

## SOFT SKILLS: IF THEY ARE BECOMING MORE CRITICAL THAN KNOWLEDGE TO STUDENTS' EMPLOYABILITY, WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE UNIVERSITIES?

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has already disrupted the world of work to such an extent that notions of linear careers in a single specialized field where an individual will gradually work his or her way to the highest level achievable – the main 'selling point' for a university education for many decades – have all but become obsolete. Increasingly, white-collar workers who believed their line of work was immune to AI and automation are discovering that they can be supplanted by a cost-saving software program. For the past few years, the response of employers and multiple other stakeholders to this epic transformation has been to emphasize the need for so-called 'soft skills', broadly defined as non-technical skills that relate to how people work and interact with others in a work setting, as opposed to cognitive – 'hard' – skills that define a specific trade and are learned through formal education, training, and/or practice. An assessment of what longer-term impact the pandemic may have on international student mobility, and more broadly on the internationalization of higher education, requires first an examination of the damage incurred thus far since the onset of the pandemic, and then a review of what data is available on how international enrollments and institutional international policies may evolve over the next two years.

### THE FUTURE BELONGS TO SKILLS

This trend seems to have accelerated in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, as documented by a LinkedIn survey of millions of job ads in mid-2020 that identifies communication, problem-

solving, analytical skills, customer service and leadership as the top five soft skills employers will prize in the coming years. Such findings are corroborated by Deloitte, the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2020 (where critical thinking and problem-solving are said to top the list of skills employers believe will grow in prominence in the next five years), and the output of multiple other research institutions. Skills in self-management such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility have been added to the list this year as relevant post-pandemic soft skills. In a McKinsey study released in April 2021, Building workforce skills at scale to thrive during – and after – the Covid-19 crisis, 69 percent of companies surveyed report doing more skill building than before the onset of the pandemic. Over half of respondents say that these skill-building efforts have focused on social and emotional skills such as interpersonal and empathy skills, as well as leadership, critical-thinking, decision-making and project-management skills – in other words on skills typically labeled as soft. Relying on, among other sources, the LinkedIn survey mentioned above, the World Economic Forum lists the ten most sought-after hard skills (ranging from Blockchain to AI, scientific computing, business analysis and video production) and the five most in-demand soft skills (creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability and emotional intelligence), but it also goes one major step forward: it supplies a list of educational outlets that offer online courses people can take to acquire these skills (e.g., LinkedIn Learning, Coursera, Udemy) away from a traditional academic setting, all for costs ranging from \$13 to \$160 per course, not to mention many free-of-charge options. "Skills – not degrees – will shape the future of work", the World Economic Forum concludes.

These developments are not lost on young people. On last year's United Nations World Youth Skills Day, an annual forum aimed at promoting the importance of equipping youngsters with skills for future employment, participating students from Argentina, Algeria and South Africa emphasized the need for educators to teach modern skills rather than "old-fashioned curricula", and shared a strong sense that schools and universities are not currently imparting the skills these youngsters think they will need in the labor markets of tomorrow. Participants also underscored the significance of acquiring strong soft skills, such as communication, critical thinking and resilience, and said they understood they will need to keep learning throughout their lives.

## IS HIGHER EDUCATION OUT OF SYNC?

The rising demand for soft skills may pose yet an additional challenge for universities, whose historical role has been rooted in the transmission of knowledge rather than in the cultivation of skills. Already in 2018, 60 percent of respondents in a national survey of employers in the United States found that recent college graduates did not have decent oral and written communication skills or a good work ethic, and 67 percent said they did not possess adequate leadership skills – all of which are in the category of soft skills. The sense that young people who just graduated from university after investing for years in a degree program are not as job-ready as employers would wish is tangible through many developed economies.



A greater focus on soft skills in the labor market may therefore add fuel to the debate, started in the wake of the 2008-2009 financial and economic crisis, on the relevance of the traditional university degree to entry-level job prospects. A working paper published in 2016 by the U.S. National Bureau of Economic

Research, Recent Flattening in the Higher Education Wage Premium: Polarization, Skill Downgrading, or Both? and showing that between 2010 and 2015, the wage gap between workers with a college degree and those with only a high school degree remained unchanged – among other, similar findings – provides the broad context for this debate. But the truly alarming source of danger for universities that has developed over the same decade is the unbundling of tertiary education, in which shorter, more skilled-focused online courses provided by a growing number of corporate agents, often in partnership with universities, offer market-ready validation through micro-credentials and badges as an alternative to years-long degree programs. In recent years, these micro-credentials have been increasingly marketed as a short-term, cost-effective learning path that provides higher return on investment than a degree and is increasingly sought after by employers. Micro-credentials are also in sync with the growing imperative of promoting lifelong learning that educational and corporate stakeholders now believe is the answer to the challenge of ongoing technological advances, as documented by the World Economic Forum's 2020 Future of Jobs Report, which finds that 50 percent of all employees will need reskilling by 2025. Crucially, more and more online platforms are now proposing modules and courses on soft skills, and it can be assumed that the unbundled offering in soft skills will only expand in the near future, thereby posing an increased challenge to universities that still primarily depend on a traditional degree path.

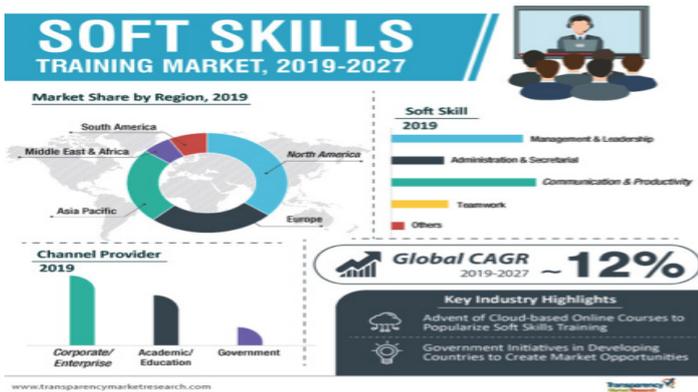
What this emerging outlook seems to point to is therefore a reinforced imperative for universities to invest more resources in skills-oriented programs, with an emphasis on soft skills. Whether this, for many institutions, can be done without shifting away from a classical academic offering has already been for years a leading concern among higher-education stakeholders.

## UNIVERSITIES AS SOFT SKILLS PROVIDERS

One of the problems this prospect poses is that teaching soft skills as a self-contained subject is still a new, vastly untried avenue. Long before the term itself was coined, universities did impart, in the broader context of liberal higher education, what is today branded as soft skills – at least the most crucial among them, such as critical skills, creative thinking, problem solving and communication. These were part and parcel

of a liberal education, but they were acquired and honed by students in the process of gradually specializing in a particular academic discipline. Rather than taught as free-standing subjects, they were passed on as the accruing benefits of pursuing an education anchored in a solid body of knowledge, starting from general education and with the aim, at least for some students, of reaching a level of expertise in a specific field over time. Whether universities are best equipped to dispense these skills as stand-alone learning units remains open to debate.

in which “a more comprehensive concept of [...] self-organized capacity to act, creativity, innovation and competence, form a new vision of individuals, capable to act under new, unknown, unprepared circumstances”, and able to meet “complex problem-solving challenges – with knowledge playing an enabling role but transformed through volition, ability, values and experiences.” Ehlers argues that in this era, knowledge is no longer viewed as the key ingredient for action but exists alongside other factors such as “values, personal traits, and the development of a disposition to act”, as the paradigm of “self-organization” in a variety of challenging contexts becomes paramount.



This account of a possible future for higher education is in keeping with the broad shift the sector has already been experiencing over the past decade, from an emphasis on knowledge, partly unrelated to market demands, to a growing focus on skills and employability. In this emerging context, the transmission of knowledge and pursuit of expertise in one narrowly defined field of specialization or scholarship, while remaining the purview of the university, may no longer lie, in the longer term, at the core of its mission. Across the world, governments and other regulatory bodies are increasingly researching and putting in place frameworks that enable institutions of higher learning to remain among the key providers and carry out this transition with success. In 2020 for example, the Erasmus+ program of the European Union published a set of guidelines aimed at “enhancing the presence of soft skills in higher education curricula (Skills4Employability).

Already in 2012, the European Commission had argued in *New skills and Jobs in Europe: Pathways towards full employment*, a report on skills, that given how crucial soft skills were bound to become for getting employment and that a university education did not guarantee the acquisition of those skills, “vocational education and training (including on-the-job and mid career training) should be considered as a more cost-effective way than higher education to provide soft skills and to keep workers up to date with fast-changing requirements that characterize their occupations.”

What the rise in the demand for soft skills and the expansion of alternative learning/training solutions will undoubtedly imply in the near future for multiple universities across the world that have not yet begun to address the issue is the need to strategize their position. The options broadly come down to three: 1) ignore the demand and run the risk of becoming irrelevant; 2) maintain the traditional model while including a strong soft-skill offer in the curricula, however challenging; 3) shift the model to partnering with platforms that provide online training in soft skills. Any combination of options 2 and 3 may add possible solutions, but option 1 will increasingly come across as a perilous choice.

At broader level, a growing bulk of the literature focused on higher education is indeed pointing toward the dawning of a “post-knowledge era”. In a book that is a part of a Springer series on the future of higher education titled *Future Skills: The future of learning and higher education*, Ulf-Daniel Ehlers, a professor of educational science at the Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University in Germany, underscores the role played by knowledge within three different periods: 1) the industrial age, in which technology was at the forefront and industrial production dominated what constituted knowledge; 2) the knowledge age, in which mass educational systems dispensed knowledge with the broad aim of promoting upward mobility; and 3) today’s “post-knowledge era”,

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