

THE ABU DHABI IDEAS SUMMIT 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT



**WHAT ARE THE UAE'S UNTAPPED
NATURAL ADVANTAGES IN
THE DIGITAL & CLIMATE ECONOMY?**



What are the UAE's Untapped Natural Advantages in the Digital & Climate Economy?

A dialogue between Industry Executives, NYU Abu Dhabi academics, and students

The Abu Dhabi Ideas Summit 2025 focused on how industry and academia can collaborate to drive sustainable innovation and technological advancements that promote the UAE's economic growth, while addressing climate challenges - leveraging the UAE's strategic location, energy potential, and digital infrastructure to build a future-ready economy that balances economic prosperity with environmental responsibility.

The UAE is uniquely positioned to play a pivotal role in the global shift towards a sustainable and digitally driven future. It has a visionary leadership with a laser-sharp focus on innovation, significant investment, thriving industries and young labor pool - fertile ground for bold ideas to move rapidly from concept to implementation. The national Net Zero target for 2050, investment in renewables, and the recent launch of the



Green Intellectual Property Roadmap all signal a strong, sustained commitment to environmental sustainability and innovation.

Since the disruptions of COVID and recent geopolitical shifts, the UAE has further strengthened its geographical role as a global crossroads - it now stands ready to leverage this as a global digital and climate economy hub. The country's investments in AI, IoT, blockchain, and other emerging technologies can be used to drive and build an efficient climate economy ecosystem.

The UAE is already a leader in renewable energy - hosting COP28, building the world's largest solar power plants and establishing the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). It has pledged to reach net zero by 2050 and aims to triple

its renewable energy capacity by 2030. Clean energy investment, along with job creation and technological innovation, accounts for 21% of the country's GDP.

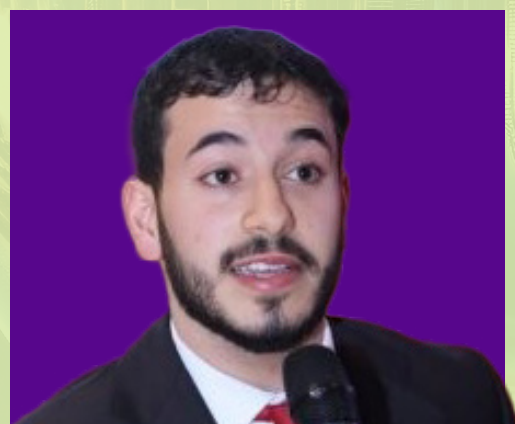
At the heart of innovation in the UAE lies a shared vision and a framework that fosters collaboration across disciplines. The synergy between academia, industry, and government is not incidental - it is intentional, structured, and outcome-driven. Whether the focus is climate resilience, economic transformation, or healthcare innovation, what enables progress is this collective commitment to working together, not in silos.

What are the critical next steps - industry, academia, and government - can take to develop sustainable business models that bridge the digital and climate economy?

"I was very fortunate to be part of IRENA's first inaugural Youth Forum back in 2020, where they brought over 30 young people to discuss energy and connect them to high-level member states. Fast-forward to this year and the assembly now hosts over 150 young people. It's really exciting to be part of something so powerful and see the UAE strive to amplify youth voices."



Lydia Sanz Lozano
Bachelor of Arts – Economics & Political Science
Co-Vice Chair of Programming
Student Energy Summit 2023
New York University Abu Dhabi



Firas Darwish
Bachelor of Engineering - Computer Science
UAE Rhodes Scholar-Elect
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"There's a structure that you tend to find in many projects in the UAE, that provides an advantage – a vision and alignment between three groups. Universities act as knowledge partners providing fundamental research, which can then be transformed into viable technologies in cooperation with a private sector partner, all under a regulatory governmental framework."

INDUSTRY – ACADEMIA BRAINSTORMING



AI and the Evolving Digital Landscape



Dr. Christopher Hayden Cooper
Executive Advisor, Group Digital and Cybersecurity,
ADNOC

AI should be viewed primarily as a productivity tool, not a definitive source of knowledge. Tools like ChatGPT offer convenience, but they must not replace human critical thinking. The real differentiator lies in our individual insight—what we know and how we apply it.

At ADNOC, our ambition to become the world's most AI-enabled energy company required more than technological adoption—it demanded a cultural transformation. Understandably, there was concern among employees about job security. We addressed this head-on through an extensive education initiative, training over 40,000 staff in foundational and generative AI.

AI is not a solution for all problems; it is an enabler. However, it is also a significant consumer of energy, and this aspect is often overlooked. Even seemingly innocuous actions—such as the use of polite prompts—can contribute to increased computational loads, and thus energy consumption. This underlines the importance of digital literacy that extends beyond functionality to include awareness of environmental and ethical implications.

Lastly, we must ensure stronger integration between academia and industry. Such collaboration can be pivotal in shaping meaningful, real-world impact when adopting digital solutions.



AI ADOPTION – MAXIMIZING IMPACT

Climate Resilience - Artificial intelligence is increasingly being used to improve resilience to challenges such as floods, earthquakes, and droughts, by equipping responders and agencies with advanced data insights and visualization tools.

Talent Empowerment - companies can actively engage with university students, involving them in real AI projects from the outset in a supportive environment.

Regional Positioning - AI startups benefit not only from a supportive domestic market but also from the UAE's strategic regional positioning as a bridge between international partners and neighboring markets in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.

Open Institutional Access - can allow young innovators to pitch ideas and build impactful collaborations.

Minimize Generative AI Energy Consumption - machine learning can inform energy policy - by forecasting technology cost trends, accounting for market shifts and geopolitical events.

Combat Skepticism on AI Policy - starting with small-scale, evidence-based work in academia and startups, that can then be scaled.

Data Quality - with only around 52% of data typically functional, filtering and preparing it is as important as the AI algorithms. Synthetic data can help fill gaps, especially in fields like healthcare, but only if usable for real-world deployment.

Uncertainty quantification - understanding confidence levels in AI predictions helps diagnose model errors and refine data inputs.

SUMMIT RECOMMENDATIONS

Regulatory institutions must evolve to enable fast yet sustainable adoption of new technologies, with collaboration between governments, businesses, and civil society.

To keep pace with rapid innovation, regulatory bodies must become more agile, fostering environments where new technologies can thrive sustainably. This requires active collaboration between governments, the private sector, and civil society to create adaptable, transparent frameworks that prioritize both progress and protection of public interests and the environment.

Positive regulation attracts investment and builds trust – clear standards, like those in the UAE, serve as effective models.

Regulatory clarity and consistency are vital for attracting international investment. The UAE's structured, forward-looking frameworks provide confidence to stakeholders, enabling innovation while managing risks. Such proactive governance builds long-term trust and can serve as a replicable model for other nations aiming to stimulate their innovation ecosystems responsibly.

Sustainability requires long-term thinking, balancing ROI with the wellbeing of future generations.

True sustainability demands more than profit—it involves strategic foresight that weighs environmental and social impact alongside return on investment. Policies and business decisions must consider future generations, ensuring natural resources, ecosystems, and human welfare are preserved while enabling present-day development and economic growth through responsible innovation.

Regional initiatives drive global impact – starting with decarbonization and energy equity in the GCC.

The Gulf region has a unique opportunity to lead global climate action through decarbonization and equitable energy access. By leveraging resources, technology, and cross-border cooperation, regional efforts like those in the GCC can catalyze systemic change and set a precedent for climate leadership and energy justice worldwide.

Volunteerism must be substantive, not performative – efforts should target real, urgent societal needs.

Volunteer efforts should be rooted in genuine community engagement and directed at urgent, measurable challenges—such as food insecurity, climate resilience, and education gaps. Performative or symbolic actions risk eroding public trust and wasting resources, whereas impactful volunteerism can strengthen civil society and accelerate sustainable development goals.

Bridging academia and industry is critical – students lack access to real-world applications, while industry underutilizes academic insight.

The disconnect between academic theory and industrial practice limits innovation. Students often graduate without applicable skills, while industry misses opportunities to apply cutting-edge research. Bridging this gap through internships, joint research, and co-designed curricula enhances workforce readiness and ensures that academic knowledge drives real-world innovation.

Academics must present ready-to-deploy ideas to industry, making partnerships more commercially appealing.

To strengthen academia-industry collaboration, researchers must move beyond abstract theory and develop practical, scalable solutions. Presenting commercially viable innovations can incentivize industry partnerships and accelerate the transition of research into real-world applications, fostering economic growth and societal benefit through tangible impact rather than theoretical output alone.

The AI boom creates new opportunities for academics to monetize and apply research beyond publications.

With the surge in AI capabilities, researchers have fresh avenues to transform academic output into real-world tools, products, and services. This shift encourages new funding models and entrepreneurial ventures, allowing academics to generate income while broadening the societal reach and impact of their innovations beyond traditional publishing.

Food security is underprioritized globally—it must become more investable through smart incentives.

Despite its foundational importance, food security receives insufficient attention and funding. Governments and investors should implement smart incentives—such as tax credits, public-private partnerships, and innovation grants—to encourage sustainable agriculture, reduce food waste, and ensure stable food systems that can withstand climate and geopolitical disruptions.

Essential needs must come first – AI and tech should focus on food, energy, and healthcare rather than hype-driven trends.

Rather than chasing hype, AI and emerging technologies must prioritize solving humanity's most pressing challenges: food security, clean energy access, and healthcare. Redirecting innovation toward these essential needs fosters long-term resilience, equity, and societal trust, ensuring that technology serves real public good rather than fleeting novelty.

Earlier start in sustainability and tech education – including high school vocational exposure and curriculum reform, building a workforce ready for the next economy.

Preparing for a sustainable, tech-driven future begins in schools. By introducing vocational training and sustainability-focused curriculum in high school, students gain early exposure to vital industries. This reform cultivates a skilled, future-ready workforce equipped to thrive in evolving job markets and contribute meaningfully to global development goals.

Practical learning opportunities are more impactful than traditional formats like career fairs—more informal and hands-on events are needed.

Traditional events like career fairs often fail to engage or inform meaningfully. In contrast, informal, hands-on learning—such as workshops, site visits, and innovation sprints—provides real-world exposure and builds practical skills. These experiences better connect students to industry needs and empower them to navigate career paths with confidence.

AI can help level educational disparities, particularly for neurodivergent learners and people of determination.

Artificial intelligence holds immense potential to personalize education, accommodating different learning styles and needs. For neurodivergent learners and people of determination, AI tools can offer adaptive content, accessibility features, and real-time support, creating inclusive learning environments that empower all students to succeed on their own terms.

Leaders across industries must integrate AI, using it to navigate complex, interdisciplinary challenges.

AI is no longer optional—it's essential. Leaders in every sector must adopt AI not only for efficiency but to tackle intricate problems spanning multiple domains, from supply chain resilience to public health. Strategic AI integration allows organizations to innovate, adapt, and remain competitive in a rapidly evolving world.

Collaboration across sectors is essential—especially between academia, government, and industry, to turn research into policy and action.

Tackling complex challenges demands collaboration across academia, industry, and government. Academic research must inform public policy and commercial strategy, while public and private sectors must support and apply scientific insight. These synergies transform research from theory into practice, accelerating impactful outcomes at local, national, and global scales.

Critical pedagogy should replace outdated teaching models, fostering inclusive, dialogue-based learning environments.

Traditional lecture-based models are outdated. Critical pedagogy, emphasizing dialogue, inclusivity, and student agency, encourages deeper engagement and reflective thinking. This approach equips learners with skills to challenge assumptions, collaborate across differences, and solve complex problems—essential capabilities for building more equitable and resilient societies in a knowledge-based economy.

Agile knowledge sharing, leveraging both inter-emirate collaboration and global exchange.

Agility in knowledge exchange is key to innovation. The UAE can lead by fostering both inter-emirate collaboration and global academic-industry networks. This dynamic flow of ideas across regions and borders enhances collective problem-solving, accelerates innovation cycles, and ensures that local solutions can be scaled and adapted for global impact.

Optimize national systems for resilience, with strong shifts toward renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and AI in logistics.

To future-proof national economies, investments must prioritize resilience through renewable energy, regenerative agriculture, and AI-powered logistics. These systems reduce vulnerability to climate, geopolitical, and supply chain shocks while enhancing sustainability and competitiveness. An integrated approach ensures long-term viability and positions nations as leaders in the green transition.

Timely action is crucial – delay has a cost, whether in sustainability, policy, or innovation.

Delaying action in areas like climate policy, technological innovation, or social reform has tangible costs—lost opportunities, exacerbated crises, and diminished public trust. Proactive decision-making and swift implementation are vital for maintaining momentum, preventing irreversible damage, and securing long-term benefits in sustainability, economic resilience, and global leadership.

Academic success must be impact-driven, not just publication-based—programs like the Industry Design Challenge are steps in the right direction.

Success in academia should be measured by societal impact, not just journal citations. Programs like the Industry Design Challenge connect students and researchers with real-world problems, fostering innovation that benefits communities and industries. This shift ensures academic work contributes directly to solving pressing global issues while enriching student experiences.

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