Universities and the Labour Market in a Transition Economy

What an Institution Owes a Workforce That Is Changing Faster Than Its Curriculum

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An economy in transition changes the demand for skills faster than a university can revise a curriculum, and the gap is met by short courses whose quality nobody assures. This article examines the position of a university in such an economy: the four demands it faces, the instruments that allow it to respond within a year, and the risk that responsiveness becomes the abandonment of academic standards. It argues that the durable response is a small number of partnerships with employers and a published procedure for revising a programme, not a proliferation of courses.

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1. A Curriculum and a Clock

A curriculum is revised on a cycle of four to six years, and the demand for skills in a fast-changing economy moves on a cycle of eighteen months.

The mismatch is structural and it is not a failure of academic planning. A programme must be designed, approved, staffed and accredited, and each of those steps takes a year; an employer who needs a competence in a new technology needs it in the next hiring round. The gap is filled

by short courses, by training providers and by whatever an institution can assemble outside its regulations.

The gap between a curriculum cycle and a hiring round is filled by courses nobody assessed

The filling is where quality becomes uncertain. A course that is not part of a programme is frequently not assessed, and a certificate that is not assessed certifies attendance. The institution's reputation is engaged by a document that its academic bodies never approved, and the engagement is invisible until an employer complains.

2. The Four Demands

A university in a transition economy faces four demands at once, and each of them arrives through a different door.

The first is the demand of the school leaver, who wishes a qualification that leads to employment. The second is the demand of the employer, who wishes staff with a specific competence and who is willing to pay for a course. The third is the demand of the state, which wishes a workforce aligned with an industrial policy and which attaches funding to the alignment.

The fourth is the demand of the adult who is already employed, who needs a credential to change a position and who cannot leave work to obtain it. The four demands conflict: the employer's course is narrow, the state's programme is broad, the adult's route is part-time and the school leaver's qualification is full-time.

An institution that answers the employer and abandons the adult has chosen a market; one that answers all four with the same instrument has chosen an incoherence.

3. The Instruments That Work Within a Year

Four instruments allow an institution to respond within a year without abandoning its standards, and each of them is administrative rather than curricular.

The first is a modular structure with an elective space, so that a new employer demand can be met by a new elective rather than by a new programme. The second is a short course with a defined assessment and a credit value, approved by a delegated procedure and reported retrospectively, so that the course is inside the regulations rather than beside them.

The third is a partnership agreement with a small number of employers, which supplies the demand forecast, the placement and the equipment that the institution cannot buy. The fourth is a recognition procedure for competences acquired at work, so that an adult's experience can shorten her route rather than being ignored.

4. The Partnership and Its Discipline

A partnership with an employer is the instrument that a transition economy most requires and the one that most easily compromises an institution.

A firm that funds a course will wish to determine its content, and the determination is legitimate within a limit: the firm knows what its process requires and the institution knows what a discipline requires. The limit is crossed when the course becomes a training for one firm's equipment, which produces a certificate that is worthless outside the firm and a graduate who cannot move.

The instrument that holds the limit is a partnership agreement with two clauses: the employer states the competence and the institution states the standard, and neither may alter the other. The agreement is a page and it is the difference between a partnership and a contract for training.

Demand	Instrument	Risk
School leaver	A full programme	Delay
Employer	A short assessed course	Narrowness
State	An aligned programme	Political direction
Employed adult	A part-time route	Administrative cost

Table 1 Four demands and the instrument for each

5. The Regional Labour Market

A university in a regional city serves a labour market that is narrower than a national one, and the narrowness is both a constraint and a resource.

The constraint is that a specialised programme may have twenty employers in the country and two in the region, so that a cohort of thirty cannot be placed. The resource is that the institution can know its em-

ployers individually, which a capital university cannot, and the knowledge is what makes a partnership possible.

The instrument is a survey of the region's employers conducted annually, with three questions: which competences are hard to recruit, which are expected to be hard in three years, and which the institution could supply. The survey is cheap, it is repeated and it produces the evidence on which a programme decision can be based.

6. The Risk of Responsiveness

The risk that an institution faces when it becomes responsive is that its curriculum becomes a series of responses and ceases to be a formation.

A programme assembled from employer demands is a programme whose graduates can do what the employers asked for in the year of their admission and nothing that the employers will ask for in the year of their graduation. The formation that a university supplies is the capacity to learn a new competence, and the capacity is produced by a disciplinary foundation rather than by a catalogue of current requirements.

The instrument that protects the formation is a rule about proportion: a defined share of the programme is disciplinary and cannot be displaced by an employer demand, and a defined share is open to it. The rule is a governance decision and it is the one that a partnership most often erodes.

7. The State and the Industrial Policy

A state that pursues an industrial policy wishes its universities to supply the workforce that the policy requires, and the wish arrives as a funding condition.

The condition can be legitimate when it is negotiated and it is corrosive when it is imposed through a formula that rewards enrolment in a list of fields. An institution that responds to the formula by expanding a field that its region does not employ has produced graduates for a plan rather than for a labour market, and the graduates will migrate.

The instrument is a dialogue with a published record: the ministry states its forecast, the institution states its evidence, and the two are

published together. The publication does not resolve the disagreement and it prevents the disagreement from being conducted in private, which is where an institution loses.

8. The Emigration of Graduates

A regional university in a transition economy trains graduates who leave, and the departure is the indicator by which the institution is most often judged and least fairly.

The departure has three causes, and only one of them is the university's responsibility. The first is the wage differential, which no curriculum can close. The second is the absence of the employers that a graduate's field requires, which is a regional policy question. The third is the mismatch between what the programme taught and what the local labour market needs, which is the institution's responsibility and which a survey of employers can establish.

An institution that addresses the third cause honestly will discover that some of its programmes have no local demand and that a decision is required. The decision may be to continue the programme for national demand, to convert it into a part-time route for people who will migrate, or to close it. Each of the three is defensible and none is comfortable, and the discomfort is the reason that the decision is usually deferred.

The instrument that makes the decision possible is the survey, repeated annually, with the regional employers and with the graduates themselves three years after graduation. The second group is the one that institutions neglect and the one whose answers are most informative, because a graduate who has left can say what would have kept her, and the answer is frequently not a salary but a career.

9. The Language of Instruction

A university in a transition economy faces a decision about the language of its teaching that a university in a stable system does not, and the decision has consequences that reach the labour market.

A programme taught in the national language serves the regional labour market and the public service, and it excludes the international literature that a discipline requires. A programme taught in an international language serves the graduates who will migrate and the employ-

ers who trade across borders, and it excludes the students from schools that taught the national language well and the international one poorly. A programme taught in both requires a translation of materials, an assessment in two languages and a staff who can teach in either.

The instrument that most institutions have chosen is a split: a national-language track for the professions that a region requires and an international-language track for the fields in which the literature and the employers are international. The split is administratively simple and it produces two cohorts with different opportunities, which is the outcome that a language policy should be asked about explicitly.

The second consequence is on the staff. A lecturer who teaches in a second language spends more time on preparation and is assessed by students on a criterion that includes her fluency, and a workload model that does not recognise the difference prices the two languages equally. The recognition is a small adjustment and it is the difference between a policy that is implemented and one that is announced.

The third consequence is on the region. A university that teaches only in an international language has withdrawn from the public conversation of its own province, because the conversation is conducted in the national language. The withdrawal is rarely intended and it is visible in the local press, which cites the institution less often than it cites a ministry's press office.

10. Conclusions

A transition economy demands a responsiveness that a curriculum cycle cannot supply, and the gap is filled by courses that are frequently outside the institution's assessment. The instruments that work are modular, delegated and partnership-based, and each of them has a limit that must be written.

Three conclusions follow. A short course with a defined assessment and a credit value, approved by a delegated procedure, is the instrument that allows a response within a year without leaving the regulations. A partnership agreement in which the employer states the competence and the institution states the standard is the instrument that prevents a partnership from becoming a contract for training. And a rule on the proportion of the programme that an employer demand may occupy is the protection of the formation that a university exists to supply.

Employer	Adult	Programme	State
months	one year	four years	policy cycle

Figure 1 Response times

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Biography:

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