Chapter 17
Bridging the Gaps Between Higher Education, Industry, and the Learner:
The Skills-First Approach

Goran Trajkovski
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3745-3009
Western Governors University, USA

Racheal L. Killian
Western Governors University, USA

Samantha Coen
Western Governors University, USA

ABSTRACT

The gap between higher education and industry is often discussed, but mitigating solutions lag behind and contribute to its widening. This chapter explores the root causes of this gap and examines the establishment of common frameworks based on skills and approaches to assessing those skills as the path forward. The perspective and needs of the industry, the learners, and higher education are discussed. Data silos to inform the educational product on skills in need by industry exist. Tools to support communicating skills in various technology solutions in the spirit of a holistic learning and employment record are emerging. Skills and competencies that populate those records must be relevant, appropriately validated, and communicated using an agreed-upon language. Selected examples of current and emerging approaches in the skills-first approach to establishing common frameworks for communication and assessment are provided to illustrate possibilities.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education and industry are integral, interdependent parts of the economy. Their seamless collaboration provides an engine for economic growth. Higher education does not exist in a vacuum and is subject to environmental pressures. The continuous change from consumer expectations and perception of products necessitates a perpetual reexamination of an institution's vision and methodologies for instruction. Global trends and societal transformation appeal to the need for change in educational offerings and attainment of demonstrable skills.

A skill, in simplest terms, is the ability to do something competently. Skills ontology is a categorization of skills that builds a common language of skills, defining the aspects of a specific job rather than relying on blanket terms and vague descriptions (World Economic Forum, 2021). Employers are looking for a workforce that has the high-demand, relevant skills that are needed to fill the available job roles. Institutions of higher education are presented with an opportunity to teach learners the specific skills that employers are looking for within innovative curricula that are built with those relevant skills at the forefront of the design process. This is skills first design, the instruction and assessment strategy that is founded in workforce high-demand skills, which guide the design and development of assessment artifacts, learning outcomes, and holistic experience of the learner. Skills first design is the key to unifying the needs of higher education, the learner, and industry by establishing meaningful relationships between these groups. Trust is built through incorporating high-demand skills in the learning product, building partnerships between industry and higher-education, speaking a common language of what an individual (the learner and the worker, learner-worker) can do and creating means for the learner-worker to demonstrate and communicate their skills. In this chapter, the term learner-worker is used to denote an individual with or without skills that uses educational products for skilling, upskilling, or reskilling, without specific references to traditional taxonomies of learners such as traditional and adult students.

For skills first design to be a success, it is imperative that industry has the confidence that learner-workers are truly competent in the skills which they report to have. In this context, higher education needs to not only teach learners the skills they need to be competent workers but also create an authentic assessment experience where learners can demonstrate to both the higher education institution and the employer that they are competent in a given skill set. Assessments that are typically developed by subject matter experts and focus on skills in a realistic context, allow learners to authentically demonstrate competencies. Using frameworks and tools that capture a learner's educational journey and skills in a learning and employment record is considered a vehicle for bridging the gaps between industry and higher education.

This chapter will examine the role of skills in higher education and industry, the importance of collecting and using insights from skills data, the skills first design through competency-based education, implementing assessment methods to measure skills, and the importance and means of communicating skills between higher education and the workplace.

BACKGROUND

Learners are looking for alternative, quicker, just-in-time opportunities to demonstrate competencies and skills that are readily applicable. Skills have become labor market currency, and job seekers, employers, and learners need better, faster, more efficient ways to develop skills to use as currency (Pulsipher,

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