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Degrees out of sync with jobs

South African graduates do not have the competence in spoken and written English or the oral presentation skills required by employers.

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South African graduates do not have the competence in spoken and written English or the oral presentation skills required by employers, according to the findings of a pilot study conducted by Higher Education South Africa (Hesa), the university sector's leadership organisation and the South African Qualifications Authority.

The findings are reported in *Graduate Attributes: A Baseline Study of South African Graduates from the Perspective of Employers*, written by academics Hanlie Griesel and the late Ben Parker.

The aim of the study was 'to take stock of the views and expectations of employers and their evaluation of the quality of graduates produced by institutions'.

The study was based on the assumption that the knowledge, skills, competencies and values that universities set out to develop may be out of sync with the immediate needs of employers.

It probed employers about the skills of graduates in four areas: their basic skills and understanding or 'know-how'; their knowledge and intellectual ability; their workplace skills and applied knowledge; and their interactive and personal skills.

A total of 99 employers across various sectors responded to the survey about recent graduates with undergraduate qualifications.

The study found that in the category of basic skills and understanding the most important graduate attribute is 'communicative competence in English'. This includes the 'tools', concepts and strategies with which to demonstrate these skills.

In most countries the foundation for these competences is laid in the schooling system, but in South Africa universities have to address the failure of the schooling system in this regard.

In terms of all basic skills—including numeracy, the ability to use new information and computer literacy—employers said they generally 'get less than what they expect'.

In the second area, that of knowledge and intellectual ability, the only significant gap between the

expectations of employers and recent graduates related to their ‘understanding of economic and business realities’.

This finding suggests that in terms of what many will consider the core business universities, they are fairly adept at meeting the expectations of employers.

In the third area, that of workplace skills and applied knowledge, the survey found that graduates miss the mark in terms of their ability to ‘choose appropriate information to address problems’ and the ‘ability to plan and execute tasks’ independently.

But they were able to deal adequately with cultural differences, which suggests that higher education is playing a positive role in this regard.

In the fourth area, that of personal and interactive skills, the biggest concern was the ‘openness and flexibility’ of graduates. But they do meet the highly valued expectation of ‘willingness to learn’.

The report suggests that employers and universities talk about ways to narrow the gap between what universities produce and what employers expect from graduates.

One suggestion is to establish a formal mechanism—a higher education/business association—that could ensure ongoing collaboration between the sectors.

It also recommends a more porous boundary between universities and businesses so that students have a clearer idea of what employers want. Similarly, students’ career literacy needs to be boosted while they are at university.

The report also calls for an ‘honest’ engagement about perceptions by employers that all institutions do not offer the same quality of training.

For the full report go to:

www.mg.co.za/graduates

[Employers’ rating of attributes associated with basic skills](#)

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