

Employability in South Africa: Shifting Mindsets, Skills & Systems

Professor Nicholas Ngepah
nngepah@uj.ac.za



UNIVERSITY
OF
JOHANNESBURG

We need to challenge the thinking around education, skills,
and employability in South Africa.

Not just in terms of what people study, but how our
system prepares citizens to produce, not just consume



UNIVERSITY
OF
JOHANNESBURG

Why Are Foreign Nationals More Competitive?

- ❖ Observation: Many foreign nationals succeed despite limited resources.
- ❖ Why?
 - ❖ Strong problem-solving mindset: They learn to do, not just identify gaps.
 - ❖ Practical, entrepreneurial training from home countries, even informal.
 - ❖ Less reliant on formal structures – build resilience and agency.
 - ❖ Mindset: “How do I create value?” vs. “Who will give me a job?”
- ❖ Implication for SA:
 - ❖ Need to instill a self-starter culture.
 - ❖ Education must build resilience, resourcefulness, and problem-solving.



The South African Labour Market Crisis: A Skills & Mindset Problem

- ❖ Youth unemployment: Over 60% in Gauteng.
- ❖ Women's labour participation lags; structural barriers persist.
- ❖ Despite high educational attainment (especially among women), employment outcomes are poor.
- ❖ Misalignment between:
 - ❖ Skills supplied (especially at secondary level),
 - ❖ And skills in demand (Health Sciences, Law, Finance, Safety, etc.)



Short-Term Fixes Must Address the Mismatch

❖ Findings from my recent study:

- ❖ Most-held skills yield low or negative employment returns, especially for women
- ❖ Some qualifications are worse than having no formal skills!

❖ What to do now:

- ❖ Shift funding away from oversupplied TVET programs.
- ❖ Invest in work-based learning, digital literacy, Mathematics, and tech-centered, community health, and public safety roles.
- ❖ Create short courses and certifications aligned to real labour market needs.



Medium- to Long-Term: Strategic Skills Planning

- ❖ We don't plan labour demand.
 - ❖ Example: Invest heavily in hospitality and office admin while demand collapses.
- ❖ Need:
 - ❖ Labour market intelligence systems that track trends.
 - ❖ Education planning aligned with sectoral development priorities (healthcare, energy, ICT, green economy).
 - ❖ Plan labour demand, and invest in skills with a strategic medium to long-term vision

Train not just to pass, but to produce. Train to transform society.



Foundational Education: We've Weakened the Basics

- ❖ Mathematics & problem-solving downgraded — despite being crucial.
- ❖ Critical thinking, logic, and quantitative reasoning must be restored.
- ❖ The erosion of “basics” has hollowed secondary schooling.
- ❖ Prepare learners for lifelong adaptability, not just rote outcomes.



Culture Shift: From Consumption to Production

- ❖ Current cultural orientation: “Consume now, worry later.”
- ❖ Need to reframe:
 - ❖ “Earn today what you’ll consume tomorrow — don’t borrow your future.”
 - ❖ Inculcate a savings culture — not supermarket-style “savings.”
 - ❖ Promote entrepreneurial citizenship — create, build, grow.



Transforming the Citizenry: Mindset First

- ❖ Mindset determines behaviour.
 - ❖ Passive job-seeking = unemployment.
 - ❖ Active value creation = employability.
- ❖ Schools and higher education must teach:
 - ❖ Problem-solving over problem-spotting.
 - ❖ Adaptability, resilience, and creativity.
 - ❖ Enable youth to participate in and shape the economy.



What Institutions Must Do

❖ Schools:

- ❖ Build foundational and soft skills (teamwork, communication, digital fluency).

❖ Higher Ed & TVETs:

- ❖ Bridge to employment: internships, job shadowing, apprenticeships.

❖ Communities & Employers:

- ❖ Open spaces for youth entrepreneurship.

- ❖ Share data and help co-design curricula.



From Crisis to Capability

- ❖ We are not lacking potential — we are misdirecting it.
- ❖ The challenge is structural, not personal.
- ❖ If we:
 - ❖ Train to solve not just to qualify,
 - ❖ Align skills to real labour demand,
 - ❖ Instill a production-focused mindset,
- ❖ Then we can shift from inequality to inclusivity

