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Inconsistency Between Admission Success and Career Readiness in Educational Institutions

Abstract

The purpose of the paper lies in analyzing the reasons for the mismatch between educational preparation and labor market requirements, justifying the importance of embedding the mastery of soft skills in foreign language learning at higher educational institutions, taking into account the current trends and expectations on the labor market, and sharing the experience of Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetman. *Methodology.* This research aims to investigate the correlation between labour market expectations, career satisfaction, and successful language learning and career preparation in higher education. The study will address the following questions: What justifications exist for school leavers' reluctance to pursue further education? Why are contemporary employers seeking employees with soft skills? And, how may the gap between these issues be bridged? Thus, this paper is based on an analytical review of recent publications and statistical analysis of data obtained from a survey of school leavers. In addition, an inductive approach was used to create generalised theories and conclusions based on a small number of observations. The results of the survey confirmed expectations that the main reason for the significant mismatch between the needs of the labour market and students' unwillingness to spend time on acquiring professional knowledge at university is the lack of social skills in interpersonal communication, in other words, mastering soft skills. *Practical implications.* The experience of the Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetman was shared, illustrating the interactive methods used in the process of learning English.

Keywords

higher education,
soft skills, interactive
methods, foreign language
acquisition, labour market

JEL: A22, F20, I2



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1 Introduction

In the twenty-first century, it is widely acknowledged that knowledge has become an invaluable asset for all businesses and companies. Therefore, higher education institutions are expected to manage it efficiently to create sustainable competitive advantages.

Moreover, today there is a growing tendency among potential future students and school leavers worldwide, which is mainly related to their reluctance to enter higher education institutions, which justifies such an approach that a four-year study is a waste of time. In this paper an attempt will be made to analyse the extent to which this trend is well-founded, the roots of the problem and possible solutions to the question of how to eliminate the negative consequences.

**2 The Gap between Education
and Employment Opportunities**

Over the past three years (2020-2023), research has been conducted in the US on the mismatch between education and employability in the US, and the results have been both startling and unexpectedly surprising. During Covid-19, the labour market faced unprecedented changes in employment patterns: pandemic measures and restrictions put millions of Americans out of work. Within a year (February 2020 – April 2021), the economy will face an unprecedented labour shortage, with nearly 4 million jobs and 8.1 million unfilled jobs across the US (Hansen, 2021). The explosive growth of the market can be supported by an intensive increase

in cybersecurity and technology that companies are pursuing to maintain the competitive level of innovation needed to continue this trend, as they can't find the right talent.

What's more, one of the well-founded reasons for this mismatch between labour supply and demand is the failure of educational institutions to prioritise employability and career readiness. It's not difficult to conclude that this tendency not only hurts employers and makes them vulnerable, but also sets the average worker up for failure before they even start their careers, as new employees hired on the basis of their four-year education often lack the actual skills needed to perform their jobs (Hansen, 2021).

In the US, a Cengage survey of two-year/community or four-year college graduates over the past five years (2016-2021) found that nearly one in five (19%) said their college experience did not give them the skills they needed for their first job after graduation. Furthermore, more than half (53%) of these college graduates did not apply for an entry-level job in their field because they felt unqualified, and nearly half (42%) felt unqualified because they did not have all the skills listed in the job description (Hansen, 2021).

Moreover, as Michael Hansen (Chief Executive Officer of Cengage, an education technology company serving millions of learners worldwide) has noted in his work since the beginning of the pandemic, job postings for entry-level positions requiring a bachelor's degree have dropped by 45% – focusing on the fact that employers simply want candidates with more skills and real-world experience (Hansen, 2021).

Some academics and researchers have suggested that the industry needs to change and give more credence to alternative education pathways that allow students to gain the skills they need to be employable. It is time for employers to increase confidence in skills-based recruitment, remove the stigma of vocational education, and move forward to create equal opportunities for all students.

The situation described above is not unique to the United States; similar trends are evident in European countries. In Germany, Austria and Switzerland, vocational education is seen as a pathway to the middle class, and an effective system for equipping students with the skills they need for their future careers has always been a focus. In the United States, approximately 65% of all job openings require a bachelor's or associate's degree, which in turn closes career paths for millions of Americans and, frankly, is not a prerequisite for success in many of today's open positions. Nevertheless, companies continue to penalise applicants who follow non-traditional educational paths, as nearly two-thirds (61%) of business leaders and HR departments admit to throwing out resumes without a four-year degree, even if the applicant is qualified (Hansen, 2021).

3 Results and Review of the Latest Research and Publications

The idea of rethinking and redesigning existing educational programmes so that higher education institutions are ready and able to train highly qualified personnel who meet the requirements of the labour market, which is shifting towards soft skills training, has always been in the focus of not only academics, researchers and scientists, but also employers. Furthermore, in 2018, a survey was conducted in the United States with nearly 652 employers on the skills they currently need in the workforce. The results of the survey confirmed the view that the top ten attributes that outpaced "technical skills" were "soft skills". As one of the leading soft skills researchers, Kevin Wayne Beardmore points out that the five most important skills for job candidates are listening, attention to detail, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and effective communication (Beardmore, 2019). According to Jeff Weiner, CEO of LinkedIn, who shares the same approach, the "biggest skills gap" in US companies is not in computer programming skills, but employees lack soft skills such as communication, teamwork and leadership (Stolzoff, 2018).

Consequently, in order to bridge this widening skills gap, higher education institutions are expected to quickly and nimbly align their curricula with the needs of employers. They are required to retool and upskill the preparation of students to ensure that they have the competencies demanded by the market (Beardmore, 2019). Fortunately, there is an advantage for higher education in addressing these two parts of the skills gap. According to Kevin Wayne Beardmore, educational institutions can increase the pace and complexity of their efforts because they have deep expertise to do so, which can be realised through iteration and improvement (Beardmore, 2019).

According to the study, employers looking for general language and communication skills often used a bachelor's degree as a proxy for this and other characteristics such as understanding social norms, recognising authority and being disciplined (Toner, 2011). Some companies have decided to "upskill" job candidates by using documents such as academic degrees to find candidates with "strong communication skills, leadership potential and reliability" as well as argumentation skills (Beardmore, 2019). According to the researcher, employers who rely on a bachelor's degree as an "employment screen" know that they can screen out good candidates, but believe that the learning experience provides important skills. It is recognised that by having a university experience, being mature and knowing how to work with different people, potential employees are able to communicate and express themselves.

At the same time, there is a growing trend that the complete and overwhelming dependence on four-year higher education may be disappearing. According

to the American Advisory Council on Labour Policy, established by the White House and the US Department of Commerce in 2019, the skills a candidate brings to the workplace, rather than a degree, are becoming more important (Dembicki, 2019). It is argued that innovative "new-collar" jobs do not require a bachelor's degree. This is the case for about half of the vacancies filled at Lockheed Martin and Apple in 2018 (Dembicki, 2019).

As a result, new testing and educational organisations and platforms are emerging on the educational landscape and shifting their focus. For example, Tessa is a social emotional learning assessment that includes both educational and workplace versions (ACT, 2019). ACT WorkKey solutions are designed to measure the soft skills "required to be a high performing employee" in order to improve a company's "competitive advantage" (ACT, 2019). In addition, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was introduced, which has traditionally tracked the reading, mathematics and science literacy of 15-year-old students every three years since 2000. Coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), PISA plans to add an optional soft skills assessment in the coming years, aimed at developing imagination, creativity, curiosity and collaboration (ACT, 19). PISA test director Andreas Schleicher believes that this is important for preparing students for future jobs. If society is not careful, he estimates that people will raise their children to be "second-class robots" rather than "first-class people" (Anderson, 2019). He also argues that mastery of soft skills will have a significant impact on job performance and increase opportunities for career change and promotion.

4. Discussion

The solution to this issue is that some organisations are taking their own approach to providing valuable alternative education options to align educational offerings with the skills needed to do real-world work, mainly soft skills or interpersonal skills. For example, Cengage has partnered with higher education institutions to create equitable access to education that promotes career readiness and to offer new hiring policy solutions that go beyond requiring a college degree alone. For example, at technology organisation Cengage, it has abandoned bachelor's degree requirements, recognising that a number of jobs require a skill set that can be acquired through alternative pathways that do not require a traditional degree, such as micro-credentials and certificate programmes (Hansen, 2021).

As for the situation in Ukraine, it is not so frustrating from the employers' point of view: in most cases they all require a higher education diploma, even for senior positions, and rely on a traditional four-year degree as the primary means of determining the

employability of applicants. But the reluctance of school leavers to go on to university, wasting what they see as four years on learning that will be outdated within four years, is growing alarmingly.

In 2022, an online survey was conducted among 18-19-year-olds (250 school leavers took part in the survey) via social media. They were asked to indicate their priorities for the coming year 2023, and almost 76% of respondents said they did not plan to continue their higher education. Out of 76% of respondents, 49% said they would combine work with learning certain skills through educational platforms such as Coursera, Projector, and Prometheus. Analysing the reasons offered by adolescents, it can be concluded that they believe that the education system in Ukraine is not responsible for ensuring that they are adequately equipped with the skills and abilities to prepare for a career that will provide them with financial stability after graduation.

This year, all higher education institutions are being asked to return to the way things were, resuming the educational process in brick-and-mortar buildings. Thus, it is clear that the archaic system of traditional education simply no longer works in today's highly digitalised world. There is a need to reassess the education system to better prepare students with skills that can be used in the labour market. Employers, in turn, need to change the way they assess candidates and job requirements. By addressing this issue, the education sector in Ukraine can help to support the economic recovery from the pandemic and the aftermath of the war, and prevent similar hiring gaps from occurring in the future.

At the same time, this misalignment between enrolment success and career readiness in educational institutions creates a difficult discrepancy for recruiters, job seekers and human resources teams who are asked to choose between hiring an employee with a required degree or one with the skills needed for the job. The answer, according to Michael Hansen, should be obvious – focus on hiring based on acquired and developed skills. In other words, today's employer attitudes towards non-traditional pathways need to change in order to open up the talent pool and build a workforce that's ready for the future. It is time for employers to "increase the credibility of skills-based hiring, remove the stigma around vocational education, and move forward to create equal opportunities for all students" (Hansen, 2021).

The match between the needs of employers and the training of potential employees has always been in sight, but at the same time, it leaves much to be desired. This gap is often referred to as the skills gap – and it is twofold. Some skills are technical, procedural and quantifiable. These "hard skills" are more likely to be context- or discipline-specific. Other skills do not fit into this classification. These "soft skills", also known as essential skills, 21st century skills, social-emotional skills or employability skills, are

interdisciplinary in nature. While most jobs require a combination of hard and soft skills, the demand for the latter is growing in an increasingly service-based economy.

The problem of a well-trained, highly skilled workforce is a perennial one. Part of the problem is related to supply and demand, as education systems strive to produce graduates with the technical competencies and relevant skills needed for available jobs.

In the new, rapidly evolving service and knowledge-based economy, soft skills are seen as a greater need by today's employers. Increasingly sought across all industries and organisations, whether private or public, these skills enable employees to work and collaborate independently and interdependently, to respond rapidly to customer needs and requirements, and to adapt to ever-changing market conditions and opportunities. As a result, higher education institutions are being called upon to integrate soft skills into their programmes and curricula.

However, in today's competency-based climate, a university degree is not sufficient proof. Higher education institutions need to produce graduates who demonstrate a willingness to develop soft skills.

At the national level, this refinement of workforce preparation and its link to post-secondary education is also evident. This trend is expected to continue as the production of high-tech, high-value, customised goods and services means that workers are expected to have greater knowledge and a broader range of skills – including interpersonal and non-cognitive skills that cannot be easily outsourced. Furthermore, these skills, such as problem identification, problem solving and non-verbal communication, can rarely be replaced by automation. Non-routine skills, whether manual or cognitive, cannot be formulated into programmable rules (Toner, 2011). Customer service excellence requires empathy and understanding. Innovation demands creativity and critical thinking. Yet some still fear that technological advances will eliminate jobs.

One of the best examples of bridging the gap between the skills expected by employers and the knowledge gained through traditional education is cooperation and strong professional dialogue between businesses and educational institutions, rather than the blind trust seen today, to create a workforce where people are prepared for their careers. The Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetman is deeply committed to this practice, offering students options for microloans, exchange programmes and certificates that help identify and more easily demonstrate to employers what employability skills they have developed as part of their education and training.

The faculty and administration of the University have regularly established partnerships with business and industry to facilitate and meet rapid

response. For example, the University has partnership programmes with companies such as: "LOGITY" (providing global logistics services), "Trans-service-1" (specialising in transport services), "Goodwell Ukraine" (food processing company), "Enzym Private Joint-Stock Company" (export-oriented private company producing yeast), "Nowy styl" (private company producing furniture), "T.B. Fruit" (leading fruit juice producer + companies specialising in engineering and transport & logistics) (KNEU, 2023). With a clear understanding and assessment of the need for qualifications, so as not to flood the market with graduates, the university focuses mainly on mastering and enhancing not only the hard skills specifically required by the manufacturing sectors (business analysis skills, business planning skills, project management skills), but also the soft skills that can be acquired in the course of various trainings, coaching sessions and courses (e.g., "Students Leadership Course", "Business Analytics and AI for Women", etc.) (KNEU, 2023). Companies also provide students with programmes and internship opportunities.

The University is also deepening its collaboration with the growing sectors of advanced manufacturing, information technology and healthcare, which rely on deeper knowledge and broader skills. For example, it has established partnerships with Ajax Systems and Progresstech Ukraine. Employers in these companies are looking specifically for university-educated individuals to fill positions in these increasingly high-tech industries to ensure that potential employees are prepared for the demands of these roles. Higher education institutions have responded by providing the career and technical education needed for these "new collar" jobs, which provide family-supporting wages.

In this regard, at the university level, the process of mastering a foreign language has become of paramount importance, as it has become a source of soft skills development.

At the Department of Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication of the Faculty of International Economics and Management, foreign language learning is based on the development of not only foreign language communication skills and competences, but also on the development of soft skills through the introduction of interactive communication methods. By reading authentic articles and analysing various business and management cases, the main goal is to develop the following skills: problem-solving, teamwork, communication skills (written), leadership, high work ethic, analytical/quantitative skills, communication skills (oral), initiative, attention to detail, flexibility/adaptability, interpersonal skills (treating others well), organisational skills, strategic planning skills, creativity, friendliness, communication skills, tact, entrepreneurship, risk-taking and, finally, fluency in a foreign language.

Interaction between students and teachers is carried out through various activities. Consider some of them.

After analysing articles on conflict management or human resource management, the students are given a "Picture Clue" exercise – they are shown several images without explanation and asked to identify or explain the problems and justify their answers. Students can write about the problems using terms from the lecture or name the processes and concepts shown in the figures. This task can develop critical thinking and analytical summarisation skills. The Thinking Break task involves asking a rhetorical question and then giving students 1 minute to collect their thoughts and think about the problem before being explained. This method encourages students to participate in the problem-solving process even when discussion is not possible. Students write something down, which helps to ensure that they are really working on the problem. Exercise "Updating Notes" – students take a break for 2-3 minutes to compare their notes with other students, fill in gaps and develop common questions. Before introducing a new concept to students, a word cloud on the topic can be displayed using an online generator (Wordle Game) to insert a paragraph or more of related text and asking students to guess what the topic is about (VanGundy, 2005).

Creativity can be enhanced by engaging students in Storytelling activities – illustrating a concept, idea or principle with a real-world application, model or case study (this activity is widely used in marketing analysis).

In my teaching practice, Socratic Questions have proven to be one of the most attractive tasks for students – to replace a lecture by bombarding students with questions, always asking the next question in such a way as to direct the conversation towards the learning outcome (or the main "driving question") that was desired from the beginning. Variation: a group of students writes a series of questions as homework and conducts the exercise in class (Yee, 2023). Reverse Socratic questioning means that students ask questions of their classmates and answer in a way that immediately prompts another student to ask a question, as well as steers the next student's question in a certain direction.

The ability to summarise information and convey it in a concise form is also required by employers today, so the "Empty Notes" task will be appropriate. The students will be given a partially filled out notebook for today's lecture and asked to fill it in. This is useful at the beginning or end of a class. A "Classroom Opinion Poll" is an informal show of hands, enough to test the waters before a controversial topic. "Discussion Row" – students take turns sitting in the front row and can earn extra points as individuals when they volunteer to answer questions posed in class; this creates a group that is prepared and engaged with the educator's questions (Yee, 2023). Also, the

students are involved in the "Self-Assessment of Learning Ways", a pre-prepared questionnaire for students that explores what metacognitive techniques they use to learn and suggests some useful ones for certain course.

"Quote Minus One" helps students prepare for the topic and think about the question. The teacher should give a quote relevant to the topic of discussion, but leave out a key word and ask students to guess what it might be: "I cannot predict for you the action of ...; it is a riddle wrapped in a mystery, within a riddle." It quickly immerses students in the topic and makes them feel involved. "Let's Guess" activities are designed to introduce a new topic by asking an intriguing question that few will know the answer to (but that should be of interest to all). Allow them to guess blindly for a while before giving the answer to spark curiosity (Yee, 2023).

A good practice for finding issues that are individually meaningful to students is to "Make it Personal" – develop activities (or even essays) that relate to the real lives of individual students. Instead of asking students to reflect on a pre-selected topic, ask them to tell stories from their own experiences. "Read Aloud" – selecting a small text (500 words or less) to read aloud and asking students to pay particular attention during this phase of the lecture. A small text read aloud in a large lecture can focus attention. "Lectures with Bullet Points" – students are asked to follow five steps: listen, stop, reflect, write and give feedback. Students become self-monitoring listeners (Yee, 2023).

"Group Concept Mapping and Whiteboard Brainstorming" – students name concepts and terms related to the topic they are going to present; the educator writes them on the board. If possible, group them into categories as responses are recorded. Works to assess prior knowledge and focus on the topic. "Brainstorming" – while brainstorming at the board, circle the main concepts and brainstorm on these specific words; the result will be like a tree that blossoms outwards.

Thus, the above interactive exercises are mainly aimed at developing and improving soft skills, mainly the ability to interact with peers, cooperate and contribute to the achievement of common goals.

5 Conclusions

The need for learning from the individual level to the organisational level is especially important in the current era of digital transformation, when adaptation to new changes is continuous. This is because if knowledge within an organisation is fragmented, ideas, experiences and solutions to problems will only be available to a certain group of people.

Faced with fierce competition in the era of globalisation, the wheel of education must be designed in such a way that the educational process can go

hand in hand with the development of advanced technologies. The process of education that moves along with the development of technology will create human quality. A qualified person is a person born from the world of education, which can hardly be replaced by educational courses.

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