IFCU
International Federation
ot Catholic Universities

NOTABLE TRENDS 2021
OVERVIEW N°1

FIRMS NOW WANT JOB-READY GRADUATES. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION?

The pressure on universities and colleges to mass produce graduates equipped with "employable skills" is not a new feature of the global society. For decades now, much of the higher education sector has broadly focused its strategies and curricula on this objective.

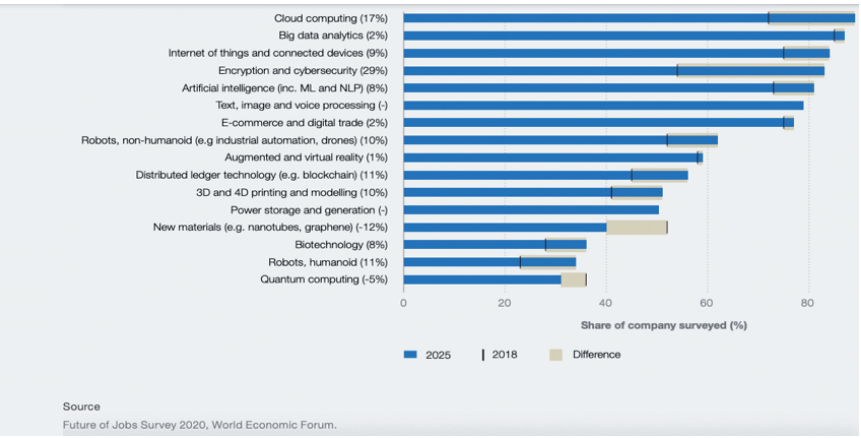
There are several reasons for this gradual shift from the time-old mission of promoting the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake to the goal of supplying qualified workers for the labor market. The most prominent one is the domination of the single neoliberal economic model that has asserted itself across the globe from the end of the Cold War. Within two decades, the demise of cleaving ideologies and the spread of market-led capitalism from the West to much of the planet had subdued higher education, turning it into a training ground for future employees and entrepreneurs. This is particularly true of the United States, where the cost of a college education has risen by more than 538% since 1985, thus undermining public trust in the value of a degree and prompting a growing number of institutions there to develop competency-based curricula. Over time, this shift has also affected countries where access to higher education is relatively cheap or virtually free. The overall trend was reinforced as a result of the financial and economic crisis of 2008, which in the West fueled further public skepticism about the worthiness of a college degree.

COVID-19 AND SKILLS

The onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic already seems to embody a third wave in this transformation of higher education. Corporate recruiters increasingly see the purpose of higher education as that of producing "job-ready" graduates. Emerging, a Paris-based human-resources consultancy firm, has been conducting a Global University Employability Survey among employers worldwide every year for the past decade, and the 2020 edition shows that 28% of respondents now believe that universities must supply "ready-to-work" graduates – up from only 8% ten years ago. This data confirms the results of the latest edition of the Global University Employability Ranking, carried out by Emerging and published by Times Higher Education, where the number of universities that engage in partnerships with firms to equip students with employable skills is shown to be on the rise. Countries that have traditionally had systems linking higher education and industry, such as Germany and South Korea, have done better than others in the ranking. The pandemic will undoubtedly accelerate this trend, with the survey showing that 82% of recruiters want increased collaboration with universities to "develop significantly new digital training formats" as a result of the Covid-19 crisis.

DIGITAL JOBS ON THE RISE

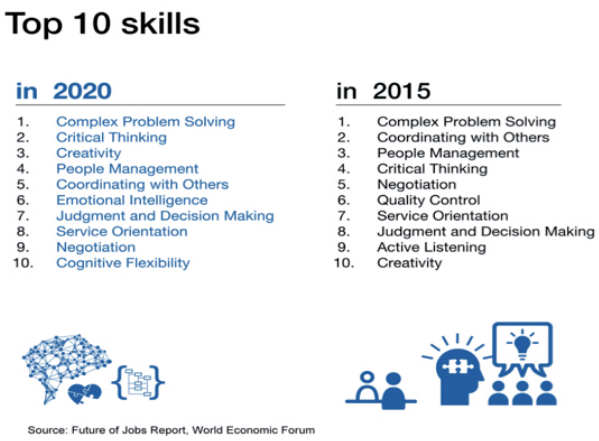
This reshaped job landscape is also prominent in the World Economic Forum's 2021 forecast of the future of work. WEF surveys show that digital roles already top the list of jobs on the rise in 2021, while a LinkedIn analysis of work trends in 15 countries suggests that leading jobs this year can all be done remotely. According to the WEF 2020 Future of Jobs report, 84% of employers plan to expand remote working, and 150 new technology jobs will be created within the next five years. What this evidently points to is that people equipped with strong digital skills will be at a significant advantage in the labor market of the next few years.



universities and employers alike as abilities that can be transferred directly from an educational path to a job as well as across jobs.

In light of changes to be expected in the job landscape in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, the WEF adds two critical skills to this list:

1 Learn to learn: the ability to rapidly gain new skills and knowledge to adapt to changes and succeed;



EVEN MORE EMPHASIS ON "SOFT SKILLS"

A major consequence of these shifts is that they will increase the pressure on universities to not only focus most of their academic offerings on STEM fields but also reinforce their emphasis on soft skills, thus accelerating a trend that has steadily grown in the last decade. The provision of soft skills, such as critical thinking, communication and creative problem-solving, has been consistently promoted by institutions of higher learning as their key argument to justify their own continued relevance in a world of fast-changing demand for professional competencies. Soft skills are indeed now viewed by

2 Learn to discern: the ability to discern what is factual and reliable in a flood of information – a need rendered even more crucial by the amount of misleading contents about the coronavirus that has surged on the internet since the beginning of the pandemic.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE HIGHER EDUCATION?

None of these changes are by essence new, and it is fair to say that the Covid-19 pandemic has only served to accelerate them. Thus, the existential crisis that they have already posed for higher education over the last decade is not a new development either. However, the

renewed imperatives of employability that have already transformed the overall mission of higher education are bound to affect universities even further, and leave by the wayside those unable to transform. Four main risks for universities in the coming years can consequently be anticipated.

First, universities that do not engage closely with industry will run the risk of seeing firms themselves become close competitors. According to the Global University Employability Survey mentioned above, 49% of recruiters believe that investing in internal qualification programs is preferable to partnering up with universities. Tech giants such as Google and Amazon have for years already been offering online training programs that provide certification and are in increasing demand in the labor market. On the other hand, vast gaps remain between employers' expectations and the ability of new graduates to adapt to a job. The 2018 Job Outlook Survey carried out by the National Association of Colleges and Employers in the United States finds that only 43% of employers surveyed believe that newly recruited graduates demonstrate sufficient professionalism and work ethic, only 42% view their oral and written communication skills as adequate, and 56% deem their critical thinking skills satisfactory. In addition, only 33% of employers surveyed say that recent graduates possess leadership skills.

Second, these shifts will further undermine the value of disciplines situated in the humanities and liberal arts. Not only has the very definition of contents in these fields been transformed over the last decade towards a greater emphasis on the development of soft skills, in particular critical thinking, but students are also significantly turning away from these disciplines, opting instead for technology and science. Even if the humanities manage to survive under the guise of critical-thinking development, questions must be raised as to the value and pertinence of this repurposing strategy. Can critical thinking be taught as a stand-alone skill, irrespective of what subject it is applied to? Can critical thinking be dissociated from prior mastery of a specific body of knowledge, the study of which alone can foster the learner's ability to question that knowledge, put it in perspective, and solve problems related to it? In short, prioritizing skills over knowledge has historically been the province of technical and vocational training, and universities in the long run may find themselves hard-pressed to demonstrate that they can do it better.

Third, should distance or even hybrid learning become more of a norm in the wake of the pandemic and should this combine with an increased demand for skills, universities may lose the major added value they have had of providing students with the in-person experience, the socialization among peers and the ability to create networks that will prove valuable when the time comes to integrate the work force as well as through career development.

Fourth, the expansion of online educational offerings, already surging before the pandemic through the unbundling of higher education and the spread of micro-credentials, will undoubtedly be boosted after countless universities were forced to transfer their courses on line for the better part of the last two academic years. In addition, the growing demand for skills in recent years has already prompted governments, especially in developing countries, to incorporate technical and vocational training programs into their national education and economic strategies – a move now championed by many international organizations, first and foremost the International Labour Organization. The coupling of these two trends indicates that alternative models of post-secondary education, requiring less time and money investment than a full college experience, will find even greater legitimacy and appeal across population segments seeking to learn and upgrade skills in years to come.

Corinne Mellul
Head of the IFCU Foresight Unit