

Beyond Competence-Based Education: Internship-Oriented Skill Formation as a New Paradigm for Higher Education in the AI Era

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Abstract

The rapid development of artificial intelligence and digital information technologies is fundamentally transforming the role, structure, and objectives of contemporary education systems. Traditional competence-based educational models, which emphasise the accumulation of theoretical knowledge and the development of information-searching skills, are increasingly challenged by technological environments in which AI systems can efficiently retrieve, analyse, and synthesise information. In such conditions, the classical paradigm that equates education with the acquisition of a stable body of knowledge and competencies is gradually losing practical relevance. This transformation is particularly significant for countries undergoing rapid technological and economic modernisation, including China, where educational reforms increasingly focus on innovation capacity, entrepreneurship, and the practical applicability of knowledge. The objective of this study is to reconsider the strategic aims of higher education in the emerging AI-driven knowledge environment and to analyse the growing importance of practice-oriented educational models that prioritise the formation of applied professional skills through direct engagement with real economic and technological processes. The research applies a qualitative comparative approach, examining contemporary developments in European higher education and comparing them with current reform directions in Chinese education policy, which emphasise industry–university cooperation, innovation ecosystems, and the development of entrepreneurial talent. Particular attention is given to European higher education initiatives that integrate structured internship programs as a core element of professional training. The study analyses examples from European private universities and international educational platforms that combine academic study with practical work experience in companies, technology centers, and research institutions. As a case example, the paper presents the “Internship in EU” project, which connects international graduates with European enterprises and innovation environments, providing a model of transnational internship-based professional training. The findings suggest that internship-centred education provides an effective mechanism for bridging the persistent gap between academic preparation and professional readiness. In the context of rapid technological change and global innovation competition, the concept of being “educated” is no longer synonymous with being capable of practical work. The study concludes that skill-forming, internship-oriented education represents a key strategic direction for twenty-first century higher education, particularly for countries such as China that seek to strengthen global competitiveness through innovation-driven development and internationally integrated talent training.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence in Education, Internship-Oriented Education, Skill-Forming Education, Higher Education Transformation, Practice-Oriented Training, University–Industry Cooperation, Innovation-Driven Education, China–Europe Educational Cooperation