Higher Education
Quality Council
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Stakeholder Summary
Current credential and accreditation system does not serve students well

The current university system of credentials, accreditation and transcripts does not serve most undergraduate students well, according to a new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). While the current system does an excellent job documenting students' knowledge of content, it provides neither students nor potential employers with an overview of the skills they have developed while studying.

Leaving employers to infer skills from content knowledge can lead to claims of a "skills gap" and of employers being unable to find graduates with the necessary skills to fill advertised positions. The report, *Skills, Competencies and Credentials*, argues that this reflects "a failure on the part of universities to talk to students about the skill development inherent in their education."

If universities are to use content as the vehicle for skill development, they need to ensure there is good evidence to support the claim that this development has occurred. The report raises the possibility of universities working together with employer groups to collaboratively discuss the desired skills and how they can be best reflected in the curriculum and in student records.

Additional Findings

Learning outcomes, competency-based education and alternative forms of accreditation are attempts from within the education sector to address some of these challenges. Alternative options to conventional transcripts, including ePortfolios, curriculum mapping and co-curricular transcripts are another potential option. However, without comprehensive employer endorsement and use of these tools or strategies, they will not address the challenge facing graduates. An increase in applicant testing is one way employers are attempting to gain insight into the skills of potential hires.

A skill frequently cited by employers as being in-demand is critical thinking and testing tools like the Collegiate Learning Assessment are becoming an increasingly common method of assessing this skill. However, universities that administer these tests find it difficult to get students to participate unless the results are reflected in grades. "Individuals make investments of time when they see value of the exercise. Why should students believe the universities' claims that there is value in skills assessment when this value is not reflected in what those doing the hiring say when they are seeking to fill vacant positions?"

While consultation with employers is a potential solution, there are concerns over the understanding employers have of the skills they need from graduates. Previous studies have shown that employers tend to rely on finding the right "fit" rather than being able to articulate the clear competencies they are seeking. But without employer involvement, the paper argues, an opening could be created outside the institutions. "If universities do not begin to expend this effort, the private sector could very well enable

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students to make matches with employers in ways that render an undergraduate degree much less valuable than it is today."

Skills, Competencies and Credentials is written by Alan Harrison, former provost and vice-principal (academic) at Queen's University and a former HEQCO fellow.