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## **Bridging the Skills Gap Through Academia: Can Company CEOs Be Part of the Faculty? A Desk Research Review**

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### **Abstract**

*The enduring gap between graduate competencies and labor market expectations remains a global concern. In Kenya, the workforce participation rate stands at 66.7%, indicating that a significant portion of the population, particularly recent graduates, remain unemployed or underemployed. These challenges necessitate a bold reimagining of academia's role in workforce development. Traditional teaching methods have predominantly emphasized technical skills, whereas employers increasingly value transversal skills such as communication, critical thinking, innovativeness, and adaptability, which cut across roles and sectors. Current discourse on bridging the skills gap often occurs in silos, with academia and industry viewing each other as the problem rather than collaborators. Anchored on the experiential learning theory, this paper explores the feasibility and strategic value of integrating industry leaders, particularly company CEOs, into academic teaching roles. Incorporating firsthand industry insights through part-time faculty appointments, mentorship programs, or guest lectures, higher education institutions can better align curricula with market realities. The paper reviews current literature on the skills mismatch, critiques the persistent divide between academia and industry, and presents case studies where CEO engagement has enhanced learning outcomes. It concludes by proposing policy, institutional, and partnership frameworks that embed corporate leadership within academia as a mechanism for improving graduate employability.*

**Keywords:** Academia, CEOs, Employability, Industry-academia collaboration, Skills gap,

### **Introduction**

Globally, as firms strive to adapt to a rapidly evolving landscape, the need for workers with new and more advanced skill sets is growing. However, most graduates struggle to find meaningful work as their skills do not match what the employers need (Chowdhury, 2020). Stakeholders agree that there is mismatch between the skills available in the workforce and those required to meet current and future business needs. This challenge has resulted in increased workload for existing staff, higher operating costs and difficulties in implementing new work practices (OECD, 2024).

Organizations increasingly require employees who can combine technical expertise with advanced cognitive and socio-emotional skills and work effectively alongside emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (Braun et al., 2024). Addressing these skill gaps is

essential, as it directly impact an organization's ability to innovate, stay competitive and achieve sustainable growth. Despite ongoing investment in education, employers report persistent skills mismatches, suggesting that traditional academic approaches may be insufficient, thus reinforcing calls for flexible, practice oriented learning pathways that go beyond classroom instruction (Edmondson, 2024). According to the experiential learning theory, students derive meaningful understanding of knowledge when they engage in authentic or simulated experiences from lived experiences (Kong, 2021).

In Africa, the value of experiential learning has recently gained stronger empirical support. In South Africa, Puren et al. (2022) examined four case-based spatial planning modules and found that "live" experiential projects not only deepened students' critical problem-solving but also informed curriculum transformation. Similarly, Mayombe (2024) demonstrated that non-school-based technical and vocational education programs, rooted in experiential learning theory, significantly enhanced employability among unemployed youth by combining classroom simulations with workplace-based training. More recently, Mutesasira and Marongwe (2025) showed how geography students in South Africa developed environmental stewardship and practical resource management competencies through field-based experiential projects, internships, and outdoor learning. These studies highlight a growing momentum in African higher education toward embedding lived experiences in curricula to foster contextual understanding, motivation, and workforce readiness, though implementation remains uneven across institutions.

Despite these insights, the concept of experiential learning is underexplored in Kenya given that a survey by the Federation of Kenya Employers (FKE), found that among the hardest to fill graduate positions are in business management, despite the ever-increasing number of business schools (Skills Needs Survey Report, 2023). This paradox suggests that educational institutions may not be equipping learners with the practical insights demanded by the market. This paper suggests that one strategic approach to addressing the issue of skills gap is to integrate top corporate executives, particularly CEOs, into academic teaching. Such initiatives according to Akdur (2021) can contribute to ensuring market ready graduates, increasing their employability, and having industry insights when making curriculum revisions.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Skills Gap***

Skill has been defined as the ability to apply knowledge and use knowhow to complete tasks and solve problems (Braun et al., 2024). Academic qualifications alone may not effectively reflect the skills demanded by the labor market, with most employers prioritizing skills over qualifications (Di Battista et al., 2023). Skills and qualifications mismatch occurs when there is a misalignment between the skills demanded in the labor market and the skills possessed by the labor force.

Skills gap may occur when the working environment rapidly changes disproportionately to the skills available in the labor market or where existing employees lack the requisite skills needed to perform effectively in their current jobs (OECD, 2024). It arises, in particular, when the education system fails to supply the skills sought by employers, or when the economy fails to create jobs that correspond to individuals' skill endowments. Irrespective of the reasons, there is a general consensus that developing employability skills is critical in order to successfully transition to the world of work (Okolie et al., 2020), and that the current strategies are limited

(Ngonda et al., 2022). A study by Braun et al.(2024) revealed growing concerns of skills gap across regions and sectors. This paper explores skills gap from the perspective of misalignment between employees competences and the demands of the employer/industry, and how the engagement of CEOs as part of faculty can help address this gap.

### ***The Limitations of Academia Alone***

Many universities continue to emphasize theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical application. Academic curriculums are focused-on specializations while the industry is looking for more practical approaches to problem solving or improving work situations (Zeidan & Bishnoi, 2020), thus creating graduates who are knowledgeable but not always job-ready. Universities have been accused of focusing on rote memorization as opposed to practical application of knowledge (Mishra et al., 2019). To remain relevant and meet industry needs, university curriculums must of necessity incorporate both technical and non-technical skills that employers are looking for. However, academia has a long way to go in realizing this and some of the contributing factors is how universities view education as an activity instead of a lifelong evolutionary practice (Zeidan & Bishnoi, 2020).

While academia is open to twinning with the industry to narrow the skills gap, challenges continue. First universities lack the agility required to change their programs to provide the necessary skills-based learning opportunities and credentials demanded by the evolving job market (Edmondson, 2024). Secondly, there is a mismatch between what academia and industry consider as the most important skills (Noor et al., 2024). However, where integrated learning has been adopted such as the training of medical personnel, the outcomes have been hailed as novel in bridging the gap between theory and practice (Ali et al., 2025).

In Africa, studies have shown that the university education system encourages memorization of facts and passing of exams over the practical application of skills (Quansah et al., 2023). Even where work integrated learning opportunities are availed, the outcomes are based on the attached supervisor and hence students do not have similar outcomes (Ngonda et al., 2022). A study by Heerden (2024), across several African countries revealed that internship opportunities though meant to bridge the gap between theory and practice hardly achieve the desired outcome because the interns are not well prepared for the workplace while the organizations are not prepared for their arrival, and hence there is minimal constructive engagement.

In Kenya, though internships are hailed as the panacea of preparing graduates for employment, the country has experienced mixed outcomes. A study by Zhao (2023), on the experiences of medical interns revealed that they did not always get consistent supervisions and, in some instances, they were made to carry out inappropriate tasks that robbed them of precious time to engage in their core responsibilities. Furthermore, a review of the Kenya's Public Service Internship Program (PSIP), showed that there is a mismatch between graduate specialization and placement thus hindering acquisition of relevant skills for future employability and career advancement (Muthima et al., 2025). According to Kiriri (2019) there is need to rethink curriculum development from a university focused approach to an industry focused approach in order to bridge the skills gap and ensure graduate employability.

### ***CEO Involvement in Academia***

Company CEOs can offer strategic insight and leadership acumen, access to real-world business cases, exposure to market dynamics, mentorship, and networking opportunities. Some of the successful CEO involvement in the classroom include the capstone learning technique where CEOs provide live business dilemmas that students are expected to solve (Lebrón et al., 2019). In such cases the students are given an opportunity to translate theory to practice (Cycyota et al., 2019).

Another approach is where academicians are given exposure to industry in an effort to provide their students with relevant and current challenges in the work place. In Malaysia, a CEO Faculty program was found to significantly impact on knowledge transfer, increase the level of leadership competence among the CEO Faculty, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of graduates to meet the needs of the industry (Azmi et al., 2021). Another growing trend is the emergence of corporate universities in response to organizations dissatisfaction with the knowledge provided by traditional universities. Examples of corporate universities abound such as the General Electric (GE's) leadership development center started by the former CEO of GE Jack Welch. However, studies have shown that graduates of corporate universities significantly underperform compared to their counterparts graduating from traditional universities (Nguyen & Fan, 2022). There are also concerns regarding the sustainability of corporate universities. These findings suggest that to successfully transition from academia to the world of work, both traditional approaches and corporate experience is needed and this cannot be achieved when knowledge is shared in silos.

### ***Global Case Studies of CEO Involvement in Academia***

According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), adjunct lecturers account for nearly 70% of all new hires in American Universities demonstrating the key role played by part-time faculty (AAUP, 2025). In the same breadth, many universities use corporate leaders as adjunct faculty. For example, the University of Michigan incorporates senior industry leadership in its teaching programs, and uses that as a differential strategy (University of Michigan, n.d.). The university utilizes both current and former CEOs as regular faculty or guest lecturers. Similarly, Augusta University has what is called the CEO series where corporate leaders go to the university to speak to students on a whole range of topics from operations management to strategy (Augusta University, n.d.). The university of York Belgrade offers the CEO lecture series that equally expose their students to practical industry experience (University of York, n.d.).

A number of corporate leaders also take up university teaching roles as adjunct faculty. For example, Steve Reinemund a former CEO of Pepsi left the corporate world to take up an academic role as the Dean of Wake Forest University School of Business (Wake Forest University, n.d.). Similarly, Howard Hass, CEO of Searly also lectures at the Chicago Booth University School of Business (The University of Chicago Booth University School of Business, n.d.).

In Africa, the link between academia and industry is underexplored. For example, a meeting of East African Vice-Chancellors held in March 2025 in Nairobi, deliberated on the need to equip graduates with the right skills to enhance employability and global competitiveness, but there was no representation from the industry in that meeting (Commission for University

Education, 2025). This notwithstanding, a few universities in Africa engage CEOs in teaching roles albeit not in an institutionalized manner. For example, the Africa Leadership University (ALU) teaching model includes inviting visiting faculty who expose the students to real world experiences across multiple industries and disciplines (ALU, n.d.). In South Africa, the University of Pretoria, collaborates with eminent persons to offer lectures on governance and human rights (University of Pretoria, n.d.).

In Kenya, studies show that CEOs are going back to the classroom not to teach but to keep updated on emerging leadership and management trends (Business Daily, 2020). Whereas these CEOs can offer valuable industry insights if absorbed as faculty, the Commission for University Education (CUE) has stringent rules on who can qualify as a lecturer. Most universities require that lecturers have a PHD degree with years of experience in teaching and research. Furthermore, they should have several publications in scholarly journals. Consequently, these stringent regulations starve the universities of valuable industry experience that can be beneficial to students. Despite these restrictions, some business schools have recruited past CEOs into their faculty to bring real life work experiences into academia. For example, the dean of Strathmore University Business School is a former group CEO of an insurance company (Strathmore University Business School, n.d.). Similarly, the Chandaria School of Business (CSOB) at United States International University- Africa (USIU-Africa) has a CEO as adjunct faculty (USIU, 2025). Whereas some universities have present or past CEOs as part of faculty, the practice is discretionary and not embedded on policy.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative desk research design, which involves the systematic review and synthesis of existing secondary data sources (Saunders et al., 2019). This method was considered appropriate due to the widespread availability of scholarly and industry literature on higher education reform, labor market dynamics, and industry-academia collaboration, employability and skills development. A keyword-based search strategy was employed to retrieve relevant literature from credible academic databases including Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Emerald Insight, as well as University websites. Keywords used included: skills gap, CEOs in academia, higher education reform, graduate employability, and industry-academia collaboration. The search was limited to English-language sources published between 2020 and 2024 to ensure recency and relevance to the current post-pandemic education and employment landscape.

Retrieved documents were screened for relevance based on their titles, abstracts, and full texts. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, institutional reports, and international case studies that addressed the integration of industry leaders into academia and strategic responses to bridging the skills gap. Exclusion criteria included articles published before 2020 and those lacking empirical or policy relevance.

The selected documents were analyzed using thematic content analysis, following the framework proposed by Nowell et al. (2017). Themes were identified through both deductive coding (guided by research objectives) and inductive coding (emerging from the literature itself). The findings were grouped under four key thematic areas namely: the persistence and nature of the graduate skills gap, limitations of traditional academia-led training models, the role of CEOs in shaping employability outcomes, and global and regional case studies of industry-academia collaboration. A funnel approach was used to progressively analyze

literature from a global to regional to the Kenyan context. This ensured a broader understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to integrating CEOs into teaching roles within higher education. Pros and cons of the approach were then synthesized to inform practical recommendations.

### **Results and Discussion**

From the review of existing literature on CEO engagement in academia, three key issues emerged. First, there is strong global precedence for CEO engagement in academia, particularly in business, leadership and entrepreneurship programs. This has taken the form of either CEOs starting corporate universities, past CEOs taking up faculty roles, or current CEOs assuming adjunct faculty roles. However, the practice is not institutionalized and, in some cases does not meet the requirements of the education regulatory authorities. This may explain the findings of O'Dwyer et al. (2022) that company executives continue to play a peripheral role in academia. Where this program has worked, the students have recorded very high ratings of the visiting faculty, an indication that students benefit immensely by interacting with corporate executives despite the challenges of time constraints (Vuoriainen et al., 2024).

Secondly, CEO engagement in academia can enhance curriculum relevance and make it more responsive to the needs of the industry. These findings corroborate the findings of Xiao et al. (2025) that transformative learning that includes diverse contexts, provision of real-life knowledge, and case-method approaches helps students to think independently rather than being passive recipients of information. To this extent, CEO participation in teaching or curriculum development enhances the relevance of curriculum, by ensuring that it is responsive to industry focus, improves student employability, and builds stronger industry-academia linkages (Kiriri, 2019).

Thirdly, there is still a great divide between academia and industry especially in the developing world. In Kenya especially, industry captains are not consulted in curriculum development meetings (CUE, 2025), despite the already identified need of skills gap that limit graduate employability. This is exacerbated by lack of institutional flexibility and policy support which are critical enablers for sustainable CEO involvement in teaching roles.

### ***Challenges and Considerations***

Incorporating CEOs into faculty has been found to enhance learning and give the students practical examples of the real world of work. Despite this, there are key challenges with this model. These include lack of pedagogical training among CEOs, risk of corporate bias, potential time constraints, and conflict with academic rigor or accreditation norms. To overcome this, there is need to institutionalize the CEO faculty arrangement so that a structured engagement can be put in place instead of *ad hoc* or discretionary arrangements.

### ***Policy and Institutional Recommendations***

The following measures can help to institutionalize CEO participation in academia. First, universities should develop 'CEO-in-Residence' programs. Having corporate executives attached to universities can add value to students and bring real world of work experience to the class room. Secondly, universities should revise the hiring criteria to accommodate professional expertise. On policy, the Commission for University Education (CUE), should create an advisory board that includes industry captains to support curriculum design that incorporates more of experiential learning and not solely exam based.

## Conclusion

Skills gap remains a persist challenge that concerns both academia and industry. This paper proposes the inclusion of corporate executives especially CEOs in academia. However, the inclusion of CEOs in academia should be seen not as a replacement for academic faculty but as a strategic complement that taps unique strengths. Their presence can enrich learning environments and better align academic outputs with real-world expectations. As the world of work evolves, academia must innovate and CEOs can play a critical role in that journey.

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