

Skills-based learning in private higher ed: The key to empowering South Africa's workforce

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In recent years, South Africa has experienced a notable shift toward private higher education. This shift is unfolding against a complex backdrop of historical inequalities, economic tribulations and capacity constraints within public universities. A key driver of this transition is the emphasis on skills-based learning (SBL) in private higher education institutions (PHEIs).



With South Africa grappling with economic challenges and rampant youth unemployment, the cultivation of an agile, skilled and adaptable workforce has become a critical objective for higher education. SBL equips students with essential competencies for diverse work environments, while having broader implications for employers, policymakers and the nation's economy.

The socio-economic factors driving the growth of PHEIs

The legacy of apartheid has left deep-seated inequalities in South Africa's education system. In the post-apartheid era, public universities have been striving to democratise education. However, the growing population, coupled with economic hurdles, has placed immense strain on these institutions. Additionally, as the global marketplace evolves, there is an increasing demand for a workforce that is not only educated, but also highly skilled and adaptable.

The growing demand for quality education and skills development has set the stage for PHEIs to emerge as a notable alternative to their public counterparts. Private institutions have seized the opportunity to deliver innovative, supportive and flexible learning experiences through specialised programmes, workplace-integrated learning and, notably, SBL (Tankou epse Nukunah et al., 2019: 289).

Enrolment in PHEIs in South Africa has surged, with a staggering 59.9% increase between 2010 and 2015. This is in contrast to a modest 10.3% increase in public sector enrolment (Tankou epse Nukunah et al., 2019: 288). The Covid-19 pandemic further fuelled this demand (IOL, 2022), highlighting the growing need for the innovative and adaptable learning that PHEIs provide.

Understanding the importance of SBL

Traditional education models prevalent in most public institutions often prioritise content, emphasising knowledge acquisition through educator-led lectures (Di Mario, 2021). While knowledge is undoubtedly important, critics argue that cultivating applicable and adaptive skills in students is of even greater importance (Smit, 2019; and Schulz, 2008: 146). Traditional education models tend to immerse students in theory, but often fail to equip them with the ability to utilise this knowledge in various contexts, including the workplace (Heron and Cushing, 2018; and Kim, 2016).

Hadi Partovi (in Lucas, 2023), founder of an education non-profit, echoes this sentiment by stating that '[t]he school system [...] is letting a lot of people down. It's preparing a lot of graduates, but those graduates increasingly don't have the skills the workplace really needs'.

Herein lies the essence of SBL: It cultivates skills through interactive, student-led learning and practical application. This approach stands in contrast to traditional, knowledge-centric models, and it is essential for preparing students to navigate different scenarios and solve problems successfully (Di Mario, 2021). According to the South African Higher Education Quality Committee (2004), SBL enhances employability by fostering skills that employers find desirable.

Through SBL, students gain the confidence and competence to thrive in professional settings, develop vital personal attributes – such as communication, problem-solving and teamwork skills, resilience, and discipline – and feel supported and empowered in their career paths (Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017: 88–90; and Subhashini et al., 2022: 174).

The broader implications of SBL

The impact of SBL extends beyond individual employability. Employers stand to benefit from a workforce that is more adaptable and practically skilled. Globally, a trend is emerging where employers are de-emphasising traditional university degrees in favour of skill sets that align with job requirements. McKinsey & Company (2022) underscores how a skills-based approach can diversify talent pools, citing examples of several organisations that have dropped degree prerequisites for job applicants.

Furthermore, policymakers can leverage PHEIs' potential to foster innovation and address some of South Africa's pressing socio-economic challenges by developing policies that support SBL.

Recommendations and future outlook

To ensure that SBL within PHEIs continues to contribute positively to South Africa's workforce and economy, there are several considerations that should be taken into account:

- *Fostering collaboration:* PHEIs, employers and policymakers must work together to keep curricula aligned with industry needs. Furthermore, employers and PHEIs should collaborate to develop work-integrated learning opportunities, such as internships, apprenticeships and co-operative education programmes (O'Leary, 2013).
- *Government support and oversight:* The government should consider supportive policies, quality assurance measures and funding for PHEIs to ensure that they align with national education objectives (Gachie, 2020).
- *Embracing technology:* PHEIs should leverage emerging technologies to enhance the delivery of SBL and prepare students for a technology-driven workplace (Bahja et al., 2021).
- *Continuous faculty development:* Faculty members should receive regular training and professional development opportunities to stay up to date with industry trends and advancements. This ensures that they can teach relevant skills and technologies to students effectively, so as to prepare them for the demands of the workforce (Boshoff, 2014).
- *International partnerships:* PHEIs should seek partnerships with international education providers to facilitate the exchange of best practices and offer students globally relevant education (Hamdullahpur, 2020).

- *Continuous feedback and improvement*: Private institutions should have mechanisms in place to collect feedback from students, employers and alumni to assess the effectiveness of their programmes. This feedback should be used to drive continuous improvement in curriculum design, teaching methodologies and industry relevance (Bashir et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The shift toward SBL in private higher education is not just a trend, but rather, an essential evolution. At Edge Education, we champion the empowerment of innovative, adaptable and skilled workforces – and it is evident that PHEIs and SBL are central to achieving this vision.

The integration of SBL within PHEIs' curricula is a promising approach for empowering the South African student population, as well as for bolstering the nation's workforce and, by extension, its economy. The key is to foster collaborations, leverage technological advancements, and ensure that policies and regulations are aligned to support this vital educational shift.

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