

It is likely that in the knowledge-based economy, degree qualifications and recognised skills will converge further, say the writers. As business organisations become flatter and more egalitarian, and jobs increasingly require combinations of both head and hand skills, educational institutions will compete to offer courses relevant to the market to attract prospective students. ST FILE PHOTO



Qualifications v skills: Is one just paper, the other the real deal?

Many say that a degree is overrated. But while skills should get their due, let's not undermine the value of higher education.

Tan Ern Ser and Hanniel Lim

Years ago, armed with an honours degree in sociology, I (the first author) joined a company providing air cargo services at our busy international airport. Having zero knowledge of what the job scope entailed did not deter me.

In fact, I chose a cargo operations role, instead of the comfort of sitting in an office writing reports, updating procedures, and responding to customer complaints. This meant that I had to learn the technical knowledge and operational requirements quickly on the job.

It was a steep learning curve, made worse by the fact that the people reporting to me were far more knowledgeable about the trade than I was. I was just a fresh graduate then, wet behind the ears, more used to thinking about theories and concepts, but placed in a role supervising people who

were older than me and who had decades of experience.

While they were mostly polite, I did sense subtle hostility in that they saw fresh graduates as unjustifiably blocking their advancement from the level of "rank-and-file" staff to "senior" staff. They often remarked that the "pen (and paper) is mightier than the sword", seemingly sarcastically. To them, I realised, "paper" qualifications could not compare with their vast experience. Indeed, I often had to humbly consult them.

This brings us to the question of whether qualifications are just a piece of paper, while skills and knowledge are the real deal. In raising this question, are we setting up a straw man or a red herring to dismiss qualifications as overrated, just for show on a name card, more form than substance, and therefore of not much practical use?

The truth may not be so simple. While skills are increasingly getting their due, we cannot

simply consign higher education to the dustbin.

THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

Nevertheless, the pendulum is swinging towards skills, perhaps to correct an imbalance. With the path to success traditionally requiring a degree, official pronouncements have been suggesting a need to recognise the many possible pathways to success.

By the same token, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong has expressed concern that there remains a wide salary gap between ITE and polytechnic graduates and university graduates.

These pronouncements appear to mirror changing attitudes in the labour market. Leading private companies find the possession of proven skills, as reflected in a portfolio of work experience and accomplishments, more relevant than qualifications for gauging a prospective employee's potential contributions.

A representative of Google recently said the company does not require any degree for most of its roles. Similarly, LinkedIn launched Skills Path in 2021 to encourage companies to hire based on skills rather than

qualifications. Mr Elon Musk has also tweeted that "educational background is irrelevant" to be a chip designer at Tesla so long as a "hardcore coding test" is passed.

AN ECONOMY DRIVEN BY SKILLS

The gripes of workers and the sentiments of leaders are fair, given that universities and the market have different priorities. The university, with its ecclesiastical and feudal roots, still preserves much of its commitments to truth and knowledge for their own sake. This contrasts with an economy which prioritises value-maximising individuals and firms, committed to minimising costs and maximising profits in an increasingly VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world.

One view is that while universities equip individuals with cognitive abilities as they pursue knowledge, they do not train them for the workplace. Their efforts to prepare students for the workplace are at best ad hoc and modular, with universities remaining fundamentally detached from the concerns of the knowledge-based economy. Firms then bear the cost of educating the graduates they hire to be work-ready.

But this view ignores the fact that businesses in a knowledge-based economy need graduates from diverse cognitive disciplines, who have a good grasp of the changing internal and external organisational environments. They can help to update management thinking and planning, especially with digital tools and analytical prowess.

It also ignores the fact that universities are responding to the changing labour market by revising their curricula, partnering industries to produce graduates "future-ready" for the workplace.

A FALSE DICHOTOMY?

How, then, should we understand the so-called qualifications and skills divide?

Indeed, in revisiting the "pen is mightier than the sword" remark mentioned above, it seems more of a backhanded compliment than a suggestion that degree qualifications are just too "academic" and therefore of not much practical use.

If degree qualifications are indeed too academic, then there are good reasons to narrow or even eliminate the salary gap between those who hold degrees and those who do not. But, as noted earlier, the

university degree has evolved over the last two decades to reflect graduates' "future-readiness". To their credit, polytechnics and ITE have also upgraded their curricula, begun offering advanced certificate programmes in addition to diplomas, and enhanced the cognitive content of their courses.

This shows that all educational institutions now recognise both knowledge and skills as necessary for success in the present and future workplace. It also shows that qualifications still carry inherent worth.

Singaporean students and adult learners recognise this, and many seek a degree qualification, even a master's degree, by taking stackable courses to beef up their CVs.

Indeed, those who preach about valuing skills over qualifications have themselves benefited greatly from higher education. The educational pedigree of our political leaders continues to be salient to voters. Even the maverick Elon Musk himself graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, and only seven or eight Fortune 500 chief executive officers do not have an undergraduate degree. In fact, more than 10 per cent of Fortune 500 CEOs graduated from an Ivy League university, though the Ivy League varsities educate less than 1 per cent of undergraduates in the US.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

It is likely that in the knowledge-based economy, degree qualifications and recognised skills will converge further. As business organisations become flatter and more egalitarian, and jobs increasingly require combinations of both head and hand skills, educational institutions will compete to offer courses relevant to the market to attract prospective students.

Amid this convergence, our society would become less hierarchical, with multiple pathways to success becoming increasingly common and recognised. Though different, each path will enjoy its prestige and privileges. This makes it obvious that accredited qualifications and recognised skills constitute a continuum rather than a false dichotomy.

Indeed, we are already observing such changes in education and career trajectories.

Students have traditionally front-loaded on formal education in a system which broadly sorted them into three streams – academic, technical, and vocational. These streams led to different career trajectories like those in earlier military establishments: commissioned officers and other ranks, who could rarely cross the divide.

However, students can now gain work experience and skills while studying, through internships and work-study programmes, while those in the workforce can engage in lifelong learning, through short courses or even diploma or degree programmes. This will increasingly blur the distinction between education and work, with people toggling to acquire both skills and qualifications seamlessly through life.

• Tan Ern Ser is academic adviser to the Social Lab, Institute of Policy Studies. Hanniel Lim is a research assistant at the same institute.