Beirut: 21-6-2021

AI for Accessibility Hackathon Kickoff and Orientation Event

AI for Accessibility Hackathon has officially kicked off.

Marking the tenth Global Accessibility Awareness Day (GAAD), the Talal and Madiha Zein AUB Innovation Park, in collaboration with the Maroun Semaan Faculty of Engineering and Architecture and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and Beirut Digital District (BDD), is organizing the AI for Accessibility Hackathon.

GAAD is a day aimed at spreading awareness and getting everyone talking, thinking, as well as learning about digital access / inclusion, and people with different disabilities.

The AI for Accessibility Hackathon Kickoff and Orientation took place in May 2021, to shed light on the importance of enhancing digital accessibility, to share stories of inspiring communities, startups, as well as individuals who are contributing to the inclusion of people with disabilities, and most importantly, to give you the chance to know how you can take part in building a socially inclusive community today.

Dr. Yousif Asfour, chief innovation and transformation officer at AUB, presented the welcome note at the event, as he introduced attendees to the importance of joining the hackathon, stating that "if you love AI and care about making this a more inclusive world, then this hackathon is for you."

Following Dr. Asfour's warm welcome, Jennison Asuncion, co-founder of GAAD and head of accessibility engineering evangelism at LinkedIn, shared his experience and motivation behind founding GAAD and thanked the organizers for continuing the celebrations of GAAD as part of helping fulfill its goal which is to "disrupt the culture of the product development cycle for both technology and digital products, in such a way that accessibility is a core requirement."

Samer Chidiac, the regional director and resident chief innovation officer of the Microsoft Technology Centers across the Middle East and Africa, followed with the accessibility commitment from Microsoft. He emphasized the importance of events like this hackathon where "accessibility innovators collaborate to make our world more inclusive" and that "it's not necessarily that you are going to make huge innovations… any improvement you can make is affecting a life and giving the opportunity to people to do more."

Mark Henry, the data and AI technical lead at Microsoft, further highlighted the hackathon vision as well as the opportunity Microsoft is providing for innovators to thrive. He also shared the inspiring story of Sakib Shiekh who used Microsoft's technology to impact his life and other visually impaired people through the Seeing AI app he built.

Anirban Lahiri, an ICT access research specialist in accessibility and assistive technology at Mada Assistive Technology Center, introduced the audience to Mada and their focus on commitment to the education sector as well as the culture and community sector. He also highlighted the role of Mada's innovation program in the Arab region as they "wanted to create a mechanism that would encourage innovators to create new solutions."

Following Anirban's talk, Christophe Zoghbi, the founder and CEO of Zaka and Beirut AI, highlighted the efforts of both Beirut AI and Zaka in democratizing AI. He also shared some insights about the AI Ready Academy as it "introduces AI to university students all over MENA and aims to equip them with hands-on industry skills in artificial intelligence." With that emphasis on the impact of the education provided by Beirut AI and Zaka on the community, he added that they are always looking forward to supporting their communities with technical expertise.

Dr. Hazem Hajj, an associate professor at AUB and an AI leader, gave a welcome note on behalf of the Maroun Semaan Faculty of Engineering and Architecture as well as some insights on both the educational and research opportunities in artificial intelligence at AUB as well as the investment in entrepreneurship and startups in technology and AI. He also encouraged the audience to consider career options in AI as they are "very rewarding but require a lot of dedication and resilience."

Up next was Ralph Khairallah, the community growth manager representing BDD, who emphasized the core role of technology in the mission of Beirut Digital District and the importance of "using technology and innovation to solve such challenges as we are proud to be part of the accessibility hackathon."

This was followed by the orientation and program kick-off presentation as Maha Zouwayhed, the business development manager at AUB's Office of Innovation and Transformation, and Dr.

Mona Itani, the coordinator of the entrepreneurship initiative and senior instructor of innovation entrepreneurship, stated the aim of the hackathon in rallying talents and fostering the regional development of the innovative entrepreneurship community related to AI. They further highlighted the two tracks participants can work on during the hackathon, assistive technology and physical Aid, and their impact on society. The hackathon team also highlighted that enthusiasts that are looking for teammates to partner with and participate may visit the hackathon's LinkedIn event page and post their teaming needs to find their match. They wrapped up with valuable tips and guidelines for the hackathon participants.

Up next was the accessibility by design talk where Saira Sayed, business development director for partnerships at Inclusive, and Saba Aamir, the frontend developer and technology projects lead at Inclusive, who introduced Inclusive as an app that connects people with disabilities to jobs, events, and opportunities. They emphasized the fact that "accessibility is an ongoing process" and the importance of "involving people of determination in the process of making the environment, whether online or offline, accessible."

The last stop was the discussion panel about AI for accessibility and the role of startups where Roberto Croci, managing director of Microsoft for Startups in the Middle East and Africa, introduced the audience to Mohammad Kilani, co-founder of Mind Rockets, Nandu Jith, founder and CEO of Nexart, and Jose Rubinger Filho, CCO and co-founder of Key2Enable, who shared the inspiration behind building their startups while demonstrating the social impact of entrepreneurship. Of the most crucial notes shared during this discussion panel was the importance of involving people with disabilities in the process of building accessible solutions for them.

With that, the AI for Accessibility Hackathon's Kickoff and Orientation was concluded. Thirty-one teams have been accepted, including 100 participants, from 11 different countries across the MENA region. The hackathon mentorship will include, in addition to the business and technical feedback, user experience input by users with special needs.

Four winners will get $2,500 each, in addition to receiving incubation at Zein AUB iPark, and one innovation will be selected to be awarded another $10,000 by AUB's Faculty of Arts and Sciences to continue the product development.

The final hackathon event and closing ceremony will take place at BDD as well as online, on June 25, and 26.

ENDS

For more information please contact:

Simon Kachar, PhD
Director of News and Media Relations
Mobile: (+961) 3-427-024
Office: (+961) 1-374-374 ext: 2676
Email: sk158@aub.edu.lb

Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 900 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 9,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 140 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 365-bed hospital.

Stay up to date on AUB news and events. Follow us on:

Website: www.aub.edu.lb
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/aub.edu.lb
Twitter: http://twitter.com/AUB_Lebanon