

The impact of Covid-19 on employability in higher education

By [Siegie Brownlee](#)

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As South Africa celebrated Youth Month, we all know that youth unemployment is one of the country's greatest challenges. This has all been unfortunately amplified in our current Covid-19 context. However, hope remains as some higher education institutions that focus on employability as a key part of the learning process, which is something more traditional institutions can learn from.



Image source: Getty Images

The pandemic has impacted every aspect of our lives and has highlighted the fact that higher education does not need to take place in a classroom, nor in a traditional “lecture” format. Over recent months, we have seen thousands of Higher Ed students studying virtually from home, determined not to disrupt their academic year.

Many students have replaced using a PC on campus with their cellphone to download and review their academic content. Other students have been seen virtually liaising with tutors far away, at times and places suitable to their learning and home environment.

Most public and private higher education institutions are also now sponsoring data costs for students to access learner management systems for free. Virtual learning no longer means learning in isolation alone with no help. The Covid-19 pandemic with its lockdown regulations has shown us that learning virtually can be interactive, meaningful and effective.

What does this mean for life after graduation?

Employment is always the ultimate goal, more so now than ever. A National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) survey found that 92% of students want placements, work experience and internships to be a part of their university experience. Another NCUB report into career portfolios suggests that we should find a better way of matching up students with employers. We need a model that considers the work-readiness and flexibility of graduates.

It is important that industry and higher education institutions continuously collaborate to ensure that a curriculum is developed that can serve both the need of the employer/industry partner and the need of the student.

Universities should equip students not only theoretically, but also as holistic social and economic global citizens. The curriculum should therefore include application, critical thinking, problem-solving, computer skills, communication skills, etc. This should be integrated in the curriculum and be taught parallel to theory.

How do you tackle employability?

It is also imperative that students and graduates do understand the qualification, the field and the different career field and job opportunities linked to that specific qualification.

We need to encourage more higher education institutions to provide young graduates with the tools to become employable, holistic professionals who stand a chance to be accepted by the world of work. This is the only way we can provide a positive perspective to youth and employability in South Africa.

How has Covid-19 changed the goal?

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we transferred our curriculum to online teaching and learning. This change forced students and lecturers to enhance their technical skills. The language of communication was suddenly different, and we all had to apply all our 21st century skills that made us cope in a very challenging environment.

Technological advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) made it possible for us to support this new way of teaching and learning. We could thus experience new ways of interactive learning through online platforms. This new way opened creativity, application, critical thinking and different communication techniques. Students are prepared to solve real complex challenges in a much more complex environment than just a face-to-face classroom.

How did this impact employability for graduates straight out of university?

Stats have shown that the employment rate has been negatively impacted by Covid-19. We have transferred our Employability Programme for current students and graduates to a virtual platform. The graduates and current students are therefore continuously being prepared for employability. We are also continuously ensuring network opportunities for students with industry partners via an online platform.

PIHE, for example, is planning Virtual Career Fairs before August 2020, with mock interviews, student showcases, recruitment skills training, etc. This has brought huge successes for employability. Our current stats for most of our programmes from January to April show an employability rate of more than 45%. This is only for the first few months of the year and we are very positive that this number will increase even through these challenging times.

Life in Covid-19 has allowed us to explore the world very differently and use critical thinking, problem solving, communication skills to ensure our academic success as students and lecturers. Without us knowing it, we prepared

ourselves and our students for a more advanced world of work and a higher chance of being employed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Siegie Brownlee, Executive Director at Pearson Institute of Higher Education

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