



GLOBAL

When a degree just isn't enough, also offer upskilling

Nita Temmerman 08 March 2019

We are hearing more and more about the ever-necessary requirement in today's competitive, fast paced, technology-driven society to either reskill or upskill. Lifelong learning is no longer a slogan or an option, but a reality – a necessity.

There are multiple reports that point to today's graduates changing jobs up to 10 or even more times during their lifetime. It seems reasonable to assume that there will be some skills (re)training required if these job changes are to successfully occur, especially given the rapidity of new knowledge development.

Employers want graduates with both theoretical and practical knowledge and skills. We can add to that the call by employers for freshly graduated university job hunters to have practical, industry- or professional-related skills. Employers want employees who have both theoretical knowledge and understanding as well as hands-on, real-world know-how and who can 'hit the ground running'.

A large number of university courses now include some work-based learning, but those experiences can be limited in time and breadth of experience. So where might university graduates turn to gain up-to-date employment skills not obtained through their university academic degree? Here are two possible options. The first is the vocational education training (VET) sector itself; and the second is universities supplementing degrees with complementary skill-based certificates.

Pathways between university and VET

The higher education and VET sectors offer compatible education offerings. One is not better than the other – they are different, despite the lesser status some associate with the VET sector.

The difference between the two extends, for example, to the type of programmes offered and their design, teaching styles, student support and services and staff qualifications and experience.

There are, of course, examples of dual provider institutions that offer the full gamut of qualifications from certificate through to doctorate. These institutions have arrived at well-

functioning arrangements for two-way movement to occur between the sectors.

There have been articulation arrangements between the higher education and VET sectors for many years. However, much of the student traffic between the two sectors has been VET students articulating from VET to university to upgrade a qualification.

This is reflected in their marketing blurbs that promote: 'Pathways to university'; 'How to gain credit for a VET course for university study'; 'Articulating from technical and further education (TAFE) to university'; and 'Get into university through TAFE'.

Reverse articulation does occur, where university graduates enrol on a VET course, mostly in order to gain vocationally specific training. However, it is typically something that students who are self-motivated do on an individual basis after they have completed their degree rather than something that is actively encouraged by their university.

There still appears to be room for much better promotion by the VET sector of its capacity to value-add to a university graduate's theoretical knowledge base in this way and for universities to genuinely endorse this.

It may not be, and doesn't have to be, pertinent to all graduates. However, those who complete a more 'generalist' arts or science degree may gain quite a bit by completing a VET course that focuses on specific technical, practical skills and provides hands-on specific industry experience.

It would be fair to say that there is still considerable scope for improved genuine cooperation to occur between the university and VET sectors, along with efforts to acknowledge their complementary value.

Practical certificate qualifications

Another option that more universities are starting to embrace is the incorporation of professional skill-based certificate-level qualifications as a supplement to a conventional degree level course. These could be offered to students immediately prior to commencing their degree or during their degree study. Combining a degree with a certificate can provide students with a competitive edge when applying for a post.

Certification programmes are characteristically specialised in a particular field and skill set or industry area and tend to focus on technical competencies rather than academic coursework.

In examples where there has been opportunity and efforts to joint plan what goes into the degree and the associated certificate by those delivering the two qualifications, students and employers express high levels of satisfaction with the complementarity of knowledge, understanding and skills presented.

The option of delivery of certificates is not restricted to undergraduate level only. Masters

level students, and in particular international students, benefit from professional development skills-based, practical modules that provide opportunity to familiarise themselves with country-specific standards and regulatory requirements, work procedures and industry codes of practice that apply to most professions.

Not an automatic ticket to a job

The job selection process no longer entails submitting a written application and if 'lucky', a single interview. The process now often includes psychometric testing, multiple interviews and completing 'on-the-spot' activities to evaluate prospective employees' creativity and critical thinking.

It certainly advantages a graduate to be well rounded and have technical, practical career skills to complement the academic ones, along with other valuable life experiences such as travel, volunteer work and so forth.

In an increasingly competitive market, employers can usually pick and choose from a wide range of prospective qualified employees and so a degree is no longer an automatic ticket to securing a position.

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