

Are our teachers of the future currently working in industry?

 By [Shan Raddiffe](#)

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It is clear that education and industry form its own little ecosystem as part of the greater economic whole.



Image source: Getty Images

Students join institutions to gain hard skills and knowledge that will take them through to the next phase of their lives - a paid career. While most candidates go on to work in industry, some of these academic professionals stay on at the institution to recycle their book knowledge and keep the wheels of education institutions turning.

However, time and time again we hear the words "skills gap" and "not work-ready" thrown at new graduates, as though they've wasted the last three or more years learning a library of information that has not, in fact, prepared them for the complexities of the "real working world".

How does this happen? And how do we fix it?

This came under debate at the Future of Education Summit on Friday, 29 July, under the panel discussion 'Transformation of Higher Education Leadership'.

Panellists Prof Malcolm McIver (CEO and provost, Lancaster University, Ghana), Jon Foster-Pedley (dean and director, Henley Business School), Jaye Richards-Hill (director, education industry for MEA, Microsoft Corp) and Dr Rose Mukankomeje (director general of the Higher Education Council, Rwanda) were moderated by Fifi Peters, an anchor for CNBC Africa.

Collaboration and support

"Transformative leadership is a shared approach - it is where leaders and the followers work together in order to help each other; in order to take each other to the next level; in order to be prepared to face future challenges. It's very much a collaborative approach that is based upon meeting realistic, pragmatic needs," said McIver. "It's not simply about giving people theoretical solutions to problems, it's about giving them practical solutions to problems, and it's about ensuring that the education industry is continually evolving to meet those growing problems that people face within society and the workplace."



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What is apparent is the institution-to-industry ecosystem is not functioning as well as it should. At best, corporates are offering learnerships to a handful of new graduates to upskill and enable them to be competent in the workplace after six months to a year. And although this eventually leads most to gainful employment, statistics show 15% of graduates in South Africa are still unemployed.

While there will always be a workplace dynamic one cannot simulate in an institutional setting, it is obvious that if graduates are not acquiring the knowledge needed to function in the workplace, the fault lies in the feedback from industry to education and the subsequent gap of what is being taught in the curriculum.

"Our education institutions at all levels need to get better at supporting young people around the reality of the world of work and what's necessary to be successful," said Jaye Richards-Hill, Director, Education industry for MEA, Microsoft Corp. She suggested a picture of success would see university students actively researching their preferred jobs and the expected requirements for those jobs as advertised by recruiters. They could look at completing short courses to enhance their skill set and add to their "microcredentials" in order to make them ready for the world of work.

Industry educators

In an ideal situation, not only do corporates continually feed real-word updates and changes back to institutions in order to keep the curriculum up-to-date, but the educators actually come from industry, so that their experience is passed on firsthand, rather than filtered down through those with no practical application of what they are teaching.

"Simply being a professor with a PhD doesn't mean to say you actually have the answers that people need. You do not have the experience; you do not have the relevance in terms of 21st century industry," said McIver. "We need to bring industry into the classroom, but we also need to make sure our academics move out of the classroom and are working within industry."

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"Great educators inspire learning, they don't inspire syllabi," said Foster-Pedley. "Syllabi are desperately important... [but] don't move fast enough." He believes that the key to being a great educator is the ability to encourage people to engage with learning and continue to learn beyond the classroom. "Don't fill them up, set them on fire... That's what transformational leadership does. It leads by illumination."

"Education has to provide responses to what the community and private sector needs," said Mukankomeje. Continuous dialogue between the private and education sector is necessary to ensure the proper assessment of what is needed in the market is taking place.

New perspective

McIver believes that regulations governing the appointment of institution management put too much value on traditional qualifications, at the expense of real-world experience. "What this effectively means is that we are denying ourselves access to an entire workforce that could bring a whole new perspective into education. Many institutions could be managed much better by somebody with an industry background than by somebody with a PhD in Microbiology.

"Many of our students would benefit by being taught by people who are working in the sector that the students want to work in.

"We need to move away from this notion that only an academic can teach; we need to move away from this notion that only somebody with a theoretical degree can actually deliver in the workplace."

"I love PhDs, I love great academics, but not all of them are necessarily very good teachers or managers, and not all managers are good teachers," agreed Foster-Pedley, who believes successful transformation will look to include the excluded - those without academic backgrounds but with the talent to become successful leaders and managers.

Best of both worlds

As far as luring industry experts back into education, Richards-Hill believes a more realistic approach would be the concept of visiting professors or visiting lecturers, where professionals would join a faculty on a part-time basis, rather than expect them to go back into education full-time. In this way, students would be offered the best of both worlds - the industry expertise and knowledge along with the academic foundation for a recognised qualification.



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"What would it take to do this?" Richards-Hill asked. "Could government support better in this? Should industry be taking a much bigger interest in programmes that will ultimately benefit them when well-qualified and well-prepared graduates leave education and come into industry?"

The answer should be a resounding "Yes." Only when we see government, education and corporates working together consistently and cohesively in this manner will we hear the words "skills gap" less and less frequently.

Economy of education

"We have to transform the education system itself," Foster-Pedley said in conclusion. And the way to do that is for leadership to have the courage to "build a new form of economy - being knowledge and creative industries - into what we do; allow Africa to emerge; build confidence in people so they are the ones who can go out and start businesses and be successful."

However, this is not something we can do alone; we have to work together to build our continent and economies.

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