

## **Responsive and Resilient: Commonwealth Universities' Engagement with Skills-Based, Labour-Market-Oriented Learning**

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### **Research Domains**

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

### **Abstract**

In the face of shifting global labour demands, higher education institutions are under pressure to equip learners with adaptable, work-ready skills. The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) have conducted collaborative research to investigate how Commonwealth universities have responded to the demand for skills-based labour-market-oriented courses. The study captures examples of how universities are approaching skills-based responsiveness to employability needs through course design, employer engagement, and inclusive access.

This paper explores early findings of this research, including institutional visions, delivery modes, accreditation models, and the barriers and enablers universities face around skills-based labour-market-oriented education.

### **Full paper**

In a world increasingly shaped by technological disruption, climate adaptation, and economic uncertainty, the relationship between higher education and the labour market has entered a new phase. Universities are under growing pressure to not only provide academic knowledge but also equip learners with agile, work-ready skills that align with evolving labour-market needs. This paper presents early findings from a collaborative study between the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), which investigates how universities across the Commonwealth are responding to these demands through the development of skills-based labour-market-oriented courses.

The research emerges from a shared recognition that universities must now act as both academic and civic institutions, fostering inclusive pathways to employment while

addressing local, national, and global workforce challenges. This study, underpinned theoretically by the Labour-Market Signalling theory, interrogates the ways in which universities position their educational offerings to signal relevance, adaptability, and value to employers and learners alike. Simultaneously, the study is underpinned by a commitment to lifelong learning and SDG 4, recognising education as a driver of sustainable and inclusive growth.

The research is structured in two phases: a survey of ACU member institutions and COL partner universities, followed by targeted case studies of institutions actively delivering or planning to develop skills-based labour-market-oriented courses. These include full degree programmes, short courses, and micro-credentials explicitly tied to sectoral demands and employability outcomes. This paper will present the findings of the first phase of the research.

The study is based on the premise that considerable diversity exists in institutional engagement, shaped by regional priorities, funding environments, and sectoral pressures. While some universities have embedded skills-based education into their strategic vision—often citing youth unemployment, green transition needs, or digitalisation—others are responding more reactively to government incentives or industry partnerships.

Notably, many institutions are expanding their use of hybrid and online delivery models, often driven by a desire to extend access to underserved groups, including mature learners, rural populations, and women returning to education. This aligns with the study's broader concern with equity and compassion in educational access. Some universities have started exploring modularised credentials or stackable pathways to support flexible progression, particularly for learners combining study with employment or caregiving.

The paper also discusses the mechanisms through which institutions determine skills needs. While some could use structured employer advisory boards or conduct labour market forecasting, others rely on ad hoc relationships or government guidance. A trend is the increasing role of employers in curriculum co-design, guest teaching, and placement provision—suggesting a shift toward more porous boundaries between academia and industry.

The research also identifies a range of barriers to implementing effective skills-based programmes, including faculty and institutional management resistance, lack of institutional capacity in terms of skills and staffing, knowledge of labour-market skill requirements, rigid regulatory frameworks, and limited funding models. In several contexts, we anticipate that traditional prestige hierarchies between academic and vocational education also persist, hindering the integration of skills-based learning within mainstream university provision.

Collegiality and community-building are central to the success of these efforts. In many cases, cross-departmental collaboration could be identified as essential to course

development, as will partnerships with employers, NGOs, and regional governments. Furthermore, the need for authentic assessment is explored in terms of being institutional responsiveness to industry needs.

From a policy and sectoral perspective, this work raises important questions. How can quality assurance and accreditation systems evolve to support non-linear, modular learning? What forms of staff development are needed to support pedagogical shifts toward practical and applied skills? And how can funding models recognise the value of courses that support local economies or underserved learners but may not yield high immediate returns?

The ACU and COL see this research as foundational to building more agile, inclusive higher education systems across the Commonwealth. By mapping current offerings and identifying gaps as well as aspirations, the project aims to inform targeted support and capacity-building efforts—whether through shared resources, peer learning, or regional collaboration. Ultimately, the study seeks to strengthen the role of universities as collaborative actors addressing social and economic challenges.

This paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship on graduate employability, institutional transformation, and sector responsiveness. It highlights both the promise and complexity of skills-based education in a global context and argues for sustained, sector-wide dialogue on how universities can build inclusive, resilient pathways to meaningful work.