

## *FIELD REPORT FROM JORDAN*

*Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.*

Abul Haija graduated recently and has a degree in mechanical engineering. Today, he is hanging out outside the Civil Engineering Department at the University of Jordan. Since graduating three months ago, he spends a lot of time on his computer at home.

"I just go out and search for companies, mechanical engineering or engineering companies in general, and I give them my CV. They say, 'No, thank you. We don't want you.'"

Haija's lack of job leads as a fresh college graduate is not simply bad luck. One-third of young people in Jordan are unemployed. Like many Arab nations, the government has tried to shrink its public sector and grow private industry. It's had some success in decreasing the number of government jobs but it hasn't managed to create a job boom in the private sector.

Economist Riad Al Khouri expresses the reality of the situation. "This is not Silicon Valley and it probably never will be."

Al Khouri is referring to Jordan's effort to create a knowledge economy. The country has no oil, no water and very few other natural resources.

Jordan needs problem solvers, entrepreneurs and innovators, but many say its public education system from primary school through college doesn't produce these types of graduates.

Amin Amin is CEO of CADER, an organization that trains teachers as part of a reform effort by Jordan's Ministry of Education. He says that from primary school on, students learn to memorize information and to regurgitate it.

"We are not trained in our schools or in our universities to be critical thinkers or to be creative or to be analytical."

Ali Al Tayyeb sits in the living room at a friend's house. He graduated from the University of Jordan in June and he describes the boredom he felt as an undergrad.

"From the minute I get in, the minute I do leave, from the chair I am sitting on, from the desk, from the walls."

Al Tayyeb says lectures were stark as classrooms. Professors entered class, delivered lessons and left. He says he pressed them to make their lessons more interactive and relevant. He asked one professor, "How this works into practical life?" There will be no answer."

Some say this kind of passive education is a vestige of a system that for years was focused on producing government employees. Walid Maani is Minister of Higher Education. He says, "If you have a system that gives the theory only, it graduates people who are not ready for the market."

One organization hopes to change this mentality. The Business Development Center in Amman is a nonprofit that offers free pre-employment training to new graduates. It places them in internships with private companies.

At a recent training workshop, a couple dozen young men and women sit around tables. A trainer facilitates a discussion about workplace etiquette.

Annas Hussaini is one attendee here. He just graduated with an International Business Degree. Hussaini says he is unsure of things like how to approach his colleagues when he wants to borrow something and if he is allowed to use the phone. He hopes to gain communication skills from the training.

The government is committed to \$20 billion worth of mega infrastructure projects over the next 20 years but these jobs will likely go to Egyptian workers. Jordanians traditionally shun vocational training and many will not work in construction.

More than a quarter million of Jordan's best and brightest work outside of Jordan. Those who stay don't have much. The jobs that exist often don't meet their expectations.

Comprehensive education reforms are now in their eighth year in Jordan. Along with international agencies and donors, the government is targeting everything from teacher training, to new curricula, to school buildings and wiring classrooms. It's still too early to tell if these reforms will have the desired effect on the economy, but Economist Yusuf Mansur says education reform alone is not enough.

"When we talk about what makes a country, how can we make Jordan into a knowledge economy? That's a big question. I think there's 10,000 steps to be taken if we want to become a knowledge economy."

Those 10,000 steps, Mansur says, must be part of a coordinated effort by the Jordanian government. But high turnover in Jordan's cabinet, he says, has made this difficult. Five years ago, he was part of a public/private partnership that drafted a national economic strategy. He shared his frustration.

"It's there on my shelf there, you see it? See the volumes – that outer wall? There's books stacked on top of each other. That's it. We wasted time."

*– Reported by Jordana Gustafson for America Abroad*