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Apr. 23, 2018 | 12:10 AM (Last Updated: April 23, 2018 | 09:57 AM)

Lebanese startup heads to global meet



Summary

A Lebanese startup that trains young people in job skills to compete in an increasingly automated workforce has been selected to go to Madrid to compete among 100 different teams at the South Summit in October. Cherpa, an online platform that helps



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Brooke Anderson | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: A Lebanese startup that trains young people in job skills to compete in an increasingly automated workforce has been selected to go to Madrid to compete among 100 different teams at the South Summit in October. Cherpa, an online platform that helps prepare students for future jobs, was chosen from five startups by a jury of Spanish and Lebanese judges at IE Venture Day Beirut Edition.

"We hope to put students on the right path for them to know what they're passionate about and give them the skills to at least guarantee they have a place in the future," said Cherpa founder and CEO Ibrahim Ezzeddine, whose business, which currently serves 140 students at seven Lebanese schools, was inspired by his 2017 senior year project at the Lebanese American University.

The conference, with a focus on the lifestyle and entertainment industries, was held Saturday at the Beirut Digital District.

It was coordinated by Spanish business school IE, known for its innovative teaching style and its international alumni network. The school has started tech events around the world, some of which have gone on to become global gatherings.

The opening of the conference was held by Lebanese and Spanish dignitaries, including Spanish Ambassador to Lebanon Jose Maria Ferre de la Pena, who discussed the two countries' historic and cultural ties. Member of Parliament Bassem Shabb, representing Prime Minister Saad Hariri, suggested Lebanon change its approach to doing business from status quo to futuristic.

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"We relied on agriculture, which is very difficult to adapt. We relied on tourism and it disappeared. Our economy is also sensitive to cost [fluctuations]. This conference offers a new approach to business.

"A new narrative will emerge and will encourage innovation, away from the traditional way of doing business. Something needs to be done," he said. "I'm from an older generation. And I'm here to listen."

Indeed, the winning team's concept fitted in with themes of the conference, such as business innovation, digital entertainment, as well as the need to modernize education systems to keep up with changes in technology and the workforce.

The education technology market is expected to grow to \$252 billion by 2020, according to EdTechXGlobal, an education technology research and networking company.

Additionally, it is estimated that by 2030 there will be a shortfall of 69 million teachers worldwide.

Responses to such challenges have included the rise of boot camps for entrepreneurs, an increase in online courses and remote access learning.

One example of education innovation in Lebanon is Eastwood College, a grade school that works to integrate innovation with its regular curriculum. School Director Michel Khoury, speaking on a family business panel, said Eastwood was the first to provide iPads to students – though not to young children, who should be playing outside, he noted.

He maintains innovation in education should not be strictly focused on technology.

"Digital is just an enabler. How do I personalize it to a child? We need to bring back the human aspect to education," Khoury said.

For Juan Jose Guemes, chairman of the entrepreneurship and innovation center at IE, being a global startup is also about more than technology. "Which cities are booming? There's a match between the cities where everyone wants to spend time and where startups are booming – places where you would never refuse an invitation to visit," he said.

"Beirut is a very special place to come and I would say it's the best place in the Middle East. Beirut is a place that can attract talent from other parts of the world," he said.

"Lebanese have entrepreneurship in your DNA. You have the chance to contribute to the revolution."

Although Cherpa is aiming to expand beyond Lebanon and serve the global market, Ezzeddine is encouraged by what he has seen so far, with students showing aptitude for designing drones and developing robots. "Our main mission is targeting and encouraging more parents and schools about the importance of this education. It's just scary. Schools don't like change. But if they teach these skills, they'll guarantee a good future for their students. Jobs are transforming, and we're preparing students for that," he said.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on April 23, 2018, on page 4.



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