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Book Review of "The Future of University Credentials: New Developments at the Intersection of Higher Education and Hiring."

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Book Review / Compte rendu

Gallagher, Sean R. (2016). *The Future of University Credentials: New Developments at the Intersection of Higher Education and Hiring*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press. Pages: 272. Price: 30.00 USD (paper).

Reviewed by Kim Warkentine, Administrative Assistant to the Director, Office of Aboriginal Education and Engagement, Vancouver Island University.

The Future of University Credentials provides a clear overview of the way that employers interpret higher education credentials in the context of the United States of America (America), and also in the context of new credentials and related technologies that have emerged in recent years. The author provides valuable insight into American hiring practices, a succinct history of online education and credentials, and clear explanations of emerging trends in credentialing and how employers view these trends versus traditional undergraduate degrees. This book is very practical and timely in its focus, and will provide universities a better understanding of how hiring managers outside of academia are assessing and interpreting university credentials “as proxies for performance and acumen that is otherwise difficult to observe” (p. 50).

The book successfully lends insight into American hiring practices via the author’s interviews with over three hundred employers and industry associations. For example, employers described the value of completing a degree in that it signaled “perseverance, determination, and other attractive attributes” while completing a series of courses without completing a credential was not as valued (p. 44). This highlights an ongoing paradox worthy of further research: Employers seem to want university graduates, but they also want universities to fill the skills gap with courses traditionally taught at colleges and polytechnics. This could be interpreted as universities doing a poor job of highlighting all the skills that students develop by completing academic course work (e.g., information synthesis, ability to work in groups or teams, basic computer skills). However, the author also points out that employers need to meet universities halfway. He writes: “It is not only universities that need to leave their ivory towers: Employers themselves could be more active in specifying what they need from institutions and seeking out partnerships” (p.170).

A succinct history of online education and credentials is provided through the exploration of alternative educational platforms, how these have been received by employers, and how they have changed the way that higher education is conducted. Online education

and then MOOCs (massive open online courses) are two examples of modern educational disruptors that have each been touted as the next technological advance to replace the university experience at a fraction of the cost. However, using the history of online education and credentials, Gallagher demonstrates that employers are not always receptive to unfamiliar platforms and that, when these innovations are valuable, universities eventually find ways to incorporate these new tools into their own offerings, thereby adapting rather than becoming irrelevant.

The author does an excellent job of providing a clear explanation of emerging trends in credentialing, and how employers view these trends. Beyond the unique perspective of this book being written by someone who seems to understand both American higher education and employers, the book is especially worth reading for cataloguing emerging credential trends such as nano-degrees, badges, boot camps and e-portfolios, and how hiring managers assess these when reviewing candidates. The proliferation of largely innovative new credentials with which most employers are unfamiliar illustrates again the recognition-factor of university degrees; therefore, until these new credentials are better understood and established, the author remains doubtful that they will replace the university degree in the near future.

Gallagher posits that university credentials that are directly linked to professional standards deliver greater value for the learner and employers. Given his background as business consultant it is not surprising that the author would suggest this; however, his point really strikes at the heart of the traditional conflict between universities and employers. Universities produce scholars, industry and business want workers; and while the two are not entirely incompatible, to expect all academic credentials to be linked to professional standards is, to my mind, unnecessary and makes me wish the author had spent more time delving into the purpose of degrees themselves beyond increasing the employability of graduates.

From a Canadian perspective, there is some interesting information regarding credential and online education history and trends, but some of the hiring information, such as university selectiveness as a signal for a candidate's potential, does not necessarily translate for Canadian higher education, as our most prestigious universities have some of the largest student populations. While the author writes in the American context, many of the concepts point to further research in this area for consideration by Canadian higher education institutions and interested employers.

Although this book serves as a good introduction to the topic of American university credentials and hiring practices, it does not adequately address other aspects of university credentials, something that would have given a more comprehensive picture of the future of credentials and hiring. A rethink is needed of the author's recommendation that all degrees should be directly linked to professional standards, as not all credentials lend themselves to such treatment. As well, while using the general term "university credential" keeps the book's focus on emerging technologies and hiring practices, it does create some confusion regarding whether the author's analysis and recommendations are applicable to all, some, or a few fields of study.

The Future of University Credentials succeeds as "a solution to many claiming that higher education in the United States (and maybe worldwide) is broken or in crisis" (p. 19). This balanced approach – looking at what's working and then pointing to

ways for employers and universities to work together to embrace innovation that may fix what is not working – is needed in a literary landscape that is too quick to dismiss university degrees entirely. Therefore, while the death of the university is not imminent, it is incumbent on universities to reach across the divide and understand the value of university credentials outside of academia; reading this book is a good place to start.

