

University students aren't cogs in a market. They need more than a narrow focus on 'skills'

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This essay is based on an episode of the University of Technology Sydney podcast series “The New Social Contract”. This audio series examines how the relationship between universities, the state and the public might be reshaped as we live through this global pandemic.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison recently announced a revamp of the vocational education and training (VET) sector to focus more on skills needed for work. Providing training for people “who need to upskill or reskill” was also a recommendation of an interim Productivity Commission report released last week.

The same emphasis on skills is evident when it comes to higher education. In explaining his government’s move to embed micro-credentials in the Australian Qualifications Framework, education minister Dan Tehan predicted future growth in the sector would be “in part employer-driven and in part driven by the individual knowing and understanding what set of skills will best suit their employment opportunities”.

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Australians are a highly educated people, with more than one third of the population educated to a degree level or above. Yet Australia’s youth unemployment doubled to 13.8% in April, after the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Something is going wrong in the relationship between education and employment. Trying to narrowly focus education and training on equipping young people with specific skills for work isn’t going to fix it. We need to fundamentally change our approach.

Education should equip people not just with specific skills, but also with the knowledge they need to be citizens, parents, community members, and for occupations in which they can grow and develop across the course of their lives.

What are skills?

When people talk about skills they might mean different things. “Skills” can refer to

specific or technical skills needed to execute tasks in particular jobs. Or it can mean more generic skills such as communication or problem solving, which everyone needs for work.

The emphasis on skills in Australia began in the late 1980s and early 1990s with a series of key reports commissioned by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. The aim was to increase capacity and participation in VET and higher education and ensure Australian workers had both a wider range and higher level of skills.

First the focus was on “generic” and “employability” skills in vocational education and, somewhat later, “graduate attributes” in higher education such as critical thinking, effective communication and problem solving skills. More recently we have begun to hear an emphasis on 21st century skills for everyone.

An influential report by the World Economic Forum and Boston Consulting Group defines 21st century skills in three broad categories:

- foundational literacies, which include literacy and numeracy
- competencies, which include critical thinking, problem solving and collaboration
- character qualities, which include curiosity, initiative and persistence.

But people are more than an assembly of skills, and skills mean different things in different contexts.



Problem solving for a childcare educator is very specific to the context Shutterstock

“Problem solving”, for example, means something completely different to the childcare worker trying to deal with a room of two-year-olds having meltdowns, than it does to the oil worker trying to put out a fire on an oil rig. Each requires distinctive knowledge and expertise to deal with the problem in their own occupation.

This is why it is not possible to teach problem solving or other skills independently of occupations or the people who do them.

From employment to employability

Increasing the nation’s stock of skills, governments believe, will lead to economic efficiency and a more productive economy. If educational providers clearly specify the skill they are teaching, and if employers clearly identify which skills they want in their employees, students will be able to decide what they should learn (and pay for).

What this means is that the social contract between education and the world of work has shifted from one that emphasises employment (a pathway to a meaningful job), to one that emphasises employability (the attributes that might enable a person to find and keep a job).

The consequence is that it is now up to individuals to prepare themselves for something called “the job market”.

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Students entering university are encouraged to “invest” in themselves by first anticipating, and then acquiring, the skills and qualities future employers might want. They are encouraged to understand themselves in a culture of continual calculation and risk management.

As the economy changes and work becomes more uncertain, the risks of someone making a bad decision increase and employers’ demands for skills become more narrowly focused.

That’s why it is not surprising that, as the queues at CentreLink have grown longer, Dan Tehan has encouraged more Australians to invest in short courses to reskill themselves.

Occupations instead of skills

But skills are not the only way to think about the relationship between education and employment.

A whole set of preconditions enable a person to be a good worker. These extend beyond that person’s ability to execute a task and include the broad range of factors that make it possible for them to feel respected, connected and that the work they do is meaningful.

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People need to live in safe, inclusive communities and they need to be able to have a say in the kind of society we share. People, after all, are more than job seekers.

People study and go to work so they can sustain themselves and their families and because they find these activities meaningful. They do not study and go to work because it contributes to the creation of markets. This may be the outcome of their activity, but for most people it is not the purpose of their lives.

An education system focused on skills misses this bigger picture, in which the whole person is developed for an occupation, which is part of a broader network of occupations in society.

Occupations are composed of many specific jobs. They are underpinned by both theoretical and practical knowledge. Occupations have histories, face ethical dilemmas and are part of a complex web of other occupations that work with each other.

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Electricians, for example, frequently work with engineers. And social workers often work alongside health workers. Research shows people are more likely to move within occupations or to other occupations where they require similar knowledge, skills and attributes, than they are to move to entirely new fields of work.

We need to think more broadly about occupations, and what it means to prepare people to work in them. Rather than focusing on skills, government policies on education and training might focus on supporting occupational pathways (for example, from aged care worker to nurse).

They might ensure graduates can go to good quality jobs with employers who will support their continuing professional development.

Training for work that anchors communities in transition

Preparation for the workforce has long been crucial to the relationship universities have with governments on the one hand, and different elements of society on the other.

It will become all the more important as our economies and societies are transformed, not just by new technology, but also by the changes that will come under the pressures of climate change.

Read more: [Climate change is the most important mission for universities of the 21st century](#)

We now need an education system that will anchor communities in transition. Adaptable, qualified graduates who have deep knowledge of their field, who can see a pathway to their future and who feel connected to, and respected in, the society they inhabit, will be able to respond to these challenges more effectively than those forced to continually second guess an uncertain job market.

The next article linked to [The New Social Contract](#) podcast will look at universities and the communities they serve.

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