

What if we turned the skills-gap debate around?

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One of the frequent criticisms levelled at universities in both the US and UK is that they do not provide students with the skills they need in the workplace. Often borrowing from human capital theory, first elaborated by the late Chicago School economist Gary Becker in the 1960s, critics argue that high aggregate unemployment rates, particularly of recent college graduates, are due to the lack of proper skills that translate into well-paying jobs. Good jobs exist, so the argument goes, there are just not enough people with the appropriate skills to fill them.

If universities could be “retooled” like an old factory or “disrupted” like a complacent industry in order to make them more responsive to evolving market needs, then the current mismatch of skills could be overcome and the economy could buzz along like before the 2008 downturn. In this “skills = jobs” formula, university students should be less concerned with understanding the way the world works and more focused on the ways of the world of work.

In this sense, they do not necessarily need “knowledge of things,” like Medieval History or Cultural Anthropology (these fields are often attacked by politicians as esoteric and irrelevant, such as Jeb Bush’s recent attack on psychology majors or Marco Rubio’s denigration of philosophy majors in the US), but rather require a series of “hard” and “soft” skills or “competencies” garnered from various sources that can then be packaged and credentialed or “badged” in some way and cashed in on the labor market.

As simplistic and reductionist as this view of the workings of labor markets, job availability and the purpose of education may be, the human capital and “skills gap” argument has taken on the force of truth in many places. In the US it has become the intellectual guide for numerous reports calling for university reforms issued over the last ten years by groups such as the Spellings Commission, the National Governors Association, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, the National Skills Coalition, as well as various think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute and the Center for American Progress.

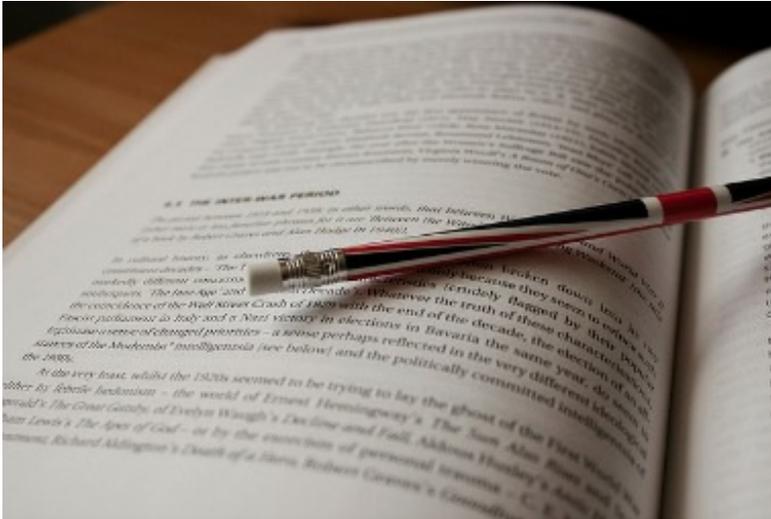
The idea of a skills disconnect has also been heavily promoted by venture philanthropic groups such as the Gates and Lumina Foundations as part of their “college completion agenda” and has been behind several initiatives and experiments to reform the liberal arts and general education launched over the last decade by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).

In the UK the skills gap argument has garnered considerable attention from various media outlets and is at the heart of formal reports issued by groups such as the global management consulting firm [McKinsey](#) and Company (*Education to Employment: Getting Europe’s Youth into Work*), the [National Centre for Universities and Business](#) and the [Association of Graduate Recruiters](#). Skill development is also a key rhetorical feature of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills recent [green paper](#), *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* that introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework.

En masse the “skills movement” constitutes an expansive global policy and funding network promoting such reforms as competency-based education, alternative and accelerated credentialisation and the use of student learning outcomes or SLOs to make sure university students can check off their employable skills, as well as new “fast food,” US style university models such as Western Governors University and Southern New Hampshire University’s College for America (the colleges with lots of competencies but few actual professors).

The problems with the skills-gap argument and the movement it helped generate are numerous, beginning with the basic fact that it is simply wrong or, at best, incomplete, simplistic and misleading. The skills movement and the human capital argument on which it is based contain an exclusively economic reading of education that seems to have mesmerized much of contemporary policy initiatives. Indeed it is only under such a reading that the reduction of the entire purpose of education to economics and the labor market would even make much sense.

The skills argument does not do justice to the complex structural conditions that makes certain skills in demand or not. It seems to replicate the economist Ludwig von Mises' rather callous declaration decades ago that if workers simply "reduced their demands and changed their locations and occupations according to the requirements of the labor market they could eventually find work." Borrowing from neoliberal economics, the skills gap movement passes this off as simply a matter of the "logic of market" working itself out as the supply of and demand for labor eventually equalise if left alone.



The economic reductionism inherent in this arguments blinds us to the fact that skills and knowledge are more a matter of the fusion of politics and society than the economics of some mythical free-floating labor market or the presence or absence of particular individual skills. Individual skill level, however defined, may explain why person X was hired for a position over person Y in one particular situation but it tells us nothing about the aggregate structural conditions that create or destroy particular types of jobs. For instance, as politics shifts from an emphasis on the expansion of education and social welfare to military spending, jobs and skills obviously shift from areas like teaching and social work to ones such as

shipbuilding and munitions manufacturing.

Likewise, as a social and political emphasis moves from crime prevention to crime control, different types of jobs in the criminal justice system, such as police or prison guards, wax and wane. As social preferences shift from print to online and then maybe back again, jobs again shift. Jobs also change as tax policies favour certain industries like finance or hedge funds over others such as manufacturing or as policies such as those advanced by neo-liberals reformulate, privatise and outsource public services like schools and health care. They also fluctuate as free trade agreements proliferate or protectionism prevail. These are not purely market or "human capital" matters but political dimensions of job diffusion driven by complex combination of political choices and shifting social norms.

Hence, the real skills gap resides in the types of employment available to workers created by the structural conditions under which work occurs. Much work that is currently available for college graduates is rather mundane and requires few skills beyond those delivered in elementary school or those that can be easily obtained on the job —"move that here," "punch these buttons," "fill out this form," etc. The true gap here is not one of skills, which are in abundance, but one of underutilization of talent or underemployment.

In other words, the skills gap actually runs the other way. It is employers who have not kept up with the improved skills and knowledge of university graduates over the decades. The managerially imposed hierarchy of jobs, the shrinking of the public sphere and the draconian features of a fast style of capitalism that disposes of workers at will means that workers in most places are not able to adequately utilize their knowledge for the betterment of the organisation they work for or society as a whole. They are merely hands to move and manipulate and minds to take and follow orders. They can be easily replaced as things shift about and can then be forced to join the precariat reserve labor force "making do" and waiting for a never arriving well-paying and stable job to come down the pike.

The skills movement shows the propensity of the current version of the market economy to devour itself and the social institutions that support it by trying to align everything to fit its immediate and short sighted purposes. Today we seem only capable of thinking in the economic and individualistic terms handed down by almost four decades of a particular neoliberal, market-centric rule. We have forgotten and become incapable of thinking of anything in long term political and social terms. We somehow knew that the purpose of education was about much more than

economics before our social democracies became completely subservient to the market and the voices of representative politics became muted by those of the economy.

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Notes:

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