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What employers look for: the skills debate and the fit with youth perceptions

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Abstract

The notion of skills shortage pervades the rhetoric of economic reform and calls for Australia to become a skilled nation, and it is implicitly associated with conceptions of youth as attitudinally deficient and inadequately prepared to meet the needs of the contemporary economy. However, a lack of clarity exists regarding the term ‘skills’, the nature of the shortfall and the distinction between ‘soft’ as opposed to ‘hard’ skills. While the new Australian employability skills framework identifies the attributes and dispositional skills considered to constitute an employment-oriented soft skills regime, it leaves important questions unanswered. With reference to a group of trade-oriented youths in transition, the skills debate is critiqued to show that the promotion of soft skills as measurable competencies has compounded an already ambiguous and imprecise field. The so-called employability skills identified in the new framework are in fact life skills and attributes, and as such, it is argued that they should not be narrowly

confined to vocational education, but instead regarded as the very warp-and-weft of liberal education.

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Anthea Taylor is currently a Visiting Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Australian Capital Territory.

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