

Defining future value will require higher education institutions to step out of their comfort zones

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Higher education institutions worldwide are currently facing a critical period in their existence. They have to redefine their value proposition to a cohort of students who are not only digital natives but have grown up in an environment where the pace of technological change is quicker than ever before while trying to maintain the core values, principles, and practices that have served them well for centuries.



Prof Magnate Ntombela, principal at Mancosa

"This debate is at the core of what Mancosa hopes to achieve in a country where tertiary education is not only a tool that enables personal success, it is also a provider for families and communities," points out Prof Magnate Ntombela, principal at Mancosa.

One of the guiding documents that many higher education institutions are using is a position paper that was published by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) titled: [The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030](#). The position paper lists a few pillars of value that higher education institutions should be focusing on.

Creating new value

The OECD paper points out that new sources of growth are urgently needed to achieve stronger, more inclusive and more sustainable development.

The paper adds that students must be educated in an environment where they should be able to think creatively and develop new products and services, jobs, processes and methods. Further, they need to create new ways of thinking and living. Increasingly, innovation springs not from individuals thinking and working alone but through cooperation and collaboration to draw on existing knowledge to create new knowledge.

"Nurturing these behaviour traits will be the core of future value," points out Ntombela, "we saw the green shoots of this during the Covid pandemic. Technology will be the main tool to create this value," says Ntombela.

However, he adds that higher education institutions must be cognisant that not all South African students possess the same basic tech skills. "Bridging courses and short learning programmes may be necessary to provide students with the tools they will need to succeed in their studies. This will also help them challenge themselves to possess the mindset described in the OECD position paper," says Ntombela.

Reconciling tensions and dilemmas

Cooperation and collaboration with others means that students must change their mindset when reconciling tensions and dilemmas, as they may be forced to work with people they have never met before.

"The challenge goes deeper than being forced to collaborate with a stranger. This stranger may come from a different cultural background and will have a unique way of resolving conflicts or tension. This is why higher education institutions need to increase their diversity," says Ntombela.

He adds that this includes a diversity of voices from academia and industry experts who can participate in master classes to provide insights into what it takes to be successful within a specific industry. This has been a focal point at many higher education institutions since 2010.

Taking responsibility

The position paper adds that the ability to take responsibility for one's actions is a crucial value differentiator. Creativity and problem-solving require the capacity to consider the future consequences of one's actions, to evaluate risk and reward, and to accept accountability for the products of one's work.

"This suggests a sense of responsibility and moral and intellectual maturity, with which a person can reflect upon and evaluate their actions. One of the modern trends that Mancosa has seen is that students are becoming increasingly scared of failure. However, this is a double-edged sword as this fear works against them. Companies have become very streamlined in the wake of Covid-19, and it is becoming increasingly rare for employees to be pigeonholed into specific boxes; they need to be able to work and collaborate across various business functions. It is difficult to do this without stumbling along the way," says Ntombela, who adds that stumbling does not necessarily mean that one is a failure. Plenty of corporations offer support structures aimed at helping employees correct their mistakes.

Prof Ntombela points out that this pillar of value was addressed during Covid-19 and is at the core of distance learning models as students are required to manage their priorities and times to achieve an objective. This can only be achieved if one is accountable and takes responsibility for their actions.

Taking the lead

When looking at the OECD position paper, Ntombela points out that Mancosa has done a lot of work addressing some of the core pillars of value that will become important in 2030.

"We need to be the change we want to see in the world. Mancosa has taken a tech-forward approach to delivering our course material and masterclasses. However, equality regarding access to technology and tech skills is an issue in South Africa; we are working hard to address this through the School of Information and Digital Technology, which is making significant strides in addressing the tech skills gap. Finally, the Honoris Career Centre guides students about the skills necessary to succeed in a hyper-competitive work environment," says Ntombela.

When embarking on the value definition journey, higher education institutions will be increasingly required to step out of their comfort zones and face disruption head-on. "The magnitude of this exercise is immense. If these institutions hit the ground running, they can establish themselves as global leaders, making them an enticing option for students who value the importance of tertiary education. However, if these institutions do not hit the right notes, their relevance in an increasingly evolving environment will fade away," concludes Ntombela.

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