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Linking industry and higher education:
assessing the skills requirements

In a recent study, half of supply chain managers admitted that they did not have the right skills to get the job done. Dr Ozlem Bak and Christine Jordan investigate the importance of bringing the profession closer to university programmes.

The scale and scope of today's supply chains demands experts with a diverse range of skills that can be readily applied in very challenging situations. The skills required are no longer limited to an operational understanding of the business environment; managers are also expected to be equipped to set up and co-ordinate global supply chains, manage change and enable flexibility.

In order to support an increasingly complex logistics and supply chain sector, CILT and higher education institutions have long discussed the importance of skills. With this aim, the University of Huddersfield explored the changing skills needed in the logistics and supply chain sector and evaluated their importance. Based on respondents' feedback (120 UK graduates and graduate employers) and the academic literature, our study generated a set of 25 key graduate skills with seven focal categories: process management; strategic; people management decision-making; behavioural; quantitative; and negotiation – see Figure 1. Our research findings indicated some interesting insights into the changing landscape of supply chain skills.

It was interesting to observe that our respondents placed highest emphasis on behavioural skills, such as communication, time management, personal motivation and stress management. These skills played a significant part in a range of job roles within the highly paced and responsive logistics and supply chain sector.

It is noteworthy that some of our findings contradicted the October 2014 UKCES report[1], which identified a lack of IT skills across all sectors in logistics. In our research, the respondents placed relatively low importance on this skill, despite significant IT advances in the sector. When asked to elaborate further, graduates felt that they were well equipped with IT abilities, gained as an integral part of their studies where they were exposed to a broad range of information technologies, including software tools, as well as through familiarity with daily use of web-based technologies. However, one has to bear

Supply chain skills categories
Figure 1

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in mind that higher education institutions' access to a broad range of information technologies is limited due to the high cost and investment necessary, and may differ between institutions. There is further scope for in-house training for the specialist IT skills needed, dependent on the individual job and company specific requirements.

Talent development is high on the agenda for higher education and industry, which are increasingly working in collaboration to achieve this goal through a range of initiatives. One such initiative is the NOVUS scheme, a collaborative venture between industrial partners and the University of Huddersfield that provides students with access to senior industry mentors, the opportunity to undertake additional professional qualifications and workplace experience. This was also iterated in our study, placing a high emphasis on strategic skills, particularly boundary-spanning management, with respondents stating these as a prerequisite for managing supply chains across boundaries. Now, through strengthened links between industry and educators, students benefit from personal engagement and a more in-depth understanding of supply chain operations, approaches to leadership and people management skills.

Higher education is also responding to the need for boundary spanning management skills through the development of innovative teaching tools such as company-based projects, computer simulation and modelling exercises, online business games and real-life supply chain case studies, to encourage students to practise problem-solving and to understand the industry specific skills needs. Students develop many relevant skills through work placements, hands-on business-related group tasks and consultancy projects that require in-depth problem analysis and realistic solution design, along with professionally prepared business reports and presentations of industry representatives. Nevertheless, equipping all students with the skills identified is often a challenging task for any higher education institution, and in some cases these are better acquired through on-the-job training and work placements.

The increasing profile given to talent development has seen significant progress made towards bringing industry and higher education closer. However, opportunities still exist to co-operate in seeking further innovative tools and new ways to bridge the skills gap.

Note. The authors are currently undertaking a UK-based survey and would welcome the opportunity to hear your views. If you would like to participate or have any questions: o.bak@hud.ac.uk or c.j.jordan@hud.ac.uk

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