

# Google vows to treat six-month course as degree equivalent

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2020년 8월 27  
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Source: Getty

University leaders were watching closely after internet behemoth Google jumped deeper into post-secondary education, offering six-month certificate programmes in technical fields that it promises to treat in its hiring as the equivalent of a four-year degree.

Google said its new certificates represent an expansion of the skills-based training it already offers through the Coursera platform, timed to the retraining demand it expects from pandemic-driven job losses.

“College degrees are out of reach for many Americans, and you shouldn’t need a college diploma to have economic security,” Kent Walker, Google’s senior vice-president of global affairs, said in a blog posting.

Higher education experts appeared to be divided on the significance of the move, noting that the key elements of Google’s initiative already can be found elsewhere, but acknowledging that Google’s massive influence could drive industry standards and acceptance.

Google's pledge to treat its certificate holders as equivalent to applicants with four-year college degrees was a major commitment, said Ryan Craig, managing director of University Ventures, which helps companies create quick and low-cost training for prospective workers for the jobs they need to fill.

Whether hiring managers at Google actually end up affording the company's own certificate holders the respect of candidates bringing a four-year diploma "remains to be seen", Mr Craig said.

Also unclear, said Paul LeBlanc, president of online innovator Southern New Hampshire University, was whether such a promise has much hope for growth outside of some very limited technical competencies.

"A degree remains a signal of other attributes, other than the specific skills needed for a job in the moment," Dr LeBlanc said.

Google, however, already has shown its ability to attract attention in education. Beyond offering research tools such as Google Scholar and Google Translate, the company's Google IT Certificate is the most popular certificate on the Coursera online platform, which was created by two Stanford University computer science professors.

The three new Google Career Certificates are in the fields of data analytics, project management and user experience design. Median annual wage for those jobs at Google range from \$66,000 (£50,000) to \$93,000, while tuition on Coursera runs to about \$300 for six months.

In addition, Google said it plans to finance 100,000 need-based scholarships for the new certificates. Most Google IT Certificate students are black, Latino, female or military veterans, the company said.

Google said it was also expanding opportunities for apprenticeships for people who earn certificates, and working with a network of more than 100 community colleges to offer certificates at the high school level.

The company's effort comes, however, amid signs that four-year degrees may be gaining popularity as an entry-level hiring barrier, Dr LeBlanc said. That's because high unemployment levels tied to the pandemic may be letting companies become pickier, he said.

"Skills-based hiring got traction when unemployment neared zero," Dr LeBlanc said, "and who knows how much backsliding we'll see with employers now that so many people are unemployed."

Scott Pulsipher, president of Western Governors University, an online university headquartered in Utah, welcomed Google's announcement.

“Google’s move is further evidence that employers, industry groups, and alternative providers are moving quickly to introduce new options and advance learning towards the skills-based future of work,” he said. “We should expect this trend to accelerate, and it is imperative for colleges and universities to adapt. If not, they risk being disrupted.”

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