 economies – led by the UK, followed by Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, and Denmark – are from the region. This suggests that the education systems from these countries are relatively advanced in preparing students for AI, digital, and green sectors.

Top 15 economies in Academic Readiness



Source: QS World Future Skills Index 2027

As economies pivot towards AI, digital, and green industries, higher education is emerging as a powerful growth lever. But is the link between Academic Readiness and Economic Transformation (how effectively economies can convert skills into productive growth) strong?

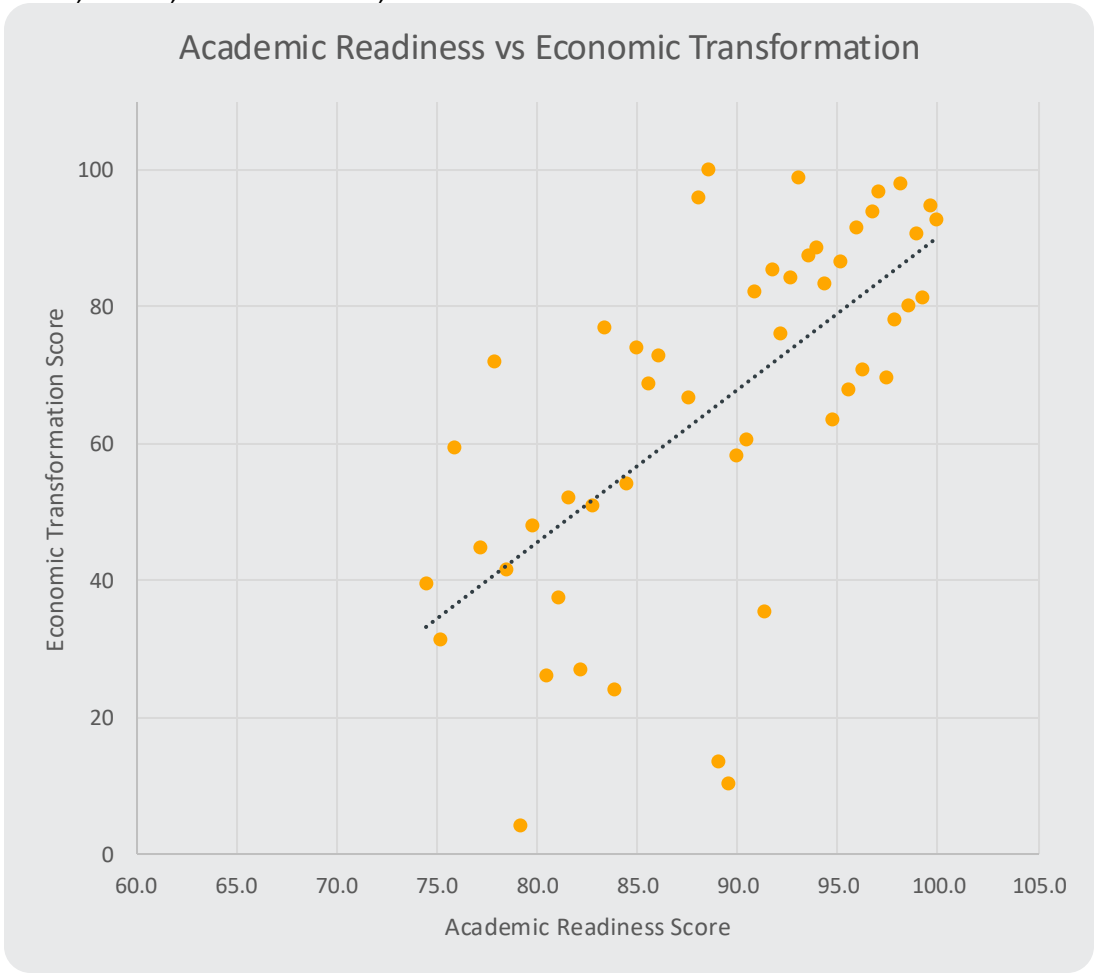
Economies like Germany, United States, Switzerland, and Denmark show the strongest alignment between Academic Readiness and Economic Transformation, suggesting that when higher education systems are closely connected to industry demand, skills can be converted into productive economic activity.

rank high on Academic Readiness but lag more on Economic Transformation, pointing to a gap between talent production and translating that into economic value.

South Korea and Japan perform strongly on Economic Transformation despite weaker Academic Readiness, reflecting a broader pattern, in which academic excellence provides the foundation, but other factors like industrial policy can drive economic growth.

Stronger coordination between government, industry and higher education must be established to bring these factors together.

By contrast, the UK, the Netherlands, and Canada



Source: QS World Future Skills Index 2027

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The Human Advantage: Who You Are, Not What You Know

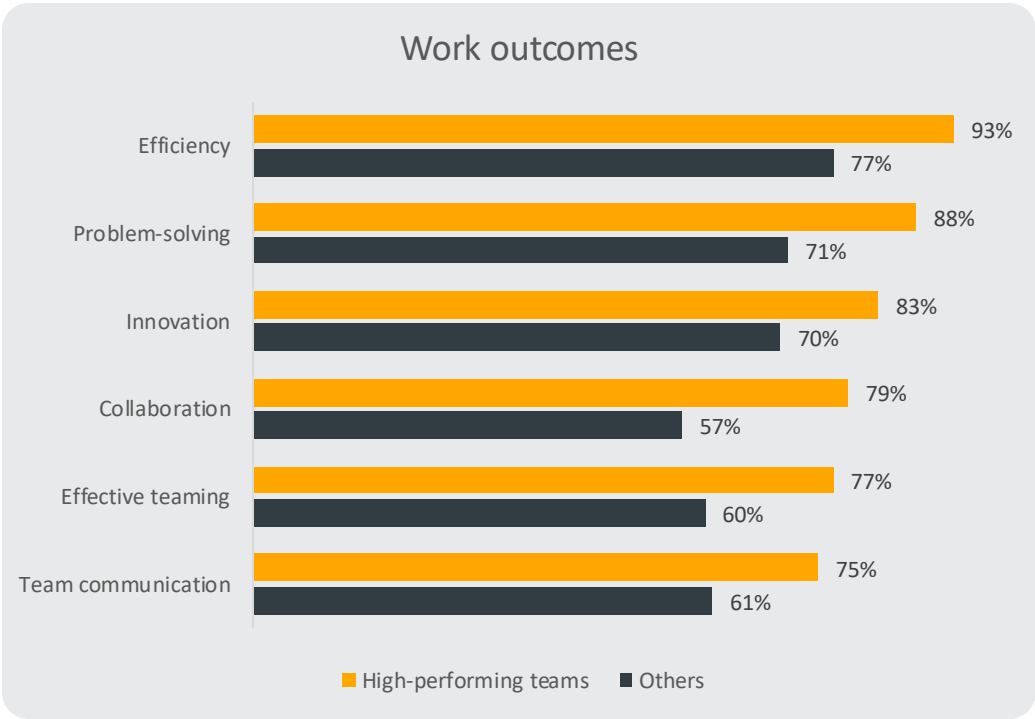
As AI increasingly automates work, the skills long nurtured by arts and humanities education are gaining new strategic value. Creativity, critical thinking, and ethical judgement are becoming essential differentiators in a rapidly changing labor market.

Deloitte’s report on the impact of human skills in AI-driven workplace reveals that the traditionally soft skills help improve high-performing teams.

The findings suggest that in an AI-driven workplace, high-performing teams gain an edge not just from using AI more often (78% vs 54%),

but from combining it with strong human skills. Across every measure, these teams report better work outcomes than their peers: efficiency is higher (93% vs 77%), problem solving is stronger (88% vs 71%), collaboration is more likely to succeed (79% vs 57%), and communication is more effective (75% vs 61%).

Teams that excel are those that can work well with AI and with one another. In practice, this means that skills like teamwork and critical thinking are becoming more important as AI adoption rises.

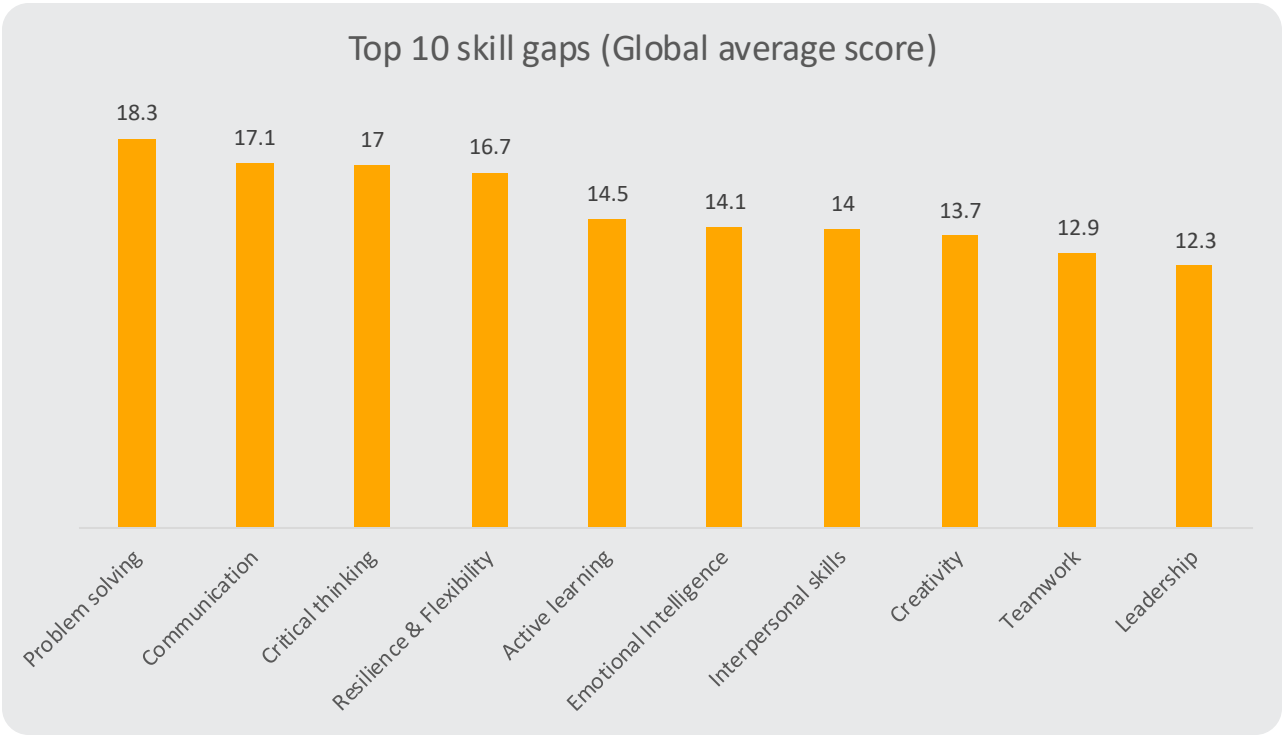


Source: Human Skills Drive High-Performing Teams in the AI Era Survey 2026 (N: 1,394)

The QS Global Employer Survey reveals that problem solving has the biggest skill gap score across the countries (18.3), suggesting that employers see this as the most critical skill missing. Furthermore, strong communication (17.1) remains a differentiator as work becomes more digital and cross-functional. Graduates need to clearly explain ideas, align stakeholders, and collaborate across teams and tools effectively.

Another area with a big skill gap is critical thinking (17). As AI increases access to information, the ability to evaluate, question, and contextualize becomes more valuable, which is why employers deem this skill as important. Rapid technological change across industries also means that employers need graduates that can adapt.

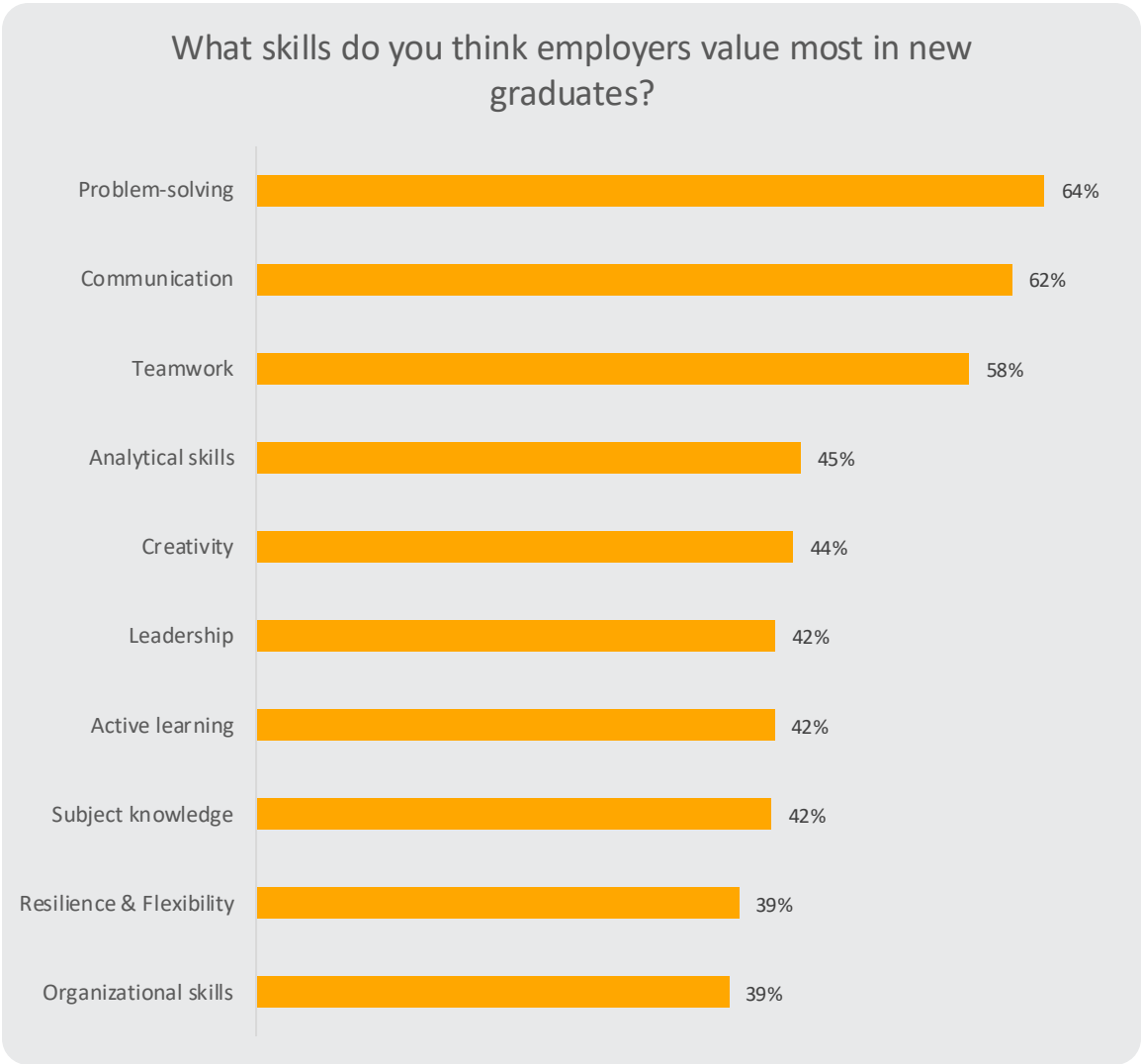
Human skills are indeed increasing in demand. Institutions that align curricula with these skills – from prioritizing applied, real-world problem solving to emphasizing interpersonal skills to developing more agile learning environments – will better prepare graduates for AI-shaping industries.



Source: QS Global Employer Survey 2026

Looking at this through the lens of prospective international students, the overlap of important skills is strong. According to the QS International Student Survey 2026, Problem solving ranks highest at 64%, followed by communication (62%) and teamwork (58%), suggesting students understand that collaboration and clear expression matter in an AI-driven workplace.

Students also think that employers place high importance on analytical skills (45%) and creativity (44%), indicating original thinking is as powerful a differentiator as technical reasoning. Overall, this points to an interesting decision-making pattern. With employability in mind, students are likely to favor courses or programs that build these transferable skills alongside subject expertise.



Source: QS International Student Survey 2026

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The New Talent Playbook: Hiring in the Age of AI

Hiring for capabilities instead of credentials

In the AI era, hiring is gradually shifting away from a reliance on traditional credentials as employers are placing greater weight on demonstrated skills. This means they are looking for a combination of job specific technical skills and the human skills that remain difficult to automate.

According to the QS World Future Skills Index, the United States, India, and Mexico are some of the top-performing countries in the Future of Work indicator. It is an indicator that measures the readiness of a country’s job market to recruit for the most in-demand skills of the future. These economies have business within the AI, digital, and green sectors that are ready to hire skilled graduates and further innovate.

Employers from these countries, across the board look for graduates that possess strong problem-solving, teamwork, critical thinking, and

communication skills. These are skills that are increasingly growing in value, especially in today’s AI-shaped workforce landscape.

As labor-market demand shifts toward roles where human expertise remains central, the competitive advantage of economies and higher education institutions will depend on how effectively they prepare learners for AI-enabled work.

Higher education institutions must respond by becoming more skills-oriented and more adaptive. They should continue to strengthen applied learning and promote more cross-discipline collaborations and treat learning and upskilling as continuous.

United States

1. Problem solving
2. Critical thinking
3. Teamwork
4. Communication
5. Active learning

India

1. Critical thinking
2. Teamwork
3. Problem solving
4. Active learning
5. Communication

Mexico

1. Problem solving
2. Teamwork
3. Critical thinking
4. Communication
5. Ethics & Social Responsibility

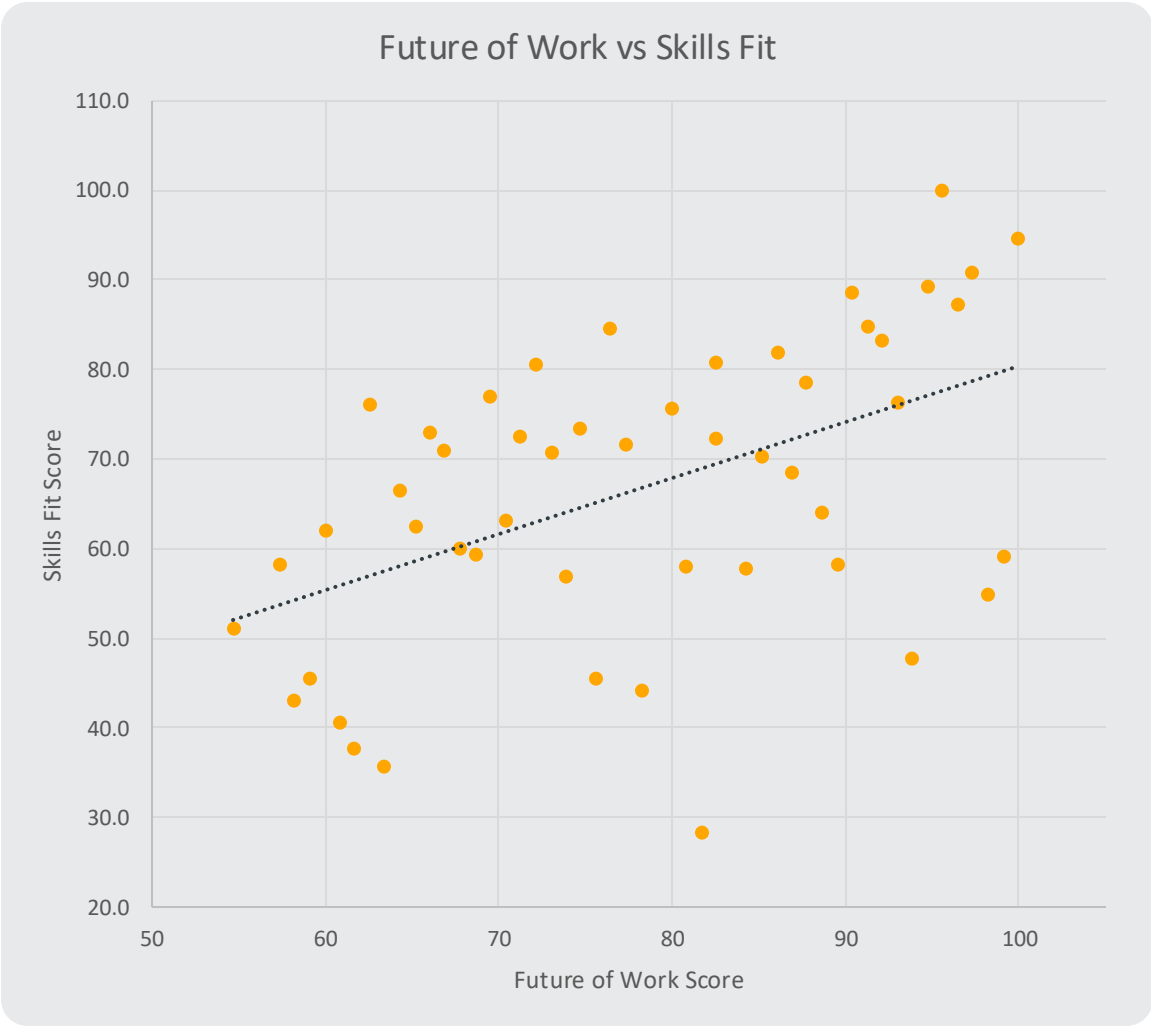
Can a country's education system produce graduates that can meet the demand of future industries particularly within the AI, digital and green sectors?

Economies including India, Mexico, the Philippines, and Spain show a clear gap between labor-market demand and skill alignment. Their strong potential to recruit graduates into AI, digital, and green jobs is not matched by equally strong Skills Fit scores, suggesting that job creation is outpacing the supply of work-ready talent.

The UK presents the opposite pattern. Its strong

Skills Fit score indicates that higher education is well positioned to produce graduates for future industries, even though its Future of Work score is comparatively lower.

The correlation is clear: education systems can prepare students for AI by embedding digital, technical, and problem-solving skills into learning, while AI's rapid growth can help higher education stay current through partnerships, placements, and real-world projects that keep curricula aligned with market demand.



Source: QS World Future Skills Index 2027

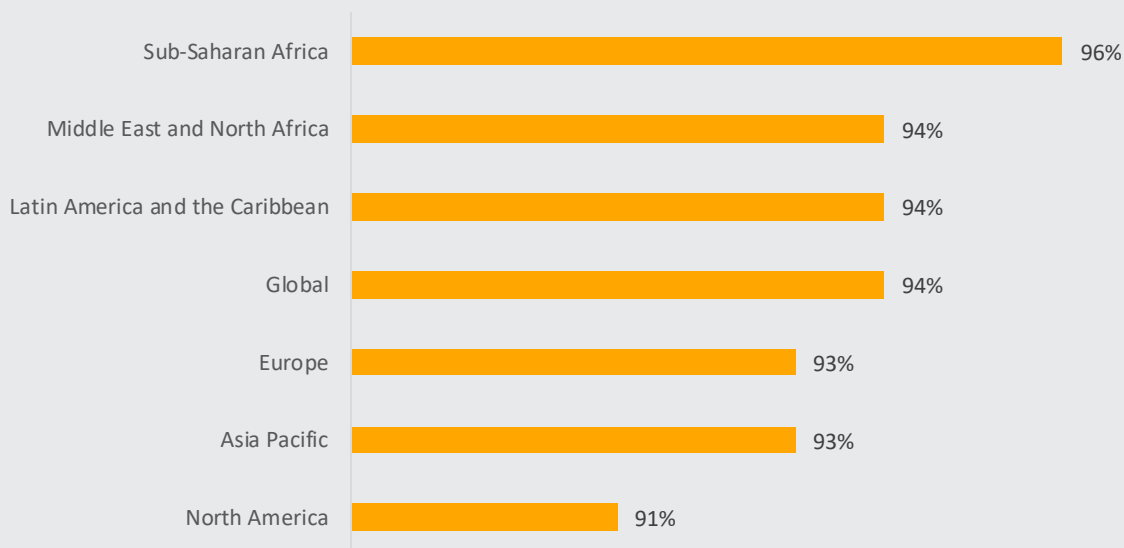
Companies are building talent, not just buying it

As companies face accelerating skill change, especially from AI and automation, many are building talent from within by either promoting internal mobility, embedding learning pathways, or encouraging reskilling and upskilling through programs like micro-credentials.

Higher education institutions must be front and centre during this shift towards skills-based pathways. The goal is to provide students and graduates with flexible and accessible options for them to upskill or re-skill as they progress in their careers. Micro-credentials and lifelong learning can be an answer to that.

The 2025 Coursera Micro-credentials Impact Report reveals that learners seek to acquire micro-credentials to stay ahead in their careers., reflecting the huge demand for micro-credentials amongst students and working graduates.

Micro-credentials help build essential career skills



Source: Coursera Micro-credentials Impact Report 2025

Majority of respondents also believe that once they're employed, earning a micro-credential will help them succeed or remain competitive in a changing work environment. This suggests significant opportunities for universities to collaborate with industry partners, governments, and technology firms to design programs that align curricula and assessment with labor market needs.

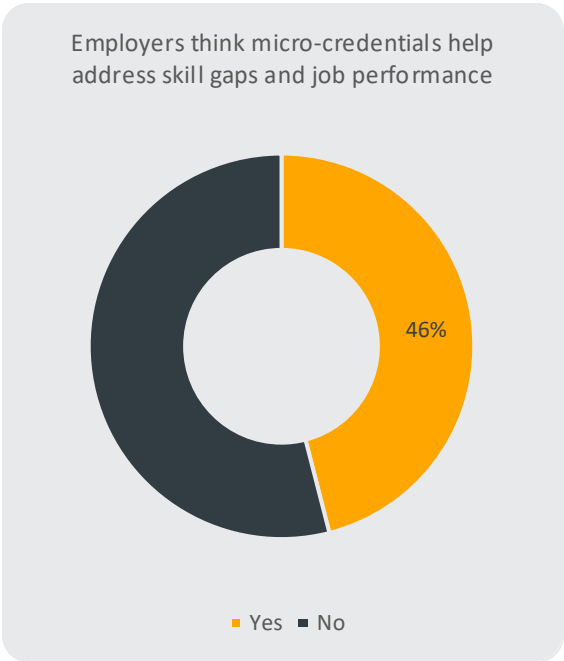
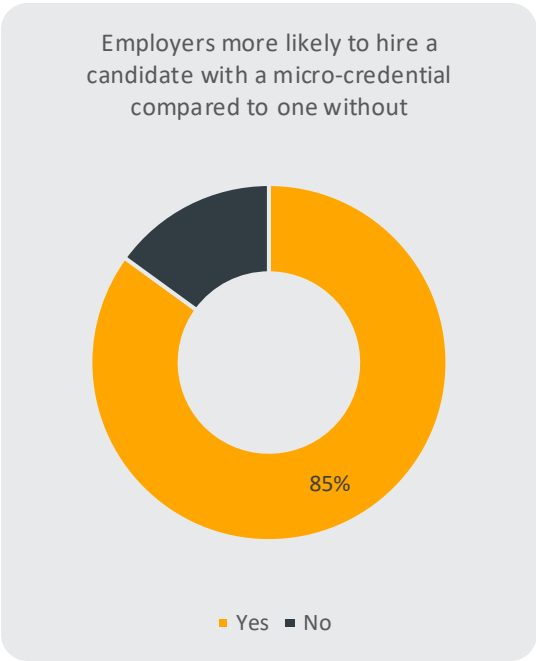


Source: Coursera Micro-credentials Impact Report 2025

The report also highlighted employers strongly endorse micro-credentials as a powerful driver of career success. Around 96% of global employers claimed that a micro-credential strengthens a candidate's application. This is reflected in their hiring decisions, with 85% of employers more likely to hire a candidate with a micro-credential compared to one without. A skills-first hiring landscape demands education providers to prioritise skills-based learning.

credentials could bridge both soft and technical skill gaps. Close to half (46%) of employers said that micro-credentials help address both skills, ensuring students gain soft skills like communication, resilience, and active learning, alongside foundational and emerging technical capabilities.

Most employers also believed that micro-



Source: Coursera Micro-credentials Impact Report 2025



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