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THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN PREPARING PROFESSIONALS FOR A COMPETITIVE WORKING WORLD



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EL ROL DE LA UNIVERSIDAD EN LA PREPARACIÓN DE PROFESIONALES PARA UN MUNDO LABORAL COMPETITIVO

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the relationship between higher education and the labor market within the context of the global economy, highlighting the importance of human capital development as a key factor for competitiveness and economic growth. The central theme focuses on how higher education institutions can prepare students to meet the demands of a labor market characterized by constant change, intense competition, and technological transformation. In this regard, the role of education in developing professional skills—both technical and transversal—necessary for entering and remaining in the workforce is analyzed. The methodology employed is a qualitative approach based on a review of academic literature, allowing for the analysis of theoretical contributions and empirical evidence related to employability and skills development. Through the analysis of diverse sources, patterns and trends in the relationship between education and employment are identified. Among the main findings is the need to strengthen the link between universities and employers, as well as the incorporation of active learning methodologies that integrate theory and practice. The importance of developing transferable skills, practical experience, and continuous learning is also recognized as fundamental elements for improving graduates' employability. It is concluded that higher education must evolve to respond more effectively to the demands of the global labor market.

Keywords:

Higher education, employability, professional skills, labor market, human capital, globalization.

RESUMEN

El artículo aborda la relación entre la educación superior y el mercado laboral en el contexto de la economía global, destacando la importancia de la formación de capital humano como factor clave para la competitividad y el desarrollo económico. El tema central se enfoca en cómo las instituciones de educación superior pueden preparar a los estudiantes para enfrentar las demandas de un entorno laboral caracterizado por cambios constantes, alta competencia y transformación tecnológica. En este sentido, se analiza el papel de la educación en el desarrollo de competencias profesionales, tanto técnicas como transversales, necesarias para la inserción y permanencia en el empleo. La metodología utilizada corresponde a un enfoque cualitativo basado en la revisión documental de literatura académica, que permite analizar aportaciones teóricas y evidencias empíricas relacionadas con la empleabilidad y el desarrollo de competencias. A través del análisis de diversas fuentes, se identifican patrones y tendencias en torno a la relación entre educación y empleo. Entre los principales hallazgos se destaca la necesidad de fortalecer la vinculación entre universidades y empleadores, así como la incorporación de metodologías activas que integren teoría y práctica. Asimismo, se reconoce la importancia del desarrollo de habilidades transversales, la experiencia práctica y el aprendizaje continuo como elementos fundamentales para mejorar la empleabilidad de los egresados. Se concluye que la educación superior debe evolucionar para responder de manera más efectiva a las exigencias del mercado laboral global.

Palabras clave:

Educación superior, empleabilidad, competencias profesionales, mercado laboral, capital humano, globalización.

INTRODUCTION

In today's global economy, higher education plays a strategic role in preparing individuals to integrate into and compete in increasingly dynamic and demanding labor markets. Globalization, along with technological advancements and the transformation of production models, has profoundly altered the nature of work, increasing the demand for professionals with specialized skills, critical thinking, and adaptability.

In this regard, Schray & Sheets (2018) emphasize that competitiveness in the new global economy depends not only on access to capital or technology, but also on the development of highly qualified human capital capable of responding to the challenges of innovation and productivity. Therefore, higher education institutions face the responsibility of aligning their educational processes with the needs of the contemporary economic environment.

One of the main challenges evident in this context is the disconnect between academic training and the demands of the labor market. Several studies indicate that, although university education has experienced significant expansion in recent decades, this does not always translate into better job placement for graduates (Lauder & Mayhew, 2020).

In many cases, education systems fail to fully develop the skills required by employers, creating a gap between the skills acquired at university and the expectations of the productive sector. This phenomenon is related to the need to strengthen the relevance of academic programs and to promote training more focused on developing practical and professional skills.

In this sense, university education must go beyond the transmission of theoretical knowledge and include the development of transversal skills such as effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability. These competencies are fundamental in a work environment characterized by uncertainty and constant change. According to Iqbal & Shaukat (2021), university education plays a crucial role in the development of employability and professional skills, as it provides students with the necessary tools to face the challenges of the labor market and adapt to different organizational contexts.

Furthermore, the role of universities is not limited to academic training; it also involves the comprehensive preparation of students for their entry into professional life. In this regard, higher education institutions must establish stronger ties with the productive sector to ensure that their curricula reflect the real needs of the labor market.

According to Nagarajan & Edwards (2015), collaboration between universities, employers and professional associations is fundamental for the development of professional skills in graduates, as it allows training more aligned

with the demands of the work environment and promotes the acquisition of practical experience.

On the other hand, the perceptions of students and employers regarding academic preparation are also a relevant factor in analyzing the relationship between education and employment. Research such as that by Massie et al. (2009) shows that, in many cases, employers perceive deficiencies in the academic preparation of recent graduates, particularly in aspects related to practical experience and applied skills. This situation reinforces the need to implement educational strategies that integrate practical learning experiences, such as internships, collaborative projects, and problem-based learning, which help to reduce the gap between theory and practice.

Similarly, the development of job skills is also influenced by students' active participation in activities that complement their academic training. According to Kang (2023), extracurricular experiences play a significant role in preparing students for the job market, as they allow for the development of social skills, leadership, and teamwork. These experiences enrich students' professional profiles and improve their job placement opportunities by providing them with additional tools to face the challenges of the professional environment.

Furthermore, the current context is characterized by the growing influence of technology and artificial intelligence on production processes, which has transformed the skills required in the labor market. In this scenario, Fagun (2025) points out that higher education institutions must prepare students for careers driven by artificial intelligence, promoting the development of digital skills and the ability to adapt to constantly evolving technological environments. This transformation implies a shift from traditional educational models toward more flexible, interdisciplinary approaches focused on continuous learning.

Furthermore, preparation for the labor market depends not only on the quality of education but also on structural factors such as economic conditions, public policies, and market dynamics. In this regard, Dhue (2025) highlights those graduates face an increasingly competitive labor market, where employment opportunities are conditioned by multiple factors, including prior experience, acquired skills, and global economic conditions. This reality underscores the importance of a well-rounded education that allows students to excel in a highly competitive environment.

Furthermore, continuing education has become a key element for maintaining employability over time. In a constantly changing job market, professionals must continuously update their knowledge and skills to remain relevant. Svec (2023) emphasizes that continuing education allows individuals to adapt to the evolving demands of the job market and improve their career prospects, reinforcing

the importance of lifelong learning as an essential component of professional development.

The relationship between higher education and the labor market has become increasingly complex in the context of the global economy. Competitiveness, innovation, and technological change have generated new demands for educational institutions, which must adapt to train professionals capable of facing the challenges of the contemporary world.

Schray & Sheets (2018) emphasize that the transformation of higher education is fundamental to ensuring that graduates can compete in the global economy, which implies greater integration between educational institutions, employers and other key actors.

In this sense, the present article aims to analyze the role of higher education in preparing students for the global labor market, identifying the main challenges and opportunities in the development of professional skills, as well as the need to strengthen the articulation between academic training and the demands of the productive environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach, aimed at examining the role of higher education in preparing students for a competitive labor market. This approach allows for a deep understanding of the dynamics, contributions, and theoretical perspectives related to the relationship between university education and employability, based on the analysis of diverse academic sources. In this sense, the study seeks to interpret and synthesize the available information in order to identify patterns, trends, and key elements surrounding the phenomenon under investigation.

The methodological design consists of a bibliographic review, through which various scientific studies, academic articles, reports, and theses related to the topic were compiled and analyzed. The sources considered include works from different periods, allowing for an analysis of the evolution of academic thought on the relationship between education and the labor market. In this sense, studies from 2015 to 2026 are included, covering approximately a decade of academic production that reflects both traditional approaches and recent perspectives on the subject.

Furthermore, the selection of sources was based on criteria of currency, relevance, and academic significance. Priority was given to research published between 2015 and 2026, providing an up-to-date perspective on the challenges facing higher education in the contemporary context. This timeframe includes initial contributions addressing the development of professional skills and job readiness, as well as more recent studies analyzing new demands of the labor market, such as digitalization and the integration of emerging technologies.

Regarding the analysis procedure, a critical and systematic reading of each of the selected sources was conducted, identifying their main contributions, theoretical approaches, and relevant findings. Subsequently, the information was organized into thematic categories that facilitated data interpretation, such as employability, skills development, student perception, and university-business relations. This process allowed for establishing connections between the different studies and recognizing the main lines of research on the topic.

In addition, academic papers and theses that provide empirical evidence on students' perceptions of their job readiness were considered, as well as studies analyzing the relationship between university education and labor market integration. These sources, distributed throughout the period 2015–2026, enrich the analysis by including both theoretical perspectives and observable experiences and results from different contexts.

Finally, the use of a methodology based on document review allows for the integration of knowledge from different temporal and geographical contexts, offering a broad and up-to-date view of the topic. Although primary data collection is not employed, the systematic analysis of academic sources from different years provides solid support for the study's conclusions and allows for an understanding of the evolving role of higher education in the face of the demands of the contemporary labor market.

DEVELOPMENT

Analyzing university education in relation to the demands of today's workplace reveals numerous areas for improvement in educational systems. One of the most relevant aspects is the need for greater coherence between academic content and the skills required in the professional sphere. In this regard, traditional educational models, focused primarily on the transmission of theoretical knowledge, are insufficient to meet the demands of a dynamic and constantly evolving labor market.

Currently, training processes must be geared towards developing comprehensive competencies that enable students to face real-world work situations. This implies incorporating pedagogical strategies that foster active student participation, promoting meaningful learning. The use of methodologies such as problem-based learning, collaborative work, and case studies facilitates the practical application of knowledge and strengthens students' ability to resolve complex situations.

Furthermore, the development of transferable skills has become a fundamental element in professional training. Competencies such as effective communication, critical thinking, adaptability, and teamwork are highly valued in the workplace. These skills allow graduates to integrate more effectively into organizations that require

interdisciplinary collaboration and decision-making in changing contexts.

On the other hand, the connection between educational institutions and the productive sector is a key factor in improving the relevance of academic training. Collaboration with companies and organizations facilitates the implementation of educational experiences that bring students closer to the realities of the workplace. Professional internships, community engagement projects, and apprenticeship programs allow students to gain direct experience, which contributes to improving the employability of graduates.

Similarly, extracurricular experiences complement formal academic training. Participation in activities such as volunteering, student organizations, or social projects allows students to develop social skills, leadership, and time management. These experiences enrich the student's professional profile and provide them with additional tools to face the challenges of the workplace.

Technological advancements have also had a significant impact on educational processes and the skills required in the job market. Digitalization has transformed work practices, creating a need to acquire technological skills that allow adaptation to new digital environments. Proficiency in technological tools, digital literacy, and the ability to learn new technologies are essential aspects of professional performance today.

In turn, the concept of continuous learning takes on fundamental importance in the current context. Given the rapid evolution of knowledge, professionals must constantly update their skills to remain relevant in the job market. This implies that educational institutions must not only focus on initial training but also on promoting a culture of lifelong learning that allows individuals to adapt to changes throughout their professional lives.

Another important aspect is students' perception of the relevance of their training. In many cases, a disconnect is identified between the content taught in the classroom and the skills required in the workplace. This situation highlights the importance of reviewing and updating curricula, incorporating more practical approaches focused on solving real-world problems. Furthermore, the use of active learning methodologies contributes to improving student motivation and their preparation for the world of work.

Furthermore, access to employment depends not only on academic qualifications but also on other factors such as prior experience, interpersonal skills, and professional networks. These elements significantly influence graduates' job opportunities, making it essential for educational institutions to promote the holistic development of students. This includes both technical skills and social skills that facilitate their entry into the labor market.

In the global economic context, graduates face a highly competitive environment where job opportunities are limited, and demands are constantly increasing. In this scenario, having a solid and up-to-date education becomes a determining factor for professional success. Adaptability, flexibility, and continuous learning are essential qualities for thriving in these types of environments.

Finally, higher education plays a strategic role in economic and social development by contributing to the formation of a skilled workforce. Educational institutions not only have the responsibility to train competent professionals but also to promote innovation, research, and the development of solutions to complex problems. In this regard, it is essential to strengthen the connection between academia and the productive sector in order to generate a positive impact on society.

Strengthening higher education requires a comprehensive transformation that includes updating content, implementing innovative methodologies, and promoting relevant skills. Only through these changes will it be possible to prepare students to face the challenges of the future.

Cajvan & Neamțu (2026) highlight that higher education plays a key role in facilitating graduates' integration into the labor market, especially in contexts characterized by high volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). In this regard, the authors emphasize that universities must act as strategic agents that not only transmit knowledge but also develop adaptive competencies that enable students to cope with changing work environments. Furthermore, they stress the importance of strengthening cooperation between educational institutions and employers to improve graduate employability. Consequently, higher education must evolve toward more flexible models focused on developing practical and transferable skills.

On the other hand, Portocarrero Ramos et al. (2025) analyze the factors that influence graduates' labor market integration, highlighting that professional success depends not only on a university degree but also on variables such as prior experience, acquired skills, and socioeconomic context. Consequently, the authors demonstrate that university education should be complemented by practical experiences that strengthen students' professional profiles. They also point out that the alignment between academic training and labor market demands is crucial for improving employment rates, reinforcing the need for a more comprehensive educational approach.

Regarding students' own perceptions, Otermans et al. (2025) maintain that graduates positively value the development of competencies during their studies, although they also identify areas for improvement in university preparation. Thus, the authors point out a gap between the skills acquired at university and those required in the workplace. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of incorporating more practical and student-centered

teaching methodologies. Consequently, the need to strengthen the link between theory and practice to improve professional preparation becomes evident.

Similarly, Fagun (2025) argues that higher education must adapt to the demands of the digital age, especially given the growth of artificial intelligence and automation. In this context, the author emphasizes that universities have a responsibility to prepare students for emerging careers by promoting technological and digital skills. Likewise, he points out that continuous learning is essential to remain competitive in a constantly evolving work environment. Therefore, educational institutions must update their programs to respond to these new demands.

Additionally, Gonzales (2017) analyzes students' perceptions of their preparation for the world of work, finding that many consider the practical training received at university insufficient. In this regard, the author emphasizes the importance of strengthening professional development programs within educational institutions. She also highlights that vocational guidance and institutional support are key factors in students' career development. Therefore, greater integration of strategies that link education with employability is needed.

On the other hand, Miklós (2026) examines the role of the university as a space of educational attraction, influenced by factors such as location and family environment in the choice of studies. In this context, the author emphasizes that educational decisions depend not only on academic interests but also on social and personal factors. He also points out that universities must position themselves as attractive institutions that offer opportunities for professional development. Consequently, university choice directly influences students' career paths.

Regarding employability, Iqbal & Shaukat (2021) emphasize that university education is fundamental for developing professional skills and improving job opportunities. In this sense, the authors point out that educational programs should focus on developing practical skills that meet market demands. Furthermore, they underscore the importance of a well-rounded education for students. Therefore, the university becomes a key player in preparing them for employment.

Dhue (2025) points out that graduates face a highly competitive job market with limited and demanding employment opportunities. In this context, she emphasizes that students must be prepared to face increasingly rigorous selection processes. She also highlights the importance of acquiring differentiating skills that allow them to stand out in the job market. Therefore, university education must respond to these competitive conditions.

Jackson et al. (2016) analyzes the relationship between education and the labor market, highlighting the importance of aligning academic programs with the needs of the productive sector. In this regard, the authors point out

that collaboration between educational institutions and employers is fundamental to improving employability. Furthermore, they emphasize that education must adapt to the demands of the work environment. Consequently, greater integration between both sectors is required.

Similarly, Massie et al. (2009) demonstrate that employers perceive deficiencies in the academic preparation of graduates, especially regarding practical experience. Therefore, the authors suggest the need to incorporate more applied training into educational programs. They also emphasize the importance of developing practical skills in students. This aims to improve the transition to the workforce.

On the other hand, Svec (2023) highlights the importance of continuing education in today's workplace, noting that lifelong learning is essential for maintaining professional competitiveness. In this regard, the author emphasizes that professionals must constantly update their knowledge. Furthermore, he points out that companies' value employees who demonstrate a capacity for continuous learning. Therefore, education does not end with obtaining a university degree.

Similarly, Nagarajan & Edwards (2015) highlight the importance of collaboration among universities, employers, and professional associations in developing workplace skills. In this regard, the authors argue that cooperation among these stakeholders leads to better-prepared graduates. Furthermore, they point out that this collaboration facilitates the acquisition of practical skills, thereby strengthening students' employability.

Similarly, Lauder & Mayhew (2020) analyze the relationship between higher education and the labor market, noting that educational expansion does not always guarantee better employment opportunities. In this context, the authors emphasize that an oversupply of graduates can lead to increased competition in the job market. Therefore, better alignment between education and employment is needed. Consequently, educational quality becomes a determining factor.

Finally, Kozera-Kowalska & Uglis (2021) examine students' perceptions of university preparation, finding that they consider education a key element for their entry into the workforce. However, they also identify limitations in the training received. Therefore, the authors suggest improving the quality of academic programs. In conclusion, higher education plays a fundamental role in preparing students for the labor market.

The reviewed contributions agree that higher education plays a fundamental role in preparing students for an increasingly competitive and changing global labor market. They emphasize that universities must evolve toward more flexible, competency-based models, integrating not only theoretical knowledge but also practical, digital, and

transferable skills that enable graduates to adapt to diverse professional contexts.

Furthermore, a persistent gap has been identified between academic training and the needs of the labor market, highlighting the importance of strengthening the link between universities and employers. The lack of practical experience and insufficient development of applied skills are recurring issues, suggesting the need to incorporate more active educational methodologies, such as professional internships, project-based learning, and real-world work experiences.

On the other hand, it is recognized that graduates' employability depends not only on their academic training, but also on complementary factors such as prior experience, personal skills, professional networks, and participation in extracurricular activities. These elements contribute to building a more competitive and differentiated professional profile in the job market.

CONCLUSIONS

The contemporary context, characterized by the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, digitalization, and the transformation of production processes, places new demands on higher education institutions. In this scenario, it is essential that educational systems incorporate training approaches focused on developing digital competencies, as well as adaptive skills that enable students to thrive in constantly changing work environments. Likewise, lifelong learning is becoming a key element in ensuring the continuous updating of knowledge and the sustainability of employability over time.

On the other hand, the current job market is highly competitive, requiring university graduates to possess strong, distinctive skills aligned with the needs of the productive environment. In this sense, higher education must transcend purely academic training, promoting the student's holistic development through the integration of knowledge, practical skills, and socio-emotional capabilities that enhance their professional performance and adaptation to diverse work contexts.

Finally, the importance of strengthening collaboration between higher education institutions, the productive sector, and various social actors is emphasized, with the aim of ensuring relevant and high-quality training. This collaboration helps to reduce the existing gaps between academic training and the demands of the labor market, contributing to the development of human capital, innovation, and competitiveness in a dynamic and constantly evolving global environment.

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Conflicts of Interest:

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions:

Maksym Iasechko: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, visualization, original draft writing, and writing, review, and editing.

Ethical statement:

The study was based on the analysis of documentary sources and publicly available data, and therefore did not involve the direct participation of human subjects. No personally identifiable information was handled.