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AI Literacy, Attitudes, and Perceived Employability among University Students in the Middle East and Gulf Regions

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping workforce requirements, increasing the importance of AI literacy in higher education. However, empirical evidence regarding its relationship with students' perceptions of employability remains limited, particularly in the Middle East and Gulf regions. This study examined university students' self-reported AI literacy, perceived employability competencies, and the role of attitudes and mindsets in these associations. A cross-sectional quantitative survey was conducted with 380 university students recruited through Prolific, including residents of the Middle East (n = 284) and the Gulf region (n = 96). Following within-sample instrument refinement, the analysis included four self-reported AI-literacy dimensions and eight perceived employability-competency composites. Hierarchical multiple regression and partial least squares structural equation modeling were used. Participants reported high levels of AI literacy and perceived employability competencies. Controlling for five background variables, the four AI-literacy dimensions explained an additional 55.4% of the variance in overall perceived employability readiness (full-model R^2 = .608). Analyze and Evaluate showed the strongest standardized association with employability readiness and was also associated with perceived career readiness. Attitudes and mindsets were statistically involved in significant, theoretically ordered indirect associations between two AI-literacy dimensions, Understand and Knowledge, and Use and Application/Create and Innovate, and all eight employability outcomes. The cross-sectional design and use of student self-assessments limit conclusions: the findings do not demonstrate objectively assessed competence, employer-rated capabilities, actual employment outcomes, temporal ordering, or causality. Nevertheless, they provide a bounded rationale for developing and rigorously evaluating AI-literacy learning opportunities in comparable higher-education settings.

Keywords: **AI Literacy; Attitudes and Mindsets; Career Readiness; Middle East and Gulf Regions Perceived Employability; University Students**