

Exploring the need for personal academic growth

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Angela Bruwer, executive academic head at the IMM Graduate School, explains global influences and impact on the higher-education sector in South Africa.

South Africa's higher education sector has seen many changes over the past few decades. Influenced by both local and global macro-environmental factors, many shifts in the global higher-education milieu have driven the need for innovative change to ensure education remains relevant and current.

The impact of globalisation, massification of education, increasing student mobility, the teaching and learning curricula evolution, the private education revolution, the academic profession, the importance of research, the effect of information technology on education, and the political and economic instability have all induced the need for a stronger focus on private institutions that offer online distance learning.

Continuously developing, redesigning and providing quality academic programmes and content to fulfil the current and future demands from industry and to align with global trends have become critical.

According to a 2009 Unesco report, as the world economy becomes more integrated, higher education institutions across the globe display more similarities with each other. The need for healthy partnerships with international educational bodies is crucial.

The global trend of increasing student mobility is expected to grow and this will shape the landscape of universities as they gear themselves to attract these students which are an important source of income in a sector faced with having to deal with limited government funding and a shrinking income from subsidies.

Emerging economies want graduates to share commonly identifiable characteristics such as

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being creative, adaptable, ethical and versed in the practical application of theory in a pragmatic way.

The private-education sector has experienced a revolution as the prevalence of private-education providers is expanding in a world where national governments are finding it harder to maintain subsidy levels. Private education institutions provide access to those students who qualify, but are not admitted to the public universities that are constrained by space, allowing students the opportunity to become more employable as they gain work experience while studying.

The South African higher-education sector comprises of a host of private education providers with different qualification offerings.

The burgeoning developments in the information technology sector have caused many to predict that the traditional university may soon be rendered obsolete. Academic programmes no longer follow singular career courses, but we have seen a trend indicating a wider exposure to different disciplines that align to provide the graduate with bigger-picture thinking.

South African academic, Michael Goldman, recently stipulated that the key role of the chief marketing officer is to look beyond mere marketing and rather focus on the wider growth of the business. He challenged marketers to be business people first and marketing artisans second, thereby inducing a shift for these professionals from brand-centric advertising roles to being the primary custodian of the customer and driver of growth and opportunity, demonstrating how marketing activities need to deliver against their intended business objectives.

The African continent is facing disintegration of the higher education sector in most countries and young people are becoming increasingly aware of the need to obtain a “world class education and qualification”. Difficult economic times invariably cause more people to study and this is recognised as a trend in most countries. Private school expansion is predicted to double over the next ten years, creating a group of people with much more discerning views regarding their continued education.

Many public universities are offering cheap education with theory, large numbers and transferring low skills levels; while industry requires qualifications to be pragmatic,

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industry-focused with practice-based activities. This has provided the opportunity for private institutions to supply quality-based, recognised qualifications.

Distance education is a mode of delivery to reach large numbers of students and this is being touted as the education mode of delivery most likely to grow exponentially in the immediate future. It is an important instrument of social integration, as it creates the space in which people from all walks of life meet, mingle, and learn from each other, responding to the social and economic challenges of society.

Political and economic stability of regions also impacts higher education in South Africa. History has shown that academic institutions are often the first casualties of regional instability. Going forward, according to the Organization for International Economic Development, some of the most likely influencers will include the rise in student numbers which will severely strain institutions and their ability to improve, the increase in female students and international students will become even more influential factors in determining the ability, or not, of universities to survive financially.

In South Africa we have seen increased competition in the higher education sector as traditional face-to-face institutions enter the distance/on-line education space. The growing population and urbanisation have played a major role in the increased number of students.

Private institutions need to ensure the delivery of educational materials suitable for digital and smart applications as more and more students have access to cellphones and tablets with cheaper broadband being available, encouraging more online learning.

Increased nationalism and closing of borders to immigrant employees has increased the need for internationally recognised qualifications. The massification of higher education has swept across developing countries with bigger classes being taught by inadequately qualified personnel who will concentrate on presenting theory for rote learning.

This impacts private institutions to fulfil the need for graduates who understand the theory and apply it in a pragmatic and effective manner in workplace situations as smaller, private providers are known to be able to respond a lot quicker to the demands of business and society due to the lack of bureaucracy which hampers public institutions.

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Lifelong learning has also become a global trend as people now change careers several times during the course of their lives. Continuous improvement and updating of skills and knowledge is essential to keep pace with a rapidly evolving economy and to remain competitive in the job market.

Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing rapid growth with the demand for education outstripping supply. A large portion of these students choose to study in South Africa. As South African state universities allow access to a specific quota of foreign students, the remainder look to private higher education institutions. Many local potential students are also turned away from state institutions because they are competing for very limited number of spaces.

The distance learning delivery method is addressing the lack of access to residential universities and institutions, faced by many southern African students. The inherently quicker responsiveness cycles of distance learning private institutions facilitates the Africanisation imperative.

The higher education environment in South Africa offers a range of government and private tertiary institutions. The IMM Graduate School is one of the most sought-after private distance-learning institutions in Africa. The qualifications offered by the IMM Graduate School are in line with global trends; focusing on business education, conferring qualifications that are relevant, with quality knowledge, skills and competencies in the fields of marketing, supply chain and general business management.

The IMM Graduate School recently launched a range of online short courses in subjects including marketing and advertising, business management and supply chain management, which are crafted and designed by subject experts and thought leaders. The institution has established excellent support systems to ensure students are well placed to make the most of the programmes which are aimed at growing, sharpening and complementing current skillsets.

Programmes are created to allow students to study anytime, anywhere in a flexible manner; with strong bespoke academic support for their working and non-working students.

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Research has shown that distance learning hones personal discipline, encourages students to be self-starters and take initiative, improves time management and fosters ambition in their students.

The commitment to complete studies successfully is strengthened when juggling work and studies. This produces skills and character traits that are sought-after and attractive to prospective employers. Accustomed to being challenged, students tend to become tenacious and eagerly take on new challenges in their work environments.