

Misaligned Expectations: Uncovering Different Aims in Universities and Industry

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Abstract

New graduates from Computer Science (CS) and Software Engineering (SE) programs do not always possess required skills or knowledge when they join their first job in industry. Are there any misaligned expectations between the industry and the educational system? The purpose of this research was to discover that; maybe students, teachers and professionals have different aims. We also looked into the possible solutions that help to reduce the resulting skill gap and the role of online graduate-level programs on resolving the issue. We provided a questionnaire to compare the opinion of participants in each category on educational achievements and ideal goals, chances of getting hired after graduation and becoming fully proficient in that job, and how related job experience can affect the employment and job proficiency. Interestingly, the results indicate that there is a misalignment between what the university teaches and what the industry would like, especially about **soft skills, project management, an real-world problem solving**, but all the interviewed categories quite agree on the topic. The one topic that, instead, may be correlated with difficulties in university teaching is **programming**. The research highlights the important role of job experience. The possible suggested solutions to better prepare the fresh graduates for industry are internships, part-time jobs, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), which brings various benefits to students.

INTRODUCTION

There is a widespread agreement that new graduates from CS and SE programs **do not always possess required skills, abilities or knowledge when joining the tech industry**: a lot of entry-level jobs actually require three years of experience [3]; gaps between Engineering Education, and Practice (what an engineer does in real life) do exist [12]; the software industry presents dissatisfaction in relation to the level of recently graduated professionals [10]; there is considerable room for improvement in what is taught to software students [in relation with job relevance] [8]; many employers find that graduates

and sandwich students come to them poorly prepared for the every day problems encountered at the workplace [4].

The acknowledgment of this skill gap and the efforts to train new graduates for the industry go back as far as 1992 [5]. So, **if in a quarter of a century little to nothing changed, what is the real matter?**

We started thinking that the matter was not an inability of the academy to properly train students and that, instead, there is a *misalignment* in the expectations of the university, industry, and students; each one goes by its own way and ignores others' desire. However, we think that higher education, specifically, high-quality online graduate-level programs, can play an important role on reducing the skill gap between industry and university.

With our research, we'd like to answer some questions:

- Could one of the reasons for the perceived skill gap be that all those that should - in an employer's view - care for learning some skills to be used at work, don't actually have that aim during their education phase?
- Do such abilities have an impact on job proficiency and graduate hireability?
- Does the behavior towards industry-related skill significantly change between undergraduate and graduate education, and can high quality graduate education programs (like Online Master of Science in Computer Science (OMSCS)) help in bridging the skill gap?

RELATED WORK

Some universities and programs took steps to try and fix this problem in some specific classes by doing all kind of things: from purposely hindering and disrupting the software development processes [4], to adapting and incorporating industry training strategies into a software engineering course [10], to creating and adapting a project-based software engineering course that led the students to face with current, real-world engineering problems [6], and to highlight to students how relevant is having and developing critical soft skills to succeed in projects[2].

We thought, as well, that different outcomes could come from different programs, so we explored the difference between CS and SE programs, but those didn't prove really relevant; the official ACM/IEEE curricula for CS [7] and SE [1], which many universities base their program on, are somewhat overlapping,

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and some studies trying to highlight differences in outcomes between CS and SE graduates were mostly inconclusive: a lot of core competencies are shared [9] [11]. And, those recently-updated curricula don't seem to incorporate lessons from the aforementioned efforts.

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the questions, we **created a survey** where we asked questions to assess the thoughts of various categories related to our research - CS and SE students (graduate and undergraduate level), CS/SE university teachers, and industry professionals in the tech sector - to discover what it is, in their opinion, the current goal of university degrees - both Bachelor's (BS) degrees and Master's (MS) degree in CS, SE or whatever a similar degree is called in one's country - and how that affects job proficiency and chances of being hired. The survey questions were designed to highlight contrasts between what students achieve and what people would like them to achieve. Following this, we provided open-ended questions in the last section of the survey that participants would share their thoughts on possible solutions on how to reduce the skill gap caused by misaligned expectations. In this last section, we also pointed out graduate-level online programs as a possible solution and asked them what would be the benefits of such programs on resolving the described issue.

Beyond the category, we had some other independent variables, like age, country of employment, country where people got their degree, highest completed education degree, company size.

We tried to reach out as many people as possible. In order to do so, we created a website as well - <https://www.misalignedtech.com> - to disseminate our research. We had an internal target of at least 300 respondents, but we got 148 responses, which is about half of our goal number.

Once we collected their answers, which were constituted essentially by categorical data (for both dependent and independent variables) and some qualitative data (open questions), we looked at differential patterns: are there situations where some variable, especially the category, has a serious impact on some perceived or desirable skill?

RESULTS

Surprisingly, we've found that the various categories' expectations don't seem to be that misaligned on many topics. All of our categories, for example, have got very similar opinions on most BS graduate skills and would-like skills with one interesting twist (Fig. 1 & Fig. 2).

Figure 1 shows that most of our respondents, regardless of their category, think that a BS graduate achieves the so-called *computational thinking*, and, secondarily, a certain chance of getting hired and some programming skills. Here, we can actually see a bit of contrast between two categories: the teachers, and the industry professionals. The former group think that programming is something a BS graduate definitely acquires; the latter, being the ones that actually employ such

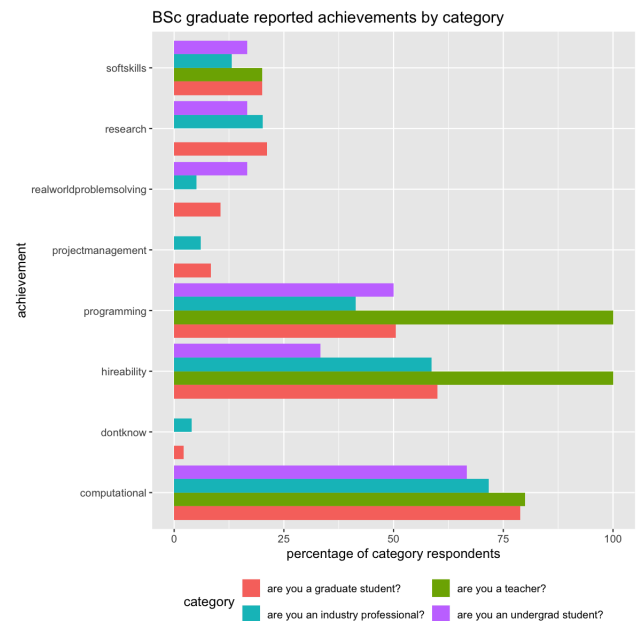


Figure 1. Currently, what do you think an UNDERGRADUATE student in CS or SE achieves, when he/she graduates?

skills, are far more reluctant to say that you get this skill in university.

Regarding the would-like skills, there are not great surprises; it seems that the most interesting selected items, that aren't achieved at university, are real-world problem solving, soft skills, and project management (Fig. 2). Undergrads especially did not vote for this latest skills, however, improvement on chances of getting hired is one of this category's would-like achievements from academic educations.

One surprise comes from programming skills for undergrads. It's not marked as a clear achievement by most respondent, and **neither it is marked as a desiderata**. How should somebody hone his programming skills? On the other hand, it seems that programming skill is mostly achieved by post-graduate level students and is not selected as a high demand for would-like achievements.

The other surprise comes from research skills. Teachers don't think it's something that is taught, and neither that should be taught. Possibly, that's left to graduate education?

Next, we investigated the opinions about graduate education (Fig. 3 & Fig. 4). It appears to be a partial solution for some parts of undergrad education, but not completely. Most people *but industry professionals and graduate-level students* would agree that MS education improves your programming skills; since industry professionals are actually the most qualified at such opinion, it's not really encouraging, since they estimate MS graduate abilities on par with BS graduate abilities. On the other hand, teachers and undergraduate students categories (> 75%) selected this skill as an achievement after MS graduation.

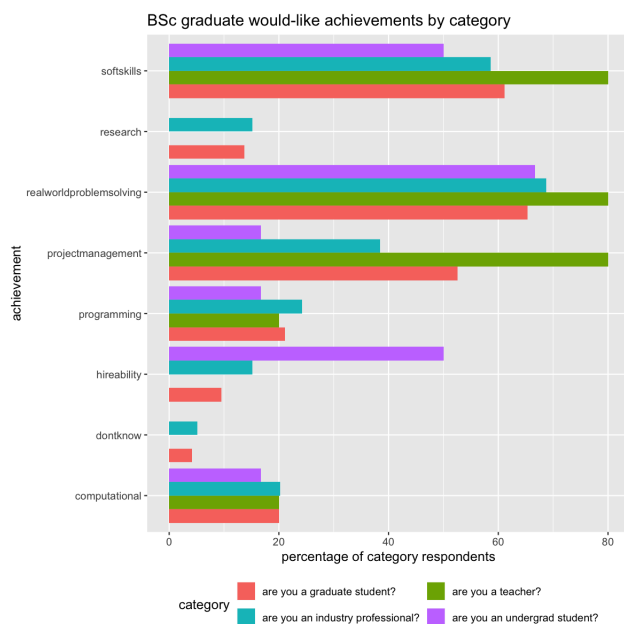


Figure 2. Are there any skills, that you think an UNDERGRADUATE student would need to learn at university, where it is not taught by universities, and are essential in working industry?

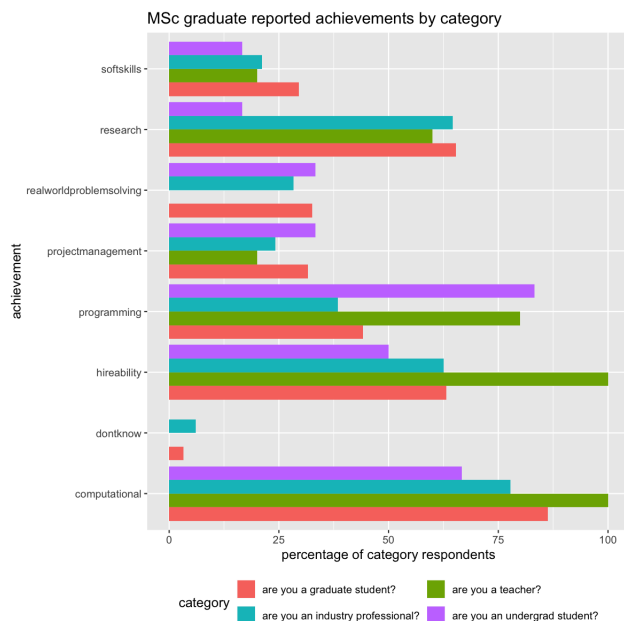


Figure 3. Currently, what do you think an GRADUATE student (MS program) in CS or SE achieves, when he/she graduates?

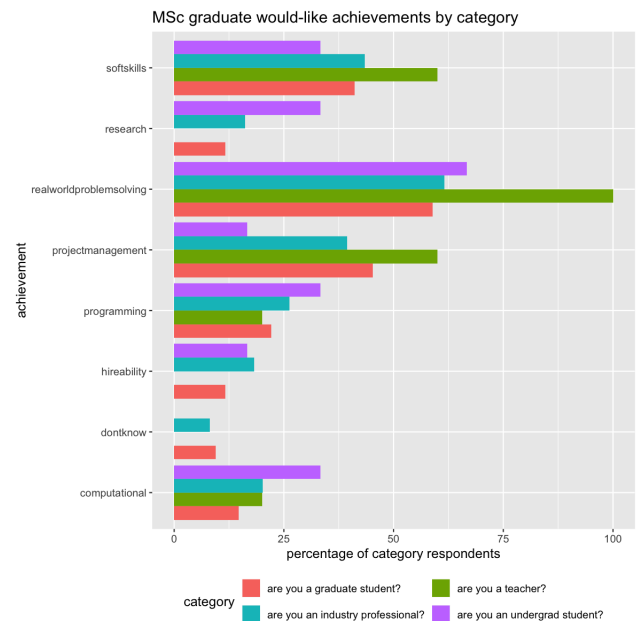


Figure 4. Are there any skills, that you think an GRADUATE student (MS program) would need to learn at university, where it is not taught by universities, and are essential in working industry?

We see better results for research: a reasonable amount of respondents think that graduate education is the stage at which research skills are taught.

But real-word problem solving is still an open problem, even after a MS degree; and soft skills, along project management, could fare much better; there seem to be a large amount of teachers that agree on the fact that MS graduates would need more skills that can be applied directly in the real world.

Generally, we can see more traces of this belief in another answer (Fig. 5). Only a few undergrads (12.5%) hope that, at the end of their four-year studies, they'll have a high chance to enter the workforce and just have a great career (Fig. 5). Other categories mostly believe that an apprenticeship phase will be mandatory for everybody - in this phase, most probably our graduates will learn about **soft skills, project management, real-world problem solving, and actual programming**.

This idea is reinforced as we asked our respondents to compare experienced and unexperienced candidates with and without degrees (Fig. 6 & Fig. 7). As we can see, a large majority (between 75% to 80%) thinks that experience matters a lot. Interestingly, teachers seem that experience is even more important, probably acknowledging the industry-school expectation gap and our supposed misalignment.

One last interesting result explains the job proficiency in short-term and long-term for both BS and MS graduates (Fig 8 to Fig. 11). Here, we can explain two things:

- In the short term, experience is more effective than a degree.
- In the long term, a degree doesn't necessarily mean a better worker.

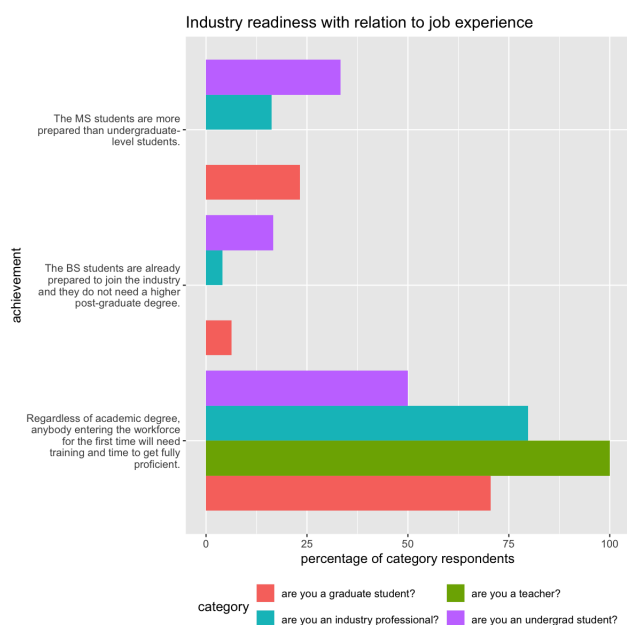


Figure 5. In general, which statement, in your opinion, is more accurate? (if we assume that below groups have no previous job experience)

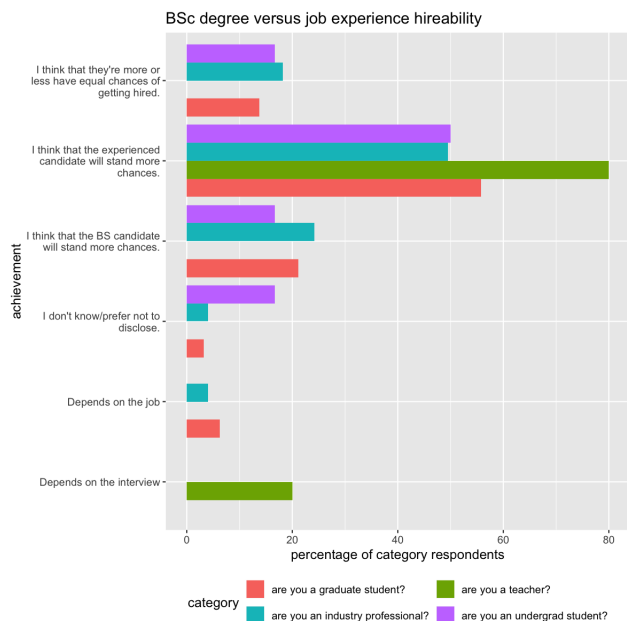


Figure 6. Consider two candidates for a same job. One holds a 4-year BS degree and has no job experience. The other has no degree, but has 4 years of job experience in a similar role. What do you think about the candidates' chance of being hired?

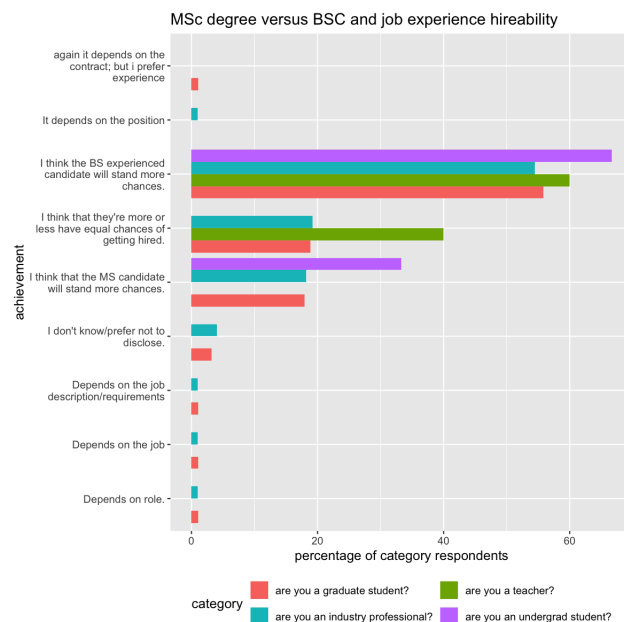


Figure 7. Consider two candidates for the same job. One holds a relevant MS degree and no job experience. The other has a BS and 2-years of relevant job experience. What do you think about the candidates' chance of being hired?

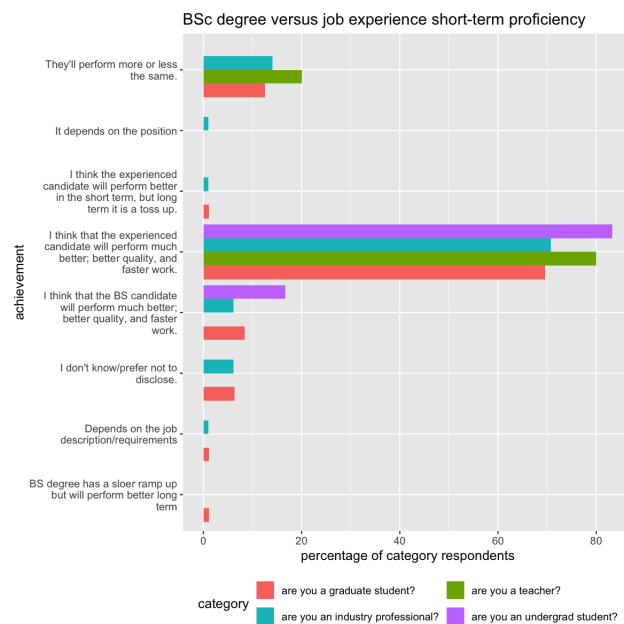


Figure 8. Consider two fresh hires for the same position at the same company. One holds a 4-year BS degree and no job experience. The other has no degree, but has 4 years of job experience in a similar role. What do you think about the candidates' skills and performance RIGHT AFTER BEING HIRED?

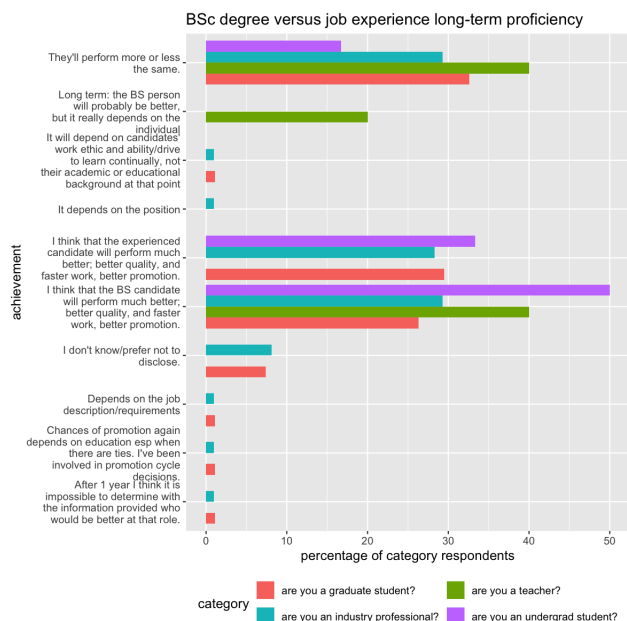


Figure 9. Consider two fresh hires for the same position at the same company. One holds a 4-year BS degree and no job experience. The other has no degree, but has 4 years of job experience in a similar role. They work at the company, in the same role, for one year. What do you think about the candidates' skills and career at that time (after 1 year)?

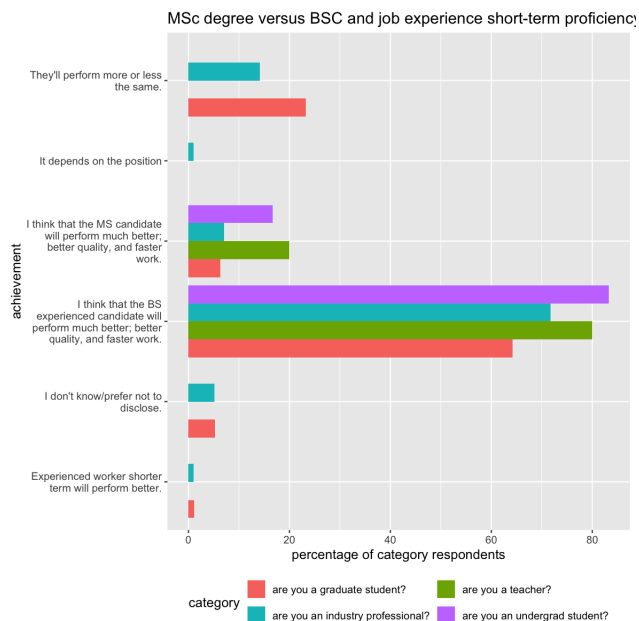


Figure 10. Consider two fresh hires for the same position at the same company. One holds a relevant MS degree and no job experience. The other has a BS degree, and a couple of years of experience in a similar role. What do you think about the candidates' skills and performance RIGHT AFTER BEING HIRED?

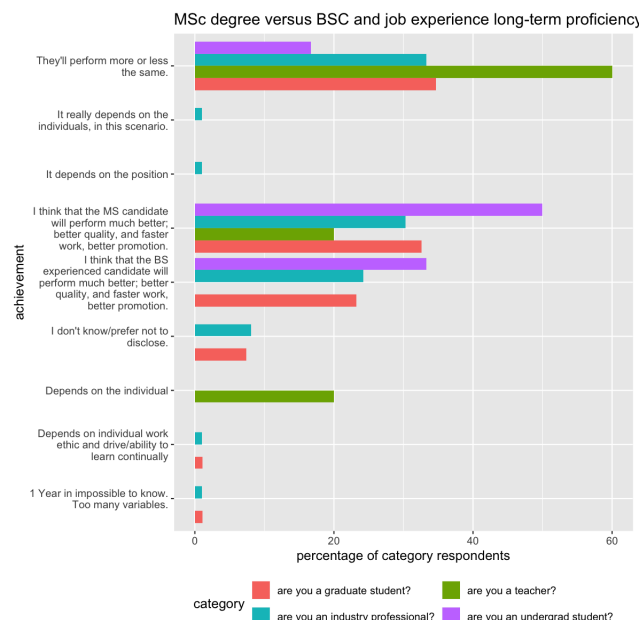


Figure 11. Consider two fresh hires for the same role at the same company. One holds an MS degree and no job experience. The other has a BS degree, and 2 years of job experience in a similar role. They work at the company, in the same role, for one year. What do you think about the candidates' skills and career at that time (after 1 year)?

While the first statement may be a bit expected, we think that the second is clearly a novelty; even teachers don't acknowledge a clear advantage for graduates at doing their job. This is quite a clear image of the misalignment: there seems to be at least a slight indication that people in the academy don't really think that a lot of the topics they teach are *that* aligned with modern industry requirements, neither in short-term nor long-term proficiency.

We have seen quite scattered responses about the impact of GPAs and top schools, and we don't think we can draw big conclusions about those topics.

In the next step, we collected data about possible solutions and suggestions on how the students in both levels can gain useful work experience during their studies. We found that most frequent answers are internships, real-world work, part-time jobs, extra courses or learning new languages, open-source projects, research, and studying (Fig. 12). As shown in the table, the majority of the participants pointed out "internships" as the most effective practice for that. The next two major suggestions are part-time job and open-source projects. It is interesting that the part-time job is selected doubled the time for MS studies compared to BS studies. Another item to point out is that 13% of the respondents think that research play an important role in MS studies to gain useful work experience. However, only 6% recommend research as an option to get better prepared for the industry.

In Fig. 13, we looked at valid alternatives to MS education for a professional in need of retraining. MOOC and, certainly, on-site job training received the highest percentage among all the

Solutions to get useful job experience during BS and MS studies

	Internship	Real-World workd	Part-time job	Extra course/Newlanguage	Open-source projects	Research	Study and Learning
BS studies	56%	4%	13%	7%	18%	6%	2%
MS studies	42%	4%	25%	5%	14%	13%	1%

Figure 12. In your opinion, how can students gain useful work experience during their BS and/or MS studies, if any?

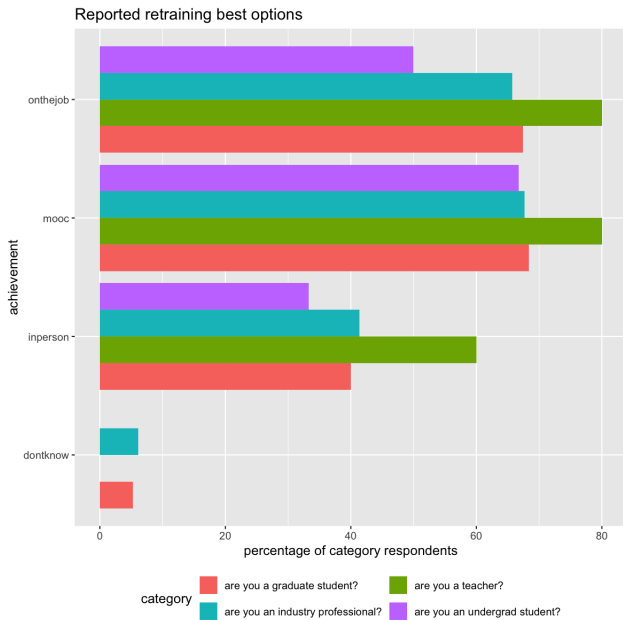


Figure 13. In your opinion, what could be valid alternatives to a Master's degree for a professional in need of retraining?

categories. The "in-person learning" received less than 40% of responses from all categories except teachers and professors. About 60% of professors think that in-person studies can be a convincing option for MS studies. Another interesting item is to compare undergraduate-level students responses regarding on-site job training and MOOC options. It shows that there is about 20% increase in choosing MOOC compared to on-site job training. This shows the high demand from undergraduate students to attend high-level online graduate programs and substitute this option with other in-person training and studies.

LIMITATIONS

We think our research has several limitations.

First: we didn't get as many responses as we would like. We got about half the responses we were expecting.

Second: our categories are quite polarized. We've got a lot of industry professionals and graduate students, but we lack teachers and undergraduate students. Surely, those few undergrads and teachers' opinion has a disproportionate effect in our analysis.

Third: most of our respondents come from the US. We don't think this research can have a worldwide validity, it's probably just one view of the problem.

Fourth: we had initially missed (an error while converting a document to Google Forms) a fundamental question in our survey (the category). Since we knew some of the respondents, we have inferred the categories for our analysis' sake for a small set of initial respondents (the survey was later amended).

CONCLUSIONS

Our collected data *partially supports* our thoughts. Undergrad programs aren't meant to teach project management, problem solving, or soft skills, while a lot of people would just love to see BS graduate with such abilities; so, there's a misalignment between the intentions of the industry and of the universities. Interestingly, most undergrad students seem fully aware of the situation.

Programming, on the contrary, seems a matter of teaching abilities. It seems that schools are unable to create good programmers. But then, most people just seem to think that apprenticeship and on-the-job training are not replaceable by pure education; maybe we should just accept that we're yet unable to abstract away that kind of learning from real-world experience, and we should scale down students (and employers!) expectations about new graduates: they won't be good programmers without an appropriate on-the-job training.

The graduate education part appears to be a bit more foggy. We supposed that graduate-level programs would better fill the school-industry gap, but we cannot say that this is the case. Most of the industry is not concerned with research, and most industry professionals don't see great programming skills in MS graduates. For sure, it's a beginning, it's something more than basic BS education; but, probably, spending the same amount of time on a real job would yield the same results about soft skills, real-world problem solving and project management.

POSSIBLE FUTURE WORKS

We think it would be very interesting to replicate the experiment on a different scale, with slightly different premises. **Recruitment** seems to be the hardest part of our research; it would be interesting to partner with some large organizations (be it companies, conferences, universities) in order to push a (similar) survey to them.

Many people (in online forums where we had spread our survey as well) told us one interesting point about the "chances to get hired" section: the experience, or the degree, only matter

up to a point in order to be *hired*. It may matter in order to *get an interview*: if we ever replicate this survey, it would be better to substitute "hireability" with "chances to land an interview".

It would be interesting to investigate the concept of good programmers, as well. Do bootcamps/MOOCs/other kind of programs produce better coders than university? Are they on par, but within a shorter timeframe? Could the university improve something?

It may be interesting to check if multiple categories (e.g. industry professionals that are MS students as well) have significantly different answers from "bare" categories; this was a bit outside the scope of our analysis because of time constraints and because of the polarization of our respondents, but could be quite useful.

It would be very useful to get more data from the academy. We haven't seen a clear indication for the purpose of the higher education programs; we may say that they appear a bit confused on whether it would like to focus on research, or it would like to help more the industry, or would just pursue knowledge for knowledge's sake - which could be a totally valid purpose!

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