



Arab Youth: The Fierce Urgency of Now

At Think Unlimited, we envision a rising generation of Arab youth equipped and empowered to become proactive citizens, social innovators, and change-makers in their communities, their nations, and the world.

In the Middle East region, youth under 30 represent an astonishing 70% of the population, making the Middle East the one of the youngest and most demographically unstable regions in the world. Some 25% of college graduates are unemployed, and degree holders usually search 2-3 years to find their first job. Youth civic participation in the form of voting and volunteerism are also disappointingly low throughout the region, as outmoded education systems—based entirely on deference to authority and rote memorization—leave youth uninspired and grossly underprepared for work, citizenship, and independence.

Arab youth are increasingly connected to the globalized world, and are waking up to their lack of freedom, lack of opportunity, and lack of preparation for an uncertain future. As a result, the Arab Spring protest movements were overwhelmingly driven by disaffected youth. However, protest—and even revolution—has not resulted in the deep and lasting change the region is hungry for. Arab youth now face the enormous challenge of turning revolution into real progress, and the future of this fragile and unstable region hangs in the balance. But when the educational experiences of young people in the Middle East have left them ill-prepared to think up the future and make it a reality, how will Arab societies move beyond the old and succeed in giving birth to the new?



“The Arab Awakening has begun, but in the midst of our [region’s] existential crisis it is in danger of being hijacked by powers that want to increase sectarian divisions and promote conflict in order to secure power and change the landscape of our country for the worse. I can think of no better remedy for this disaster than promoting social entrepreneurship.... It is the social entrepreneurs who are working hard to bring about the Arab Spring that we all want to see.”

Dr. Iman Bibars, Regional Director, Ashoka Arab World

Our Mission

Think Unlimited equips and empowers Arab youth to engage critically and creatively with their world. We provide transformative learning experiences that build achievement motivation, creativity, critical thinking and entrepreneurship skills, and encourage young people to apply those skills through social innovation.

Social innovation is the generation of creative, bold, and scalable solutions to the world’s most pressing social, political, and economic challenges.

Now more than ever, Arab youth must take hold of their nations by building the movements, institutions, organizations, and businesses that will lay the much-needed foundations of lasting progress and change.

Think Unlimited is working to provide timely, concrete, and culturally sensitive educational interventions that give students tools for creating solutions, and that capture the energy and imagination of young people and turn it into the fuel for change and development, rather than merely protest and unrest.

Organizational Snapshot

Established in 2011 as a U.S.-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Think Unlimited has been extensively vetted and ultimately supported by top venture philanthropists, including the [Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation](#).

We have been twice recognized by Her Majesty, Queen Rania Al-Abdullah, for our contribution to improving educational quality in Jordan. We are two-year recipients of a [Clinton Global Initiative Complimentary Membership](#), offered to only a handful of education nonprofits worldwide. Our programs have been written up in Arab Investor Magazine, the [New York Times](#), the [FastCompany CoExist blog](#), and the [Harvard Business Review Blog](#).

In the past, Think Unlimited has offered programs in public schools and youth centers throughout Jordan, but we now focus our efforts in the higher education space through the Solutionaries program.

Think Unlimited’s offices are located in Amman, Jordan with a staff of 14 employees. We have a U.S.-based, 7-person Board of Directors, and an international Advisory Board. Our work is funded through a mix of revenue-generating activities and philanthropic support.



Solutionaries: The Middle East's New Revolutionaries

The Solutionaries Program Is...

- an entirely original, 100% evidence-based curriculum designed specifically for Arab youth
- teaching critical thinking, creativity, and innovation in classrooms where rote-memorization is the norm
- offered as a two-semester, for-credit course in partnership with Jordanian Universities
- taught by young members of the Arab Diaspora who serve as visiting lecturers
- one of the only programs in the Arab world utilizing diaspora talent for peer-to-peer youth development

In the Spring semester of 2014, Think Unlimited launched a groundbreaking new course in Jordanian universities called “Solutionaries.” We define “Solutionaries” as individuals who identify, understand, and work to solve the world’s most pressing problems. Solutionaries are social innovators, entrepreneurs, and changemakers in every field. The core competencies of a Solutionary are critical thinking, creativity, and innovation.

Solutionaries is taught to groups of 20 students in two 75-minute sessions per week. Students attend 60 sessions over the course of 2 semesters, resulting in 75+ hours of intensive training. As a credit-bearing, hands-on introduction to real-world innovation, the course is the first of its kind in the entire MENA region.

Who facilitates the Solutionaries course? Young members of the Arab diaspora who have experienced the transformative power of education in their own lives and act as powerful role models for their peers. We recruit, train, and bring them to Jordan for a year of service on the frontlines of development in the Arab world.

In the first semester, students develop attributes that are proven prerequisites of genuine problem solving and innovation—including self-determination, curiosity, empathy, grit, and a “growth mindset.” In the second semester, students discover that innovation goes far beyond coming up with a good idea. We teach core research skills to help students choose an issue they are passionate about and explore its root causes. They then go

on to learn techniques for idea generation and divergent thinking. Finally, students learn basic “design thinking,” or how to develop their idea into an actionable initiative that is different, desirable, and doable. They then plan and prepare to implement their idea in their community.

The Solutionaries course is taught entirely through student-centered, project-based learning, which is simply revolutionary in Middle Eastern universities. Our curriculum is composed of games, activities, discussions, reflection, and assignments that continually push students outside of the classroom. The young people who enter our course as students truly do leave as Solutionaries—equipped and empowered to work on a diversity of initiatives that will produce innovative, locally-driven, scalable solutions to the Middle East’s most pressing problems.

Impact to Date

Over the past three years Think Unlimited has implemented education programs in partnership with Jordanian public schools, youth centers, and universities—reaching thousands of students. Our curricula are entirely original, are based on the best social scientific research about human development and behavior change, and have been developed specifically for use in Jordanian educational settings.

We conduct rigorous monitoring and evaluation of our programs in consultation with experts at Yale and Stanford Universities, and only seek to scale programs that are meeting the highest standards for transformative impact. In June 2014, we completed a successful pilot of our new Solutionaries program with 120 students in 2 Jordanian universities, and our data shows impressive impact returns:

Behavioral Data

A creativity expert from Yale University has designed pre- and post-tests to determine how students' behavior is changing as a result of our course. After our pilot semester:

- 91% of our students demonstrated an increase in divergent thinking
- On average, students performed 30% better on divergent thinking tests after the course than before
- 70% of students are showing significant improvements in achievement motivation and "growth mindset"

Survey Data

We also administer pre- and post- self-report measures designed by top social psychologists, as well as asking for feedback from students through surveys:

- 78% of students report that this course is "More useful" or "Much more useful" than other courses at their university
- 95% of students report that "my life will be different because of this course"
- 63% of students plan to continue working on their project idea after the course

Some of the initiatives our students are working on:

- A project to turn polluted, abandoned lots into urban gardens
- An app allowing school administrators to communicate with parents to help solve the problem of low school attendance
- An interfaith festival to combat religious intolerance
- An exchange program for medical students to take temporary research positions abroad in order to explore modern cancer-fighting technologies

Student Stories



"After I took this course, I know now that...I should have a goal to reach excellence. This will include effort, obstacles, failure, and learning from my failure. I applied this to the way I study until I felt the change in my grades, and I started to get higher marks than ever in my life. The way I used to look at successful people has changed, too. I have never thought they had to put as much effort as we do to reach their current status. I never thought that I could be like them someday by working hard and never giving up. But now I do, I believe I could. I wish this experience would never end, and it will always be one of the most amazing experiences in my life."

Dina Alabtah, Zarqa University

"I had started initiatives before, but they were all failing – and finally, I started taking this class where every day they were walking with us step by step instead of just talking and telling us what we should do. They were actually helping us to find our goal, draw the solution, and really work on it. If you did fail, like I did many times, you can just keep going – it's not wrong to fail."

Husam Alshloul,
Zarqa University



"We always complain...but for the first time I'm actually feeling like I'm doing something. That maybe, perhaps, I could change something."

Anas Al-Disi,
American University of Madaba

"I started to talk to my family about the topics we are learning in each session and everyone who knows me was impressed, and started to encourage me to do more and to continue with my passion. Through this course, I discovered that something inside of me wants to do something to change things around me, and that if I have a goal that I should work hard for it, and even if I fail I should never give up."

Sanabeel Bilto,
Zarqa University



Taking “Solutionaries” to Scale

Having completed a successful pilot and achieved proof of concept, Think Unlimited is now poised to have a game-changing impact on youth throughout the Middle East as we take this program to scale. Demand for the Solutionaries course among potential university partners far outstrips our current capacity, and we are seeking new donor partners to help us implement an ambitious plan for scale:

- During our 2013/14 Solutionaries Program Pilot we reached 120 students in 2 universities
- In the 2014/15 academic year we will more than double our reach by adding 2 new university partners and increasing the number of sections at each university, enrolling a total of 320 students
- We hope to double our number of partner schools each year going forward until, in 2020, we are implementing the course in all 42 universities in Jordan
- By 2016 we expect to begin partnering with universities outside Jordan (likely first in Palestine and UAE)
- By 2025 we hope to be working in universities across the entire MENA region



“In my opinion, Solutionaries is one of the most amazing courses that the university offers. I think it is really important for each and every university in Jordan to offer it. It helps the youth to identify their goals and work really hard toward them. I love how this course supports us. I used to give up easily and to do nothing about it. I would just sit and wait until I got up again from my failure but now I learned that I should get up really fast because to fail fast means to learn fast. I have always wanted to do something great but I didn’t know where to start or stop. Now that I have learned “the 10,000 hour rule” I have my answer and I know one day I will be able to reach what I want.”

Huda Al-Seide,
American University of
Madaba



"During the second month of Solutionaries, we teach the concept of empathy. One of the main steps of empathy is active listening. To convey this concept to the students, we conducted an "active listening circle" activity, where students were instructed to listen to another student's opinion about a controversial issue (sexual harassment) and repeat exactly what that other student said, without adding their own opinion. It seems like a simple task. However, after the activity, when I asked the students "what surprised you most?" many of them expressed that they were shocked at their own inability to focus and actively listen when they heard something they disagreed with. This realization required a lot of introspection on the students' part. They came out of this session truly understanding what it means to practice empathy. It was one of those transformative moments I am always excited to see as a facilitator of Solutionaries, and that require a deliberate and balanced implementation of lecturing, conducting activities, and cultivating students' curiosity."



Iman Allawzi,
2014 Solutionaries Facilitator