



# Addressing the skills shortage and improving student employability



# Learning the skills of the future, today

Microsoft is committed to offering skills training that helps learners advance their careers and meet the changing needs of society, *writes Laura Longcore, vice-president of Worldwide Learning at Microsoft*

**A**t Microsoft, our mission is to empower every person and organisation on the planet to achieve more. A critical part of succeeding in this mission is ensuring that current and future generations can develop the skills needed not only to participate in the rapidly evolving digital and technological landscape but also to drive and shape it. It is my great pleasure to share our commitment to bridging the technical skills gap by providing students, educators, and education institutions with access to programmes and solutions that empower teaching and learning while expanding career opportunities and access for all learners.

To address this issue, Microsoft has proudly invested in a variety of certification programmes, curricular offerings, and talent solutions that enable institutions to support learners, whether they are yet to enter the workforce or are early in their careers, and allow them to acquire the technical skills to gain competitive employment.

One such offering is [Microsoft Learn for Educators](#), a comprehensive programme that provides educators with the resources, support, and professional development to teach students technical skills that are aligned with industry demands, setting them on the path to career success. Within this programme, instructors and educational institutions can access a variety of resources, including teaching guides, lesson plans, and interactive labs, to deliver high-quality, industry-relevant coursework.

Another offering is [Microsoft Learn Career Connected](#), a programme that combines training resources from Microsoft Learn with the networking power of LinkedIn to help students start their careers in the tech industry. The programme fosters partnerships with customers, higher education institutions, and other partners to support career growth and job opportunities. Moreover, Microsoft Certifications have been designed to be industry-relevant and are recognised globally, making them an excellent addition to any resumé. They also offer a pathway for learners to advance their careers and stay up to date with emerging technologies.

As the higher education sector looks to the future of learning, it must recognise the need to be agile and adapt able to meet the changing needs of society. Microsoft is committed to staying at the forefront of innovation and working collaboratively with colleges, universities, and our industry partners to equip the next generation of technology professionals with the skills they need to succeed in the workplace.

I'm proud that Microsoft is committed to bridging the skills gap for learners who are early in their careers through our certifications, curricula, and employability programmes. By working together, we can build a brighter future for all learners and ensure that the workforce of tomorrow is equipped with the skills they need to succeed. We invite you to join us on this journey towards a more technically skilled and inclusive workforce.

## Bridging the gap: helping students to be work-ready

Institutions face different challenges when ensuring that students are ready for the labour market. We profile three universities that are making the most of the Microsoft Learn for Educators programme



"Almost all roles require digital skills to operate successfully"

**In a world where digital skills are in high demand, universities and other higher education institutions are using Microsoft Learn for Educators (MSLE) to obtain resources to prepare students for the rapidly changing tech landscape. MSLE recognises the pivotal role faculty members play in shaping students' career decisions and success and provides them with free curriculum support, training, and tools for teaching. Educators see the value of students acquiring industry-recognised certifications in today's labour market, and MSLE gives them access to ready-made, instructor-led curriculum that can put students on a path to a variety of technical careers.**

Debasis Bhattacharya, associate professor at Maui College at the University of Hawaii, teaches applied business and information technology and uses MSLE to support his students in gaining digital certifications that will make them stand out to employers. "The course itself is geared up for this as an applied business and information course and helps students into business positions that require technical skills, for example, to

work as a technologist in a medical company," he says.

Before the pandemic, Hawaii's labour market was dominated by the hospitality industry, and the pool of employers and potential employees tended to be restricted to the island itself. But when Covid hit, there was an economic shock for those in the hospitality sector, and many islanders ended up without work. Since then, however, there has been a resurgence in the number of roles available to the 2,200 or so students at the college.

"We now have a number of jobs where employees don't necessarily have to be on the island, or where people from Hawaii can take roles in companies off the island where they can work remotely," explains Bhattacharya. "We have adapted to the shift, and the market of employers for our students has increased."

Many of these roles offer higher salaries than were on offer before the pandemic, and almost all require digital skills to operate successfully on a remote basis.

Educators work with students on certifications in their specialist fields, Bhattacharya says. Students are working towards Microsoft Fundamentals certifications in Security, Compliance, and Identity Fundamentals; Azure Artificial Intelligence Fundamentals; Azure AI Fundamentals; and Azure Data Fundamentals. "Our students are very interested and motivated to add certifications to their list of credentials. This is largely due to an awareness that employers value these industry certifications in addition to college degrees. Integrating these certifications along with college courses means students can gain in-demand skills before they begin applying for jobs, giving them a head-start after graduation. These certifications are reliable and valid indicators of employment potential, as students are



"Employers value industry certifications in addition to college degrees"

aligning their credentials with their online job profiles."

Maui College is already seeing results from using the teaching and learning content and resources available as part of MSLE. Educators have access to ready-made curricula that map to the certifications employers are looking for. As more students gain certifications, the college has seen an uptick in employers approaching students before they graduate. "They are getting more internships, many of them remote positions with companies on the US west coast that should lead to more full-time roles once they graduate," Bhattacharya says.

In addition to their coursework, students seeking roles that will make the most of their Microsoft certifications can use the [Microsoft Learn Career Connected](#) programme, which connects job seekers with companies interested in people with Microsoft certifications in cloud computing, artificial intelligence, data, and security. Students can browse potential career paths and employers,

and there is a Microsoft Learn Career Connected LinkedIn community where students can connect with Microsoft customers and partners that are looking to hire people that have technical skills.

"They can interact with a community of other students, look at their experiences, talk to employers who want certain skills – there are many ways to help decide which path they want to take," he adds. Enrolling in the programme has helped Maui College expand its career advisory support for students beyond traditional employer initiatives offered locally.

Bhattacharya feels that the MSLE programme has empowered educators at Maui College beyond practical support such as access to curriculum frameworks and teaching tools. Colleagues in associated disciplines such as cybersecurity or

artificial intelligence can get tips and tricks for teaching the Fundamentals courses in those certifications, so they feel more supported. "Many [technology vendors] provide courses, but this feels like we get something more," he says.

### Continuing education in Canada

The University of Calgary in Canada was the first institution in the country to become an education global training partner with Microsoft, and, so far, it has trained more than 13,000 students in Microsoft Azure Cloud. To date, over 2,400 students from the university have achieved Microsoft certifications; the majority have been in Microsoft Azure Fundamentals, and just over 100 have gained advanced role-based certifications in Azure Data Scientist Associate and Azure AI Engineer Associate.

Calgary is situated in southern Alberta, where the local labour market has seen a marked shift in the past decade. Historically, lots of employment opportunities came from oil and gas, whether working in offices or in the field. The Alberta 2030 Vision aims to develop a highly skilled and competitive workforce in growth areas such as renewable energies and technology, so offering Microsoft credentials to local students and lifelong learners supports these wider ambitions.

Furthermore, Microsoft certifications are in high demand in Canada. According to data insights company Lightcast, 87,462 job postings requiring Microsoft Azure skillsets were posted between May 2022 and May 2023. MSLE helps educators at the university deliver programmes that will prepare students for these vital certifications.

Many of Calgary's students enrolled in technical programmes have experience in the workplace but don't necessarily know where technology fits into their careers or how they can pivot their careers to keep up with the rapid pace of digital change, explains Ewa Wasniewski, director of domestic

programmes at the university. Acquiring industry certifications can help even experienced employees demonstrate that they are keeping pace with digital developments in the workplace. "We're trying to do skills-gap analyses with employers, but it can be challenging because we're training for a field of work that might not be there yet," she says. Further support has come from MSLE in terms of curriculum planning, according to Vui Kien Liao, associate director of technology programmes for continuing education at Calgary. "Students could just access courses on the internet, but they get value out of the experience of sharing and interacting with instructors," he says. "The MSLE programme helps us to build a curriculum that appeals to all learners."

One success story is Sasan Taghadosi who completed an Azure Data Fundamentals Certification and is now working at the Royal Bank of Canada as a senior data quality analyst. He had previously studied for a master's and wanted to pursue a

new career in a technical data-related field. Liao helped him to achieve this through interactive lab demos and by pointing him to the relevant [Microsoft Learn](#) learning path, which showed him the certifications he would need. Taghadosi also completed the AI fundamentals training and can therefore offer employers his skills in both cloud and artificial intelligence – two of the most in-demand technologies. "Cloud computing penetrates every industry, so if our students can use these credentials to enhance their work, they have access to better opportunities," Liao says.

### Skills to start careers

Students at Eastern Washington University (EWU), meanwhile, are in high demand for their data analytics skills. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, demand for people

with data science skills will increase by 28 per cent by 2026 in the US alone, making graduates in this area a much sought-after commodity. The university runs several data majors, including business systems and analytics, and data analytics. Employers often approach EWU's College of Professional Programs when they're looking to build a talent pipeline in this area, according to Alexandros Paparas, assistant professor at EWU. "Businesses often come to us looking for potential recruits, so the students all find jobs before they graduate."

Although EWU is in the early stages of using MSLE to support its teaching, many students have already successfully achieved certifications ranging from Azure Fundamentals to Power Platform. These credentials will afford them an advantage in the labour market, Paparas believes. "We want them to take these credentials because it shows they can handle data, can work with cloud technology or manage security," he says. The students are then viewing and applying for jobs posted on LinkedIn via Microsoft Learn Career Connected, where potential employers can see evidence of their skills [through certification]. While students often build early links with employers and apply directly for roles, the Microsoft Learn Career Connected programme and dedicated LinkedIn group have also been useful for students in terms of networking, showcasing their credentials, and honing their job applications.

Like other universities using MSLE, EWU is able to use MSLE to help it implement Microsoft certifications alongside its existing degree programmes. This gives educators the confidence to provide students with work-ready capabilities when they start their careers. "Gaining these certifications is important," says Paparas. "Once you join a company, you might not get a chance to re-learn these things. We want students to build techniques they can apply in the real world."

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# Making career connections: how Microsoft unlocks opportunities for new talent

Gaining digital credentials is just the first step towards a rewarding career in tech. Microsoft Learn Career Connected can link students with a range of opportunities with employers

**T**he market for technical skills continues to evolve and grow, and employers need a sustainable stream of talent to realise their ambitions. Yet many experience a digital skills gap, meaning they struggle to access professionals with the right experience and qualifications in current and emerging technologies.

The pandemic cemented the fact that even the most traditional businesses now compete in a digital space. The [Microsoft Learn Career Connected](#) programme is helping to address the issue by connecting students with opportunities to learn – whether on their own or through organisations that recruit and train. Microsoft Learn Career Connected can also connect students with job opportunities and a network of potential employers.

Avanade has a long history with Microsoft having begun as a joint venture between the tech giant and Accenture in 2000. This means it is uniquely positioned to offer opportunities that require



**"Even the most traditional businesses now compete in a digital space"**

certifications in core Microsoft technologies. It employs almost 60,000 people who are experts in the Microsoft ecosystem and recruits about 6,000 new people each year.

Avanade has 10 academies – in-house learning and development programmes focusing on specific areas – that help it to globally upskill talent across Microsoft's technologies. But it still faces challenges in keeping up with market demand for these skills, thanks to the fast-changing nature of technology and growth in client demand. "In our global academy programme, we hire for potential rather than skill, and this means we can access candidates from more

diverse backgrounds," explains Mirjam van Ost, talent lead for global business applications, data and AI. "We generally find that it's easier to teach people the technology than the qualities they need and the consulting skills. The digital skills gap is everywhere, but we can always hire more people." Senior solutions architects and people with executive capability are the biggest challenge to recruit, she adds.

Avanade is one of a host of Microsoft-affiliated customers and partners that are part of the Microsoft Learn Career Connected programme that can help learners with training, placements, or even securing a job. Through the programme's dedicated LinkedIn community, candidates can learn about job postings that match their career aspirations and current or future skills, see details of seminars and training events or

receive guidance from a community moderator on how to curate a profile that employers will notice.

The [Avanade LinkedIn community](#) showcases life at the company, including blog posts about work experience. "We're seeing the most growth in this community from people moving into data, AI and business applications, as well as lots of people at the start of their careers. It reaches places where we don't necessarily have legal entities, so [it] helps us find people who can then join our academies," says van Ost. Employees receive extensive career support at Avanade, with each new joiner being allocated a career adviser from day one and gaining access to extensive in-house learning opportunities. "If we can hire people who already have Microsoft knowledge, that's one thing less we have to teach them," van Ost says. Because the technologies themselves change so quickly, soft skills such as having a growth mindset, effective delivery management and multiplier leadership (people who bring out the best in others) are often the most valuable. "Once they're here, we have an extensive learning and development organisation internally to support them and can organise a lot of training ourselves. The one thing that is constant is change," says van Ost.

## Tech training and people skills

Research shows that greater diversity in teams promotes innovation, and TechFluent's goal is to support under-represented communities to gain the vital digital skills that will help them compete in the labour market. Free for participants, the organisation offers a [14-week programme](#) that introduces learners to Microsoft Dynamics and the Power Platform. The programme is split into two parts – digital skills and consulting skills – the latter of which helps them develop soft skills such as negotiation or team leadership, which will prepare them to deliver real-world

projects. This is useful because some participants already have digital expertise but need specific Microsoft qualifications, while others want to build their consultancy skills.

The minimum requirement is a high school diploma, a threshold that means participants come from a wide range of backgrounds. "We do tech training over Teams and pair that with mentorship," explains Liz McGlennen, executive director of TechFluent. "It's hard to get into a role in the technical sector if you don't have a network or a guide to explain things. Each student starts with a mentor from an IT team, then a second mentor towards the end of the course that helps them to look for a job." Microsoft Learn Career Connected complements the way TechFluent's programme is structured because students can see job opportunities that match their skills, while the organisation itself can reach out for volunteers. Microsoft Learn Career Connected's [dedicated LinkedIn community](#) means they have a ready-made network of fellow digital professionals.

TechFluent has now run its programme for two years. Several graduates have been successful in finding new jobs in technology, and one has become an entrepreneur. "Some people know the industry but not the tech, while others are vice versa," says McGlennen. "Traditionally, tech people have been programmers, but now the gap is in the people skills part. We bring that key middle point between the tech and the users."

When it comes to providing learners with the support they need to build a career in the digital industry, Microsoft Learn Career Connected has been invaluable, McGlennen concludes. For those looking to start a career in tech, Microsoft Learn Career Connected provides a hands-on source of advice on potential career paths, training options, a ready-made network of like-minded peers and employment opportunities with Microsoft customers and partners.

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**Branded content editor**  
Ashton Wenborn

**Designer**  
Steve Beech

**Sub-editors**  
Peter Collins

**Images**  
iStock

**Contributor**  
Jo Faragher

**Sponsorship and advertising opportunities**  
sponsorship@timeshighereducation.com

**Times Higher Education**  
26 Red Lion Square  
London  
WC1R 4HQ



