

Transforming Executive Education: Innovative Strategies for a Dynamic Business Landscape

Impressions, insights, and takeaways from UNICON's Directors' Conference 2025 hosted by Onsi Sawiris School of Business, The American University in Cairo

A Report by IEDP for the Executive Education Sector



8 Strategies for Executive Education in a Dynamic Business Landscape

The 2025 UNICON Directors' Conference in Cairo brought together leaders from across the global executive education sector to explore how institutions are adapting to a rapidly changing business environment. These are the eight core strategic themes that emerged:

#1

Localization as a Design Principle

Institutions are moving away from global templates and leaning into regional realities. The market is clear—providers must adapt for language, cultural fit, delivery preferences, and sector-specific needs. In emerging markets especially, success depends on contextual intelligence and co-creation with stakeholders on the ground.

#3

The Power and Promise of Emerging Markets

The MENA region, and Egypt in particular, was positioned as a high-potential landscape for executive education. Institutions are tapping into regional momentum—like Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 or Egypt's investment in talent development—to grow offerings that are deeply embedded in regional context, policy, and industry demand.

#2

Personalization Through Content, Delivery, and Marketing

Personalization is now the expectation—from the way programs are designed to how they are marketed. Institutions are leveraging data, smarter segmentation, and more flexible instructional models to speak directly to learner needs, not only organizational goals. This includes personalized content journeys, adaptable program elements, and dynamic digital engagement—all of which hinge on robust data strategies.

#4

Collaboration as a Competitive Advantage

From program co-design to faculty models, collaboration emerged as a strategic imperative. Institutions are working more closely with governments, NGOs, independent experts, and peer schools to understand and meet market needs, build scalable delivery models, and serve more diverse learner populations. Internally, collaboration within teams and across functions is seen as critical to achieving alignment and agility.

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#5 Partnerships That Expand Capability

Schools are forming innovative partnerships that go beyond co-branding—building value exchanges with corporates, sports organizations, and other sectors. These partnerships help scale impact, access new audiences, and create delivery models tailored to niche or hard-to-reach markets.

#7 Agility and Self-Awareness in Team and Program Design

From team dynamics to project cycles, agility is increasingly key to how executive education teams operate. Frameworks like the GC Index can help clarify how individuals contribute to impact, while flexible delivery models and practitioner-based instruction enable faster adaptation to evolving market and client needs.

#6 Client Retention, Community, and Lifelong Engagement

Institutions are prioritizing client retention as highly as acquisition—developing internal academies, personalized learning pathways, and long-term content strategies that keep clients and learners connected. The focus is on creating ecosystems and long-term engagement, not just individual programs.

#8 AI as an Operational and Strategic Capability

Institutions are no longer just teaching AI—they are living the reality. AI is being woven into marketing, prospecting, coaching, and curriculum development. The emphasis is on using AI to enhance the core strengths and accelerate the speed of business, while remaining thoughtful about governance, data, trust, and the need for critical thinking and oversight.

Introduction

Now in its 53rd year, UNICON—the global consortium for university-based executive education—continues to be a vital forum for advancing the future of the sector. Its annual Directors' Conference brings together leaders from business school executive education teams across the globe to share ideas, explore emerging trends, and forge new collaborations. The 2025 gathering, hosted by the Onsi Sawiris School of Business at the American University in Cairo (AUC), was the largest yet, with participants representing institutions from 29 countries.

Cairo proved a fitting host city. A dynamic metropolis layered with millennia of cultural heritage—from Pharaonic ingenuity to Islamic, Christian, and Arab influences—reflecting both rich tradition and modern transformation. With ambitious infrastructure projects and growing global investment, Egypt is a compelling case study in how business and education can evolve together. For executive education professionals, the MENA region offers valuable lessons in innovation, entrepreneurship, and market adaptability—making Cairo an ideal setting for conversations on the future of the sector.

The event was also an opportunity to spotlight the host institution. Recently renamed the Onsi Sawiris School of Business, AUC's business school has long been a regional leader in executive education. With roots dating back to 1966 and a formal executive education offering since 1977, it now serves over 40,000 students across 30 programs. Egypt's proud tradition as a seat of learning—home to 128 universities and the only country where its own history is a dedicated scientific discipline—made this an especially meaningful venue for a conference committed to shaping the next era of global leadership.



“There is a great deal that is new and different even since we came together at our last conference. The pace of technology is affecting our lives in many ways. The globalized world is changing and we are faced with much uncertainty. Some things don't change though—like the fact people want to come together and learn from each other.”

Eric Bergemann, UNICON Board Chair and Managing Director of Americas and Industry Programs at MIT Sloan Executive Education

Day 1 AUC Tahrir Campus

Session 1: Unleashing Impact — The Case of Onsi Sawiris School of Business

The opening panel shared insights on the community-rooted impact of the host business school. Chaired by Dr. Samer Atallah, Associate Dean and Associate Professor of Economics at the Onsi Sawiris School of Business, the session explored how the school's various centers extend influence far beyond traditional executive education. As Dr. Atallah remarked, “‘Impact’ is an elastic word—it can apply to many different areas. For us, the focus is the MENA region.”

Center for Philanthropy, Civic Engagement and Responsible Business

Dr. Ali Awni, Director of the John D. Gerhart Center, shared how his team is redefining the intersection of business and social responsibility. “Philanthropy and business? Yes—they can benefit from each other,” he stated. The center supports capacity-building across age groups and sectors, from civic engagement programs for young people to bootcamps for social entrepreneurs in remote areas. Awni emphasized the goal isn’t venture scale-ups but people: “The output is people—not projects or ventures. People who will go out more socially engaged.” By meeting participants where they are—literally and figuratively—the center works to embed local knowledge into its training, resisting one-size-fits-all models. One observer dubbed the approach “the poor man’s executive education,” capturing its grassroots, accessible ethos.

J-PAL MENA

Amira Elshal, Associate Director of Research at J-PAL MENA (the regional arm of MIT’s Poverty Action Lab), discussed how rigorous research methods—particularly randomized control trials—are used to shape policy based on evidence rather than ideology. “We don’t want our research to stay in a library,” Elshal stressed. “We want it in the hands of policymakers.”

J-PAL’s mission includes building a local pipeline of researchers who understand the nuances of the region and can effectively communicate findings to sometimes skeptical stakeholders. Through initiatives like the Egypt Impact Lab, the center collaborates closely with government agencies and NGOs, aligning academic insight with real-world decision-making.



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Dr. Ali Awni, Director of the John D. Gerhart Center, Onsi Sawiris School of Business, American University in Cairo



Hala Barakat

Director, Center for
Entrepreneurship and Innovation,
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The American Universit
Egypt

Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation

Dr. Hala Barakat, Director of the Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, shared how her center is catalyzing change across MENA's entrepreneurial landscape. In five years, the center has grown from a two-person team to a 15-person operation. With a strong focus on gender equity, it has trained over 3,000 women leaders and launched initiatives like hackathons with seed funding for digital business ventures.

Mentorship is another cornerstone. Over the past four years, the center has delivered more than 2,000 hours of mentorship. SMEs—"the rising middle" as she calls them—are also a priority, with programs targeting capacity building, access to finance, and collaboration with banks. A new initiative, Women on Boards, aims to expand female representation in corporate governance.

A Model Rooted in Context

Collectively, these centers reflect a model of business education deeply embedded in context. Whether through civic leadership, evidence-based policymaking, or inclusive entrepreneurship, the approach is to prioritize relevance, local engagement, and sustainable impact. As Dr. Atallah summed up: "Some of the most brilliant ideas I've come across come from people at the bottom, not the top."

Session 2: Expanding Horizons — Open Enrollment and Access to Executive Education in Emerging Markets

The second session explored how the Onsi Sawiris School of Business is shaping their executive education offerings to meet the unique needs and opportunities of the market. Moderated by Mohamed AbdelSalam, Executive Director of Executive Education, the discussion offered insight into the school's flexible, market-informed approach, featuring perspectives from long-standing corporate partners and independent subject matter experts working within AUC's innovative instructional model.

A Market-Driven Model

Mohamed AbdelSalam opened the session with a candid reflection on the school's recent transformation:

"We took a look at our portfolio and decided to do a major restructure and revamp. We went to the market, spoke with industry leaders, and asked: What are your pain points? What do you need your workforce to learn? We built our programs around those answers."

The result is a customer-oriented model that marries practical value with academic reputation. AUC now draws from a pool of over 200 independent professionals—industry experts selected, trained, and quality-assured by the school. This approach enables scalability as well as continued real-world relevance.

AbdelSalam added, "The types of clients we have would eat purely academic faculty for breakfast... They're coming with preset challenges and they want answers from someone who understands the ground reality."

A Long-Term Corporate Partner

Karim Hamdy, HR and Organization Development Director at Ezz Steel, brought the perspective of a corporate client-turned-partner. Ezz Steel's relationship with AUC spans over two decades and includes the co-creation of their Talent Advancement Program, a long-running initiative aimed at developing middle management talent. Hamdy shared impressive outcomes:

"Turnover among participating staff dropped to under 1%, and we calculated an ROI of 23 times. One group identified ways to reduce operational waste that generated significant savings."

The program is dynamic by design—adapted annually to reflect emerging business challenges. For Ezz Steel, the AUC partnership has become central to both capability building and retention strategy.

Industry-Led Curriculum Design

Nader Ibrahim, Managing Partner of several investment firms and a leader at the Egyptian Private Equity Association (EPEA), spoke about his experience co-developing AUC's Private Equity Diploma. Identifying a gap in Egypt's investment ecosystem, Ibrahim worked closely with AUC to design and launch the program in 2021. Now in its ninth cohort, the diploma serves professionals from across the region and is backed by partnerships with organizations such as the Sovereign Fund of Egypt.

"Together with AUC we trained the instructors, developed the content, and built something rooted in the real demands of the sector—which is rapidly growing in the MENA region," Ibrahim explained.



“We develop internal experts. We train them, equip them, and support them so they can go back and upskill their own teams.”

Dr. Riham Moawad, a leadership consultant, HR director, and adjunct academic at the Onsi Sawiris School of Business, American University in Cairo

The Triple Role of the Instructor-Practitioner

Dr. Riham Moawad, a leadership consultant, HR director, and adjunct academic, shared her multifaceted role in AUC’s executive education offerings. Her unique position at the intersection of business and academia allows her to bring contemporary theory into the classroom while gathering practical data for ongoing academic research. Increasingly her work with AUC focuses on helping corporate clients build internal academies—a strategy that enables companies to develop their own talent pipelines.

“We develop internal experts. We train them, equip them, and support them so they can go back and upskill their own teams,” she said. “It’s about sustaining services and retaining talent.”

AbdelSalam added that this emerging focus—sometimes referred to informally as “Academy as a Service”—represents a strategic direction for AUC, even if formal models are still evolving:

“Right now, we’re renegotiating these partnerships from scratch each time. But we’re working toward a more concrete and scalable business model.”

Rethinking Access, Anchored in Context

While the panelists came from diverse sectors and roles, a unifying thread ran through the discussion: relevance, responsiveness, and deep connections to local market needs. Whether retooling a curriculum for steel plant managers, launching a new diploma for investment professionals, or co-developing internal academies, AUC’s executive education model is clearly designed not just to deliver education, but to solve real problems in real time. In the context of emerging markets—where traditional models often fall short—this agile approach is a key asset.

Session 3: Shaping the Future — The Landscape of Executive Education in Egypt and the Region

Chaired by Marco Serrato, Vice President, Arizona State University Learning Enterprise, this session brought together three seasoned executive education leaders deeply embedded in the context of the Middle East and Africa. Their discussion painted a picture of a landscape marked by transformation, opportunity, and the urgent need for nuanced, localized approaches. For institutions and educators looking to engage meaningfully with the region, this panel offered both practical advice and a call to rethink conventional models.

Situation on the Ground: Trends and Demands

Mohamed Kesseba, Senior Director of Executive Education Programs at AUC's Onsi Sawiris School of Business, opened the discussion with findings from their Learning & Development Landscape report 2025, which draws on direct client feedback. According to Kesseba, current demand is dominated by anything “with the word ‘digital’ in it”—from AI to data transformation. Other rising themes include the need for more customization, reskilling, micro-credentials (still relatively under-the-radar but growing), and emerging demand for coaching and team-aligned leadership development. Encouragingly, training budgets are on the rise again after a three-year dip.

At INSEAD's Middle East campus, Regional Director Bachar Tabbara noted a similar spike in demand—especially in Saudi Arabia, where Vision 2030 has driven massive investment in public-sector leadership programs. “We’re doing modular journeys that can last years,” he explained. But unlike many other markets, MENA remains committed to in-person delivery. “Ninety-nine percent of our programs are face-to-face. The region doesn’t lean toward virtual learning.”

The ‘How’: Local Context, Global Standards

Across the panel, there was consensus on one principle: context is everything. Prav Pillay of the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) in South Africa warned against blanket approaches:

“Anyone with an ‘Africa Strategy’ is already failing. These are multiple markets, cultures, and languages—South Africa alone has 11 official languages.” Pillay called for “hyper-localization with a global mindset,” an ethos that aligned notably closely with Kesseba’s described approach at AUC: “We aim to be globally credible, locally grounded.”

Customization, the panel agreed, is where value is created, with Kesseba noting that 50% of the effort in executive education is in the design phase:

“You need to understand sector-specific challenges, leadership mindsets, learning platforms, and, most importantly, cultural relevance. One-size-fits-all doesn’t work here.”

One of AUC’s innovative responses to this challenge has been a unique partnership with Al-Ahly Football Club—a global brand with over 12 million Instagram followers. In this arrangement, AUC delivers tailored executive programs while Al-Ahly promotes the partnership across its influential platforms. “It’s not just about education delivery—it’s a model of mutual value,” Kesseba said. “Partnerships expand your capacity for innovation.”

Pillay too stressed the importance of partnership chemistry: “Look for shared values and ethos. Ask: Are we exchanging capabilities? Are we opening new markets or extending reach in meaningful ways?”

Looking Ahead: Leadership, Equity, and Global Impact

Looking to the future, Pillay issued a compelling reminder that leadership in emerging markets carries a particular weight: “Be cognizant of history. The gap between the haves and have-nots is stark. In many parts of Africa, we’re not just training executives—we’re training people who will lift entire communities.”

The panel’s collective message was clear: executive education in this region is not about applying global models locally—it’s about co-creating solutions that resonate in specific cultural, economic, and political contexts. As Pillay aptly put it:

“What we do touches the strategies of all major organizations in the world. Executive education has the power to drive the global economy and affect positive change.”

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Day 2 New Cairo Campus

Session 4: Empowering Leadership Through Self-Awareness — Exploring the GC Index

Day 2 of conference saw a shift in focus, inviting participants to reflect not on external challenges, but on how individuals and teams generate impact from within. This double session—led by Nathan Ott, Co-Creator of The GC Index®—introduced a dynamic framework for understanding leadership and team contribution, followed up with an hands-on exercise.

These sessions resonated particularly strongly in the room, sparking lively discussion throughout the day and well into the next. Conversations continued over lunch, proclivity wristbands were worn proudly, and many delegates began using the tool's vocabulary immediately to describe themselves and their teams.

The GC Index—described as the world's first "organimetric"—shifts the lens from personality or competency to impact energy: how individuals are naturally inclined to make a difference in their organizations. Rather than ranking people by capability, it maps their instinctive proclivities across five roles:

- **Game-Changers** – imaginative and obsessed with possibility; they drive transformational change.
- **Strategists** – pattern-seekers who bring clarity, logic, and direction.
- **Implementers** – practical operators who deliver results and get things done.
- **Polishers** – focused on excellence and continuous improvement.
- **Playmakers** – the glue in teams, fostering collaboration and inclusion.

Ott emphasized that all roles are valuable—and often interdependent. “Don’t fall for the myth of the hero game-changer,” he cautioned. “An idea is only as impactful as the person who delivers it, improves it, or brings the team along with it.”



The GC Index, already adopted by over 9,900 organizations—including AUC—has proven especially useful in leadership development, team formation, and strategic planning. Unlike more static models, it allows for nuanced leadership profiling and alignment between team strengths and organizational priorities. “We’re not measuring how nice you are or how good you are,” said Ott. “We’re measuring where you’re energized to make an impact.”

Participants were invited to apply this thinking in teams. The exercise tasked them with designing a strategic roadmap to solve a pressing challenge—such as transforming a business development approach or delivering an AI strategy—by leveraging the mix of GC Index roles within their team. The aim: to prioritize the right kind of energy at the right moment in a project’s lifecycle.

The results were both practical and insightful. Teams gained new perspectives on collaboration, leadership blind spots, and how to structure initiatives around the strengths already present—or identify where new profiles might be needed.

While not focused on regional markets or executive education delivery models directly, the GC Index sessions resonated for their immediacy and usefulness. The language gave participants a fresh lens for thinking about leadership and teamwork—tools they could take home and apply immediately. It also offered a reminder that some of the most impactful shifts begin with self-awareness—and that transforming organizations often starts by understanding how people are wired to contribute.



Session 5: Driving Growth — Strategies for Marketing, Business Development, and Sales in Executive Education

The final session of Day 2 brought together a global panel of executive education experts to explore how institutions are evolving their marketing, sales, and business development strategies in an increasingly competitive and data-driven landscape. Moderated by Mohamed Kesseba, the session ranged widely—from organizational design to digital innovation and the future role of content.

Breaking Down Silos: Aligning for Growth

The conversation opened with a familiar challenge: how to align siloed functions like marketing, sales, and business development. The panel agreed that true integration begins with structure, but is ultimately sustained by shared goals and communication.

“On the question of central vs. decentralized—for me, hybrid works well,” said Danielle Macedo, Director of Marketing and Member Engagement, UNICON. “When marketing sits with the executive education team, even if just once a week, it makes a difference. The other thing that helps? Clear, simple objectives.” Rayner Canning, Director Business Development and Executive Education, University of Cape Town, Graduate School of Business, reinforced the importance of aligning teams to customer needs:

“It’s about understanding your segments and services, and linking those functions accordingly.”

At IMD, Sabri Fathallah, Director Custom Programs Development, shared how the school has acted structurally to improve alignment:

“We put marketing, B2B, and B2C sales under one dean and on the same floor. It sends a message—alignment is expected.”

David Kang, Associate Dean of Executive Education, Stanford University, Graduate School of Business Stanford, emphasized the relational work needed to build real collaboration:

“When you’re accountable for a result—like making the sale—but don’t have total control over it. You have to influence—aligning your goals with the goals of other groups. Create win-wins all the way around.”

Retention Over Acquisition

Turning to growth, the panel argued that starting with current clients is not only more cost-effective—it’s more impactful.

“We know that improving client retention by just a small percentage can have a big impact on growth” said Daniel Chadwick, Founder of Nexed Insight and Director at IEDP. “Growth starts with overperforming for the clients you already have.”

Chadwick shared findings from an upcoming study from Nexed Insight, developed in partnership with UNICON, that shows that what clients value most in their learning partners is alignment with business goals, followed closely by adaptability.

“These two are connected. It’s adaptability that enables you to stay aligned as client needs evolve.”



Content: From Marketing Asset to Strategic Through-line

The role of content was discussed, not only in marketing but as an ongoing mechanism for engagement and value delivery.

“Notice the overlaps,” said Macedo. “Someone considering an EMBA may well appreciate the same content as someone looking at a flagship leadership program.” She advocated for high-value, topic-level campaigns and regular content engagement—not just promotional material, but case studies, faculty insights, and lectures.

“What do you want different segments to be reading, seeing, acting upon?” asked Rayner Canning. “It’s not just about producing content—it’s about segmenting it, personalizing it, and making sure it reinforces what you do and why it matters.” In response, Kesseba observed that, “It’s not about finding customers for your content—it’s about finding content for your customers.”

Chadwick proposed looking beyond the education sector for inspiration: “There’s a lot we can learn from the creator economy—how YouTubers and podcasters build a cohesive narrative you can jump into at any point and feel included. Our sector could use more of that continuity and narrative flow.”

Kang highlighted content as a strategic asset—not just for engagement but as a sustainable growth strategy: “The number one strategic issue in our industry—or close to it—is the cost of customer acquisition. Content plus community might be the solution. That’s what we’ve started to focus on—building community around the content we create. Engaged alumni tend to want to give back, in all kinds of ways.”

Digital Tools, Personalization, and Data-Driven Engagement

As the conversation turned to digital innovation, panelists discussed the growing role of AI, CRM, and personalization in shaping smarter go-to-market strategies.

“In MENA, it’s a crowded market,” said Sabri Fathallah. “In 2019, we counted 33 business schools serving the region—plus consultants and boutique firms. We chose to differentiate by building on our unique strengths, not by copying others.”


Macedo noted the growing accessibility of AI tools and more sophisticated CRM systems. Some schools are now co-developing AI platforms with partners like Microsoft to meet privacy and usability needs.

Chadwick stressed that personalization is now expected across all age groups—not just by digital natives:

“Personalization depends on data. But it’s a value exchange. People will share data if the result is relevant and engaging. We have to keep justifying that exchange—here’s what we’ll do with your data, and why it’s worth it.”

Canning concluded with a timely reminder:

“Innovation starts with mindset. The tools are out there. The question is—do your people want to keep iterating, improving, and experimenting?”



“We chose to differentiate by building on our unique strengths, not by copying others.”

Sabri Fathallah, Director, Custom Programs Development, IMD

Day 3 Grand Egyptian Museum

Session 6: The AI Advantage — Navigating the Impact of Artificial Intelligence in Executive Education

The final session of the UNICON Directors' Conference, chaired by Dean Sherif Kamel of the Onsi Sawiris School of Business, brought the focus squarely onto one of the most pressing—and polarizing—forces reshaping executive education today: artificial intelligence. With insights from deans and executive education leaders across the global sector, the discussion explored AI's practical applications, strategic risks, and potential to redefine the industry.

From Curiosity to Integration

Eric Bergemann, Managing Director of Americas and Industry Programs, MIT Sloan Executive Education, captured the urgency and pace of change:

“AI has moved from slow learning to fast learning. What used to be ‘another topic’ is now being woven into the fabric of business.”

He described the formula as mass plus speed equals increased impact—not just for AI, but for the institutions trying to keep up with client expectations.

Nicholas Hamilton-Archer, Chief Executive Education Officer, Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan was equally direct:

“I think we have to lean into the machines. At Ross, AI is being integrated into prospecting, marketing, coaching, in design thinking workshops using AI customer avatars. The mindset we've adopted is: how does AI give us the capacity to do what we want to do?”

Yet, as Aniya Iskhakava, Director, IESEOnline and IESE Business School, pointed out, the challenge isn't just technical—it's cognitive:

“We're in a period of testing. But we must avoid the paradox of automation—the more we automate, the less skilled we become.”

She shared a cautionary tale in which AI-generated content during a brainstorming session diminished creativity: “Everything had been copied and pasted.” The antidote, she said, is building intellectual communities and providing faculty with structured support, including case development and internal learning networks.



“The mindset we've adopted is: how does AI give us the capacity to do what we want to do?”

Nicholas Hamilton-Archer, Chief Executive Education Officer, Ross School of Business, University of Michigan

Human Strategy in an AI World

The panelists agreed that effective use of AI demands more than tools—it demands thoughtful strategy and governance.

Dean Kamel offered a framework: People > Data > Governance > Technology infrastructure.

“The technology is meaningless without the other elements,” he emphasized. Hamilton-Archer added:

“Content is ubiquitous—so what’s next? We need to find unique ways to meet the needs of today. And we still want the human moments: that dopamine hit of meeting new people, having your ideas validated or challenged.” He described current challenges as “solvable” and even welcomed the rise of AI tools as the modern-day Cliff Notes—a reality to adapt to, not resist. “We’ve got to be thoughtful. But this also opens up an opportunity for executive education to act as trusted advisors to industry.”

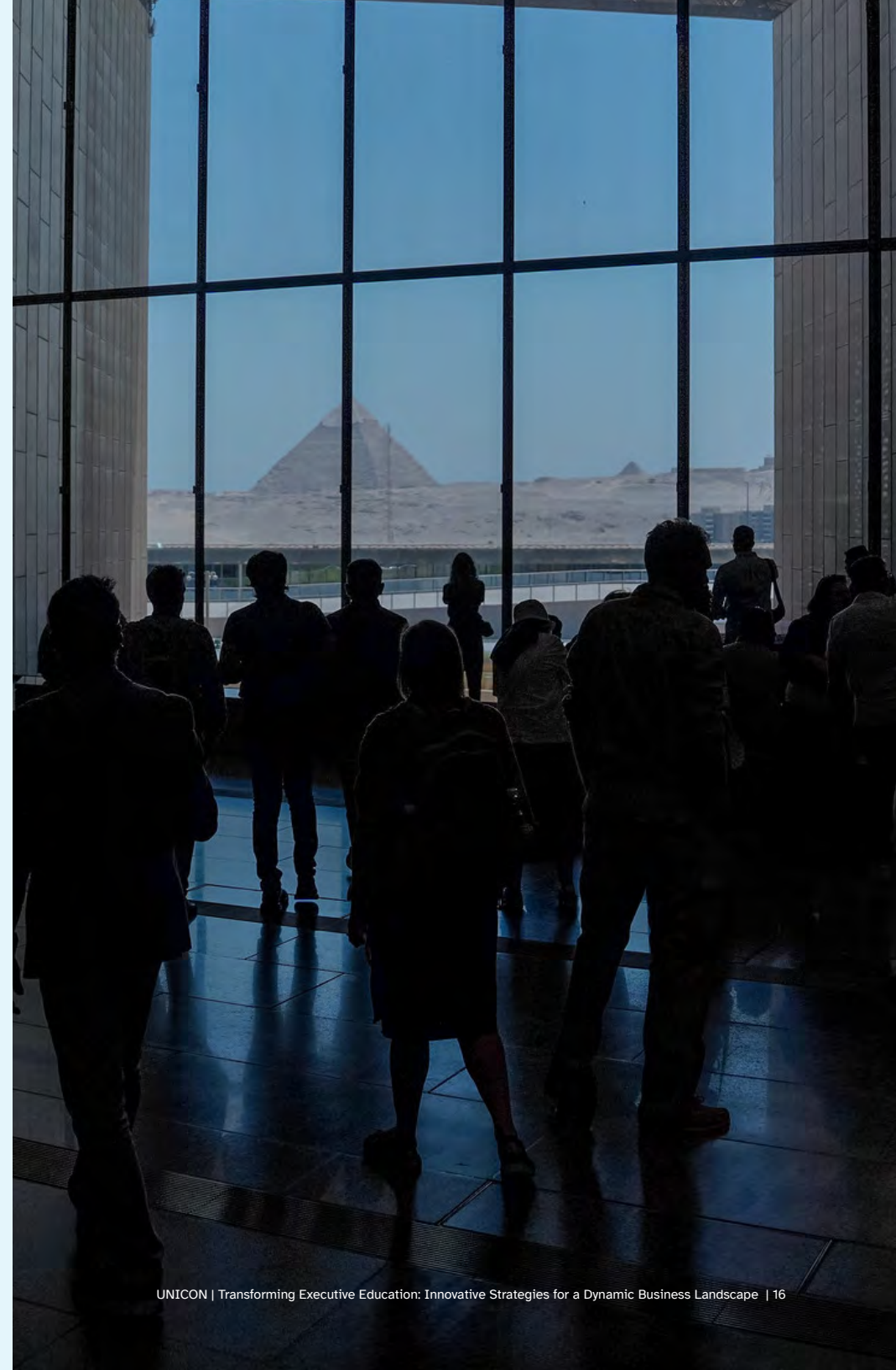
Bergemann echoed this sentiment, noting that AI has energized faculty: “It’s not ‘same old, same old’ anymore. There’s tremendous cross-pollination between universities around AI research. It fires up the faculty and it fires up the team.”

Risks, Ethics, and the Path Forward

The panel also acknowledged the risks: overreliance, ethics, data security, and what one participant called the “hallucination problem”—AI-generated outputs that appear credible but are incorrect.

Eric Bergemann raised one market response we may see in response: “We’re going to see a growing focus on assurance of learning. AI is accelerating that need. It’s not just what people know—it’s how they apply it.” In closing, Hamilton-Archer reminded the room that while AI is disruptive, it also signals opportunity:

“There’s a generational shift happening. People want things now. Institutions need to keep pace, but not lose sight of the human experience. And in all of this, we’re moving at different speeds. That’s why learning from each other, as we’ve done here, is so valuable.”



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