

BUSINESS EDUCATION MUST MOVE BEYOND THEORY

Experiential learning is reshaping how South Africa prepares graduates for the modern workplace.

By Hoosen Essof, Regent Business School Head: Community Engagement, Innovation and Student Experience

South Africa's higher education sector is undergoing a quiet but significant shift. As workplaces evolve under the pressures of digital transformation, global competition and economic uncertainty, employers are increasingly questioning whether traditional academic models are keeping pace with industry needs.

For decades, universities were primarily evaluated on their ability to deliver theoretical knowledge. Today, however, organisations are placing greater value on graduates who can interpret complex situations, collaborate across disciplines and apply learning in practical settings from the outset of their careers.

Hoosen Essof, says Regent Business School understands, "The challenge facing higher education is no longer access to knowledge, but the ability to apply it effectively."

This changing expectation is prompting institutions to rethink long-established teaching methods. Lecture-centred delivery is gradually being complemented — and in some cases replaced — by experiential learning approaches that include simulations, case studies, workplace projects and applied problem-solving exercises.

Education specialists argue that such models better reflect how decisions are made in real organisations, where ambiguity, time pressure and collaboration are constant features. The intention is to narrow the gap that has long existed between graduation and workplace readiness.

Globally, universities and private higher education providers are experimenting with curriculum redesign to meet these expectations. In South Africa, several institutions, including REGENT Business School, have incorporated experiential learning frameworks into business and management programmes as part of broader academic reform initiatives. These developments mirror international trends where employability outcomes increasingly shape programme design.



Another notable shift is the growing acceptance of lifelong learning as a central principle of higher education. Career paths are no longer linear, and professionals are returning to study multiple times throughout their working lives. As a result, institutions are building flexible academic pathways that allow progression from entry-level qualifications through postgraduate and executive education.

“Education is increasingly viewed as a continuous journey rather than a single qualification completed early in life.”

Programme innovation is also being influenced by the rapid expansion of the digital economy. Qualifications incorporating entrepreneurship, digital intelligence and data-driven decision-making are becoming more prevalent as institutions respond to changing industry demands. Professional accreditation remains an important factor, particularly in regulated sectors such as accounting and finance, where alignment with industry standards supports graduate mobility.

Accessibility continues to shape policy discussions within the South African context. Flexible learning models — including blended and online delivery — are expanding participation among working adults and students balancing professional or family responsibilities. Many educators see this as essential to addressing broader socio-economic challenges, including unemployment and inequality.

Yet questions remain about how effectively higher education can anticipate future skills requirements. While experiential learning models show promise, their long-term impact on employability and economic growth will depend on sustained collaboration between academia, industry and policymakers.



What is clear is that higher education can no longer rely solely on traditional teaching paradigms. As the nature of work continues to evolve, institutions that successfully integrate theory with practical experience may be better positioned to prepare graduates not just for their first job, but for careers shaped by continuous change.