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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE



Higher Education in an
Era of Innovation

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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: Higher Education in an Era of Innovation

Editors: F. Schutte, M.E. Herselman and A. Botha,

Foreword: Leading with Purpose: Sustainability, Resilience and Responsible Progress

We live in a time of profound complexity and extraordinary possibility. Across continents and sectors, leaders confront widening inequality, technological disruption, climate uncertainty, geopolitical fragmentation, and deepening questions about institutional legitimacy. At the same time, innovation accelerates, young populations reshape demographic futures, and new governance paradigms emerge. In this environment, the question is no longer whether organisations should lead with purpose, but how.

This volume brings together selected and expanded contributions from two scholarly conferences that interrogate the evolving meanings of leadership, sustainability, governance, and ethical responsibility in contemporary contexts. The chapters collectively reflect a shared conviction: that progress in the twenty-first century must be anchored in purpose, shaped by resilience, and guided by responsible stewardship.

For decades, leadership discourse was dominated by short-term performance metrics and shareholder primacy. Today, however, organisations across public, private, and civil sectors are increasingly compelled to answer a deeper question: What are we for? Purpose, properly understood, is not a marketing slogan or aspirational statement. It is the enduring reason an organisation exists, the problem it commits to solving, and the value it pledges to create for stakeholders over time. When authentically embedded, purpose aligns strategy, culture, governance, and innovation toward long-term societal contribution.

The chapters in this volume engage this challenge from diverse disciplinary and contextual perspectives. They examine leadership models that balance economic performance with social justice; governance systems that integrate accountability and adaptability; digital transformation initiatives that prioritise inclusion over exclusion; and educational, organisational, and community practices that cultivate resilience in uncertain environments. Some contributions interrogate structural inequality and youth unemployment; others explore sustainability transitions, ethical decision-making, and the responsibilities of institutions in emerging markets. Together, they demonstrate that leading with purpose is neither abstract nor idealistic, it is operational, measurable, and deeply contextual.

In the African context, the conversation acquires particular urgency. The continent stands at a demographic and developmental inflection point: home to the world's youngest population and rich in entrepreneurial dynamism, yet facing persistent inequality, infrastructure gaps, and climate vulnerability. Expanding the frontiers of progress in Africa demands more than economic growth; it requires inclusive development, digital equity, environmental justice, and governance systems

rooted in accountability and ethical leadership. It also calls for drawing on indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu, affirming that sustainable progress is relational, communal, and interdependent.

Sustainability and resilience emerge throughout this volume as complementary imperatives. Sustainability asks us to preserve and steward resources responsibly so that today's actions do not compromise tomorrow's needs. Resilience, by contrast, speaks to the capacity to adapt, absorb shocks, and innovate amidst disruption. In combination, they define the architecture of long-term leadership. A resilient enterprise without purpose risks opportunism; a sustainable vision without adaptability risks stagnation. Together, they frame the conditions for enduring impact.

Importantly, the contributions in this book do not romanticise purpose-driven leadership. They acknowledge the tensions leaders face: quarterly performance pressures versus long-term investment; technological efficiency versus social inclusion; environmental transition versus economic livelihood; governance compliance versus ethical conviction. Yet they also affirm that these tensions are not insurmountable. With aligned governance structures, stakeholder engagement, transparent accountability mechanisms, and cultures that prioritise ethical conduct, organisations can navigate complexity without compromising integrity.

At its core, this volume invites readers to reconsider how success is measured. Beyond GDP growth, quarterly returns, or institutional rankings, progress must be assessed by the dignity it upholds, the communities it strengthens, and the future it safeguards. Purpose-driven leadership demands courage, the courage to innovate responsibly, to confront inequality honestly, and to make decisions that favour long-term benefit over short-term applause.

The scholarship gathered here reflects thoughtful engagement, rigorous inquiry, and practical insight. It speaks to academics, policymakers, corporate leaders, educators, and students who recognise that leadership today requires more than technical competence; it requires moral clarity and strategic foresight. The authors collectively challenge us to move from rhetoric to implementation, from declaring purpose to operationalising it.

As you engage with the chapters that follow, you will encounter diverse voices united by a common theme: that sustainable practices and resilient systems are not peripheral concerns but foundational requirements for a just and flourishing future. The future is not inherited passively; it is shaped intentionally. Leadership with purpose is therefore not an option, it is an obligation.

May this volume stimulate continued dialogue, critical reflection, and courageous action.

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This volume would not have been possible without the collective commitment of many individuals and institutions. We extend our sincere appreciation to the authors whose scholarship, insight, and dedication have shaped this book. Their willingness to refine and expand their conference contributions into rigorous chapters reflects a shared commitment to advancing purposeful leadership, sustainability, and resilient practice.

We are grateful to the organising committees of the conferences from which this volume emerged. Their vision in convening interdisciplinary dialogue created the intellectual foundation upon which this book is built.

Our thanks also extend to the peer reviewers for their careful engagement and constructive feedback, which strengthened the quality and coherence of the contributions.

Finally, we recognise the broader scholarly and practitioner community committed to ethical leadership and responsible progress. It is within this community that the ideas in this volume will continue to evolve and inspire meaningful change.

Professor F. Schutte, Professor M. E. Herselman, and Professor A. Botha (EDS)

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Section A: Facilitating Student Success: Beyond Academic Achievement

This section explores student success as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond grades and completion rates. The chapters interrogate how institutions can cultivate holistic development by addressing belonging, well-being, resilience, digital inclusion, academic support, and equitable access. Emphasising student agency and contextual realities, the contributions highlight innovative pedagogical practices and support frameworks that foster not only academic competence, but also personal growth, ethical awareness, and lifelong learning readiness. Together, they argue that meaningful student success requires integrated, inclusive, and context-responsive strategies.

Chapter 1: Exploring Student Experiences of Different Learning Modes in Applied Photography: An Experiential Learning Case Study

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Abstract

Purpose: Practical photography education depends on psychomotor skill development, including motricity, equipment handling, and visual–tactile judgement, which are typically acquired through demonstrations and hands-on practice in physical learning spaces. As STADIO considers migrating the Applied Photography module to a fully online format to widen access, this study explored whether essential practical competencies can be developed effectively without studio-based, face-to-face engagement. Using Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as the analytical lens, the study compared student experiences across learning modes and examined which mode students perceive as most suitable for developing practical photography skills.

Study design/methodology/approach: An exploratory qualitative case study was conducted at a private higher education institution in South Africa. The study was framed within an interpretivist paradigm and guided by ELT. Data were collected through document analysis (the Applied Photography course guide) and qualitative engagement (focus groups and interviews). Participants were recruited through volunteer sampling and included 10 students (6 third-year students and 4 alumni) and 5 staff members (lecturers and programme colleagues). Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-step process, and findings were interpreted in relation to the ELT cycle (experiencing, observing, reflecting, experimenting).

Findings: Participants reported a strong preference for face-to-face learning for the active phases of the ELT cycle, observing, experimenting, and experiencing, primarily because live demonstrations provided embodied exposure to atmosphere, pressure, movement, and real-time troubleshooting. Students emphasised that motor skills and professional readiness developed more effectively when physically engaging with equipment (e.g., recognising differences in weight and handling of light units and accessories), receiving immediate lecturer guidance, and participating in studio-based critique, where non-verbal cues could be interpreted. Online learning was viewed as more supportive of reflective and self-paced learning activities but was limited by resource disparities (e.g., bandwidth and equipment access) and by reduced capacity for immediate correction during skill acquisition. Virtual reality was regarded as a potentially useful supplementary space for planning and experimentation, but insufficient to replace the tactile, communicative, and pressure-filled conditions of real studio demonstrations.

Originality/value: The study contributes empirical insight into how ELT's active learning phases operate differently across learning modes in a practical photography module. It adds nuance by showing that while online components may strengthen reflective learning and flexibility, the development of motricity and industry-relevant competence depends heavily on in-person demonstrations and studio-based interaction. The findings support curriculum decision-making by recommending a blended-contact (web-centric) model that preserves face-to-face demonstrations while leveraging online platforms for resources, scaffolding, and reflective learning. Future research is recommended to tailor demonstration approaches to diverse student learning preferences and to evaluate the effectiveness of virtual studio environments as a supplementary (not replacement) resource.

Keywords: Experiential Learning Theory; Applied Photography; practical skill development; learning modes; blended learning

1.1 Introduction and Background

The practice of photography, even at a foundational level, requires the acquisition and application of specific technical and practical skills. Central to this development is motricity, the coordinated use of muscles and limbs for functional movement, often honed through repetitive action and muscle memory. Within practical modules such as Applied Photography, students engage in psychomotor activities that involve physical coordination and the activation of motor skill regions. These competencies are crucial for operating photographic equipment and understanding visual elements such as composition, light, and texture.

However, integrating online learning into photography education poses distinct challenges. While theoretical knowledge and conceptual understanding can be effectively delivered through online platforms, the psychomotor dimensions of photography, such as camera handling, eye coordination, and auditory processing, are more difficult to address. Online programmes often lack the sensory engagement needed for students to master essential visual and tactile elements, such as image brightness, colour balance, tonal variation, and texture recognition. Furthermore, the development of auditory skills, which assist in interpreting cues from the environment and equipment, is frequently underestimated in photography education.

The importance of physical learning spaces is particularly evident in photography education. Activities such as fieldwork, campus-based demonstrations, and hands-on engagement with industry-standard equipment contribute significantly to student learning. These experiences allow for immediate feedback, facilitate experimentation, and support the internalisation of practical skills through experiential learning. Physical interactions with lecturers and peers in studio environments also enhance understanding and foster collaborative learning.

Within the context of STADIO Higher Education, the Applied Photography module, part of the BA in Visual Arts in Visual Communication Design programme, has highlighted tensions between widening access to education and maintaining quality in practical teaching. As an institution committed to expanding access, STADIO offers online learning to support students facing geographic and economic barriers. However, online learning can pose significant obstacles in practical disciplines. Students often experience personal, technical, and logistical challenges, including unreliable internet access, lack of access to equipment, and feelings of isolation. Moreover, online learners must demonstrate strong time-management and self-regulation skills, as poor time management is a common reason for attrition in distance education.

The researcher, a lecturer with experience in both face-to-face and online teaching modalities, has expressed concern about the feasibility of teaching practical photography skills effectively in an

exclusively online environment. The removal of physical learning spaces and social interaction raises questions about students' ability to develop the necessary motricity, psychomotor coordination, and sensory awareness required in photography. The shift to online learning, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and institutional cost-effectiveness strategies, has created a growing need to critically examine students' experiences in practical online modules.

This study was therefore undertaken in response to the potential migration of the Applied Photography module to a fully online format. The purpose of the research was to explore whether the essential skills required in photography can be effectively developed in an online environment and to inform decisions regarding the pedagogical approach to such modules. The findings aim to support academic leadership and curriculum developers in upholding educational quality in a digitally mediated learning context.

1.2 Problem Statement

The Applied Photography module is underpinned by the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which posits that learners construct knowledge through active participation, observation, experimentation, and reflection. In this context, learning is most effective when it takes place in authentic, industry-relevant environments where students can engage with photographic tools, receive expert guidance, and participate in practical activities.

A fully online learning environment challenges the fundamental assumptions of ELT. Without access to physical spaces, specialist equipment, and real-time peer and lecturer interaction, the development of essential skills such as motricity, psychomotor coordination, and visual-auditory perception may be compromised. This study seeks to determine whether students enrolled in Applied Photography can develop practical competencies without experiential learning.

The research specifically explores the extent to which students in a fully online Applied Photography module can practice, experiment, and reflect in ways that lead to meaningful skill acquisition and knowledge development.

1.3 Research Objectives

The research objective for this study was to compare the experiences of students studying Applied Photography online and those studying face-to-face. Ultimately, the researcher aimed to explain students' perceived effectiveness of each learning mode through the lens of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT).

1.4 Research Question

What are the experiences of students studying Applied Photography in different learning modes at a higher education institution?

1.4.1 Sub-questions

- What are the experiences of students regarding learning practical skills in Applied Photography while studying in different learning modes?
- Which learning mode do students perceive as most suitable based on their experiences of studying Applied Photography?

1.5 Outline of the Article

The article follows a conventional academic format, beginning with an introduction that outlines the research problem, the study's purpose and significance, and the research objectives and questions. This is followed by a comprehensive literature review that establishes the theoretical framework, critically engages with relevant empirical studies, and identifies gaps in the body of knowledge. The next section details the research methodology, including the research design, data collection methods, sampling procedures, and data analysis techniques employed in the study.

Subsequently, the article presents the results and findings, offering a clear justification of the data collected and an interpretation of the findings in relation to the research questions. The discussion then turns to the implications for teaching and learning, exploring the practical significance of the results with reference to pedagogical practice and curriculum development. The article concludes with a summary of the main insights, a discussion of the study's limitations, and recommendations for future research directions.

1.6 Literature Review

The context of Applied Photography in higher education is fundamentally shaped by the demands of a dynamic and image-rich industry (Hirsch, 2000). Beyond mere artistic expression, contemporary photography often serves commercial purposes, requiring practitioners to purposefully create images for clients, brands, organisations, or publications (Langford, 2007). This professional application requires a robust understanding of photographic principles, including composition, design, and technique, as well as practical skills such as focusing and camera settings (Langford, 2007). Furthermore, photographers in this field must develop critical competencies in constructing workflow structures, analysing client briefs, and producing professional portfolios. The curriculum for such programmes often extends to an understanding of semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, and the ability to interpret and describe visual information (Langford, 2007).

Photography education, particularly in practical modules such as Applied Photography, presents unique pedagogical challenges. To adequately prepare students for the world of work, teaching and learning should ideally incorporate an experiential learning lens that simulates industry expectations (Hill et al., 2018). This implies that learning environments should be both natural (on-location photo shoots) and technology-driven (photography studios, computer labs), offering flexibility and engagement beyond traditional classrooms. These environments, coupled with industry-related equipment, are designed to immerse students, allowing them to gain knowledge,

understanding, and experience by observing, experimenting, reflecting, and actively doing what they learn (Clover, 2006). Crucially, for students to internalise complex techniques and develop essential psychomotor skills, they require direct exposure to and engagement with these elements (Kahraman, 2020). This is where effective demonstrations become essential. As Kennedy, Akers, and Jackson (2017) point out, exercises such as field visits, campus tours, and out-of-class demonstrations are vital for advancing student performance and deepening their understanding of photography fundamentals, offering immediate feedback critical to skill acquisition. Such direct experiences, where lecturers make subjects and locations available, help students explore effective subjects and locations that mimic professional settings, in contrast to students taking photographs independently in their own time (Clover, 2006).

Understanding learning modes is pivotal in this discussion. The sources differentiate between two primary learning modes: in-person (face-to-face) and distance (fully online) (Atkinson & Burden, 2007; Zawacki-Richer et al., 2020). All other approaches, such as blended, hybrid, and Hyflex, are considered learning models that combine elements of the two primary modes (Atkinson & Burden, 2007; Zawacki-Richer et al., 2020). Blended learning typically integrates in-person classroom instruction with online opportunities, leveraging technology to engage students and accommodate diverse preferences (Bizami, Tasir & Kew, 2023). Hyflex offers even greater student choice, allowing participation ranging from fully online to fully in-person, built on the principles of learner choice, outcome equivalency, resource reusability, and accessibility. The distinction is that a student cannot simultaneously learn in both distance and in-person modes; physical presence implies direct, real-time interaction, while distance learning inherently involves physical separation (Atkinson & Burden, 2007; Zawacki-Richer et al., 2020).

For practical courses like Applied Photography, which are tailored to prepare students for the industry, the choice of learning mode has profound implications. Students need access to and experience with industry-related facilities and equipment to create quality artefacts (Dreher, Reiners, Dreher & Dreher, 2009). Effective teaching and learning models in a photography course demand active student involvement in interpreting and developing knowledge, mirroring reality to prepare them for industry expectations (Dreher et al., 2009). This means knowledge creation in a practical photography module occurs through "learning by doing, by making, and by creating artefacts" (Dreher et al., 2009). The experiential learning approach, which relies on direct demonstrations, allows lecturers to show students how to apply industry-related skills using specific facilities, equipment, and locations. Students can then experiment with these factors, reflect on their results through critique and feedback, and develop their own experiences (Rojprasert, Neanchaleay, Boonlue & Sinlarat, 2020). Online learning models, including Web Course (fully online), Web-centric Course (hybrid with online materials and in-person discussions), and Web-enhanced Course (where internet use improves face-to-face learning), offer varying levels of integration (Bali & Musrifah, 2020). While a Web Course offers flexibility and breaks down time/distance barriers, the challenge for practical subjects lies in effectively mimicking hands-on experiences and demonstrations (Bali & Musrifah, 2020).

The literature underscores the critical role of demonstrations in experiential learning strategies. Groves et al. (2013) contend that while students can understand new skills by reading or watching tutorials, they will struggle to apply them effectively without active engagement with the environment and the equipment. This aligns with ELT, which asserts that practical skills are best learned through active engagement in the learning environment, especially through observation and imitation. The complete removal of physical learning spaces, such as a photography studio, can negatively affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Kim, Lee, and Cho (2022) found that students who completed an online photography course and had access to a physical studio for practical demonstrations and supervision earned higher grades than those who relied solely on recorded demonstrations. The key justification given by students was the "more direct engagement with the lecturer and other learners". The constant monitoring by lecturers during physical demonstrations enables more effective evaluation of skill development and underscores the importance of direct supervision in practical, skills-based courses (Kim et al., 2022).

The development of psychomotor skills, involving physical movement, coordination, and motor-skill regions, necessitates practice, with competencies quantified by speed, precision, and strategy (Lewis & Williams, 1994). Kolb's model of experiential learning highlights a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Lewis & Williams, 1994). In the context of practical skills, demonstrations are the cornerstone for initiating the concrete experience and active experimentation phases. While online learning modes can facilitate watching videos or tutorials, allowing students to pause and replay, they often lack opportunities for immediate experimentation and socialisation with peers, which are crucial for skill development and teamwork in industry (Hill et al., 2018). Kahraman (2020) stresses the importance of field trips in photography courses, finding that students felt these experiences reinforced techniques taught in class, enabled active peer learning through socialising, and helped them identify shortfalls and areas for improvement. Students specifically noted that field trips and lecturer demonstrations provided opportunities to learn through experience, to embody information, and to increase self-confidence.

Virtual reality (VR) offers a potential solution to the challenge of the absence of physical learning spaces in online practical courses. VR environments can support cognitive, spatial, and visual exploration skills, such as observation, experimentation, and reflection, making them, to some degree, effective replacements for physical spaces (Jensen & Konradsen, 2018; Makransky & Lilleholt, 2018). Studies show that VR groups performed better on recall tests and reported more positive feelings than those using traditional book learning or video (Brown & Cruickshank, 2003). However, transforming a traditional face-to-face approach to an online one, particularly for practical demonstrations, is costly and may be ineffective if the teaching strategies are unsuitable. Critically, while VR can simulate lighting patterns and atmosphere, fully implementing the experiential learning theory for photography would require an inestimable number of photographs

of different lighting scenarios and compositions to be pre-attempted (Allcoat & Von Mühlenen, 2018). Moreover, current VR studios are mostly interactive but not adaptive enough to model all possible behaviours of light sources and compositions, limiting the hands-on learning experience. They also miss the communicative aspect of informal discussion prevalent in a face-to-face studio, and the image-creation process is limited compared to a real studio. While VR can solve the "bottleneck issue" of limited capacity in physical studios, it cannot fully replace the comprehensive experience of a real studio for practical demonstrations (Hewawalpita, Herath, Petera & Meedeniya, 2018).

Experiential learning is crucial for effective photography education, especially for practical modules. This requires natural and technology-driven environments and equipment to immerse students in observation, experimentation, and reflection. Demonstrations are essential for students to internalise complex techniques and develop psychomotor skills. Field visits, campus tours, and outside-the-classroom demonstrations are crucial for boosting performance and comprehension. Online learning for practical skills has limitations, as it struggles to effectively mimic hands-on experiences and demonstrations. Virtual reality (VR) has limitations: it is not sufficiently adaptive to model all possible light sources and compositional behaviours, and it lacks the communicative qualities of face-to-face studios. This study investigates students' experiences of a practical photography module in different learning modes, focusing on the effectiveness of demonstrations in fostering skill development.

1.7 Research Methodology

This study was framed by the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) due to its direct relevance to learning in practical modules where experiments, projects, and hands-on activities are central (Hedin, 2010). Applied Photography inherently involves students interacting with the reality being studied, making ELT an ideal fit. Kolb's definition of learning as "the process by which knowledge is formed via the transformation of experience" is particularly pertinent, as it requires students to engage with all parts of the learning process: experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting (Kolb, 1984). These experiences, often initiated by demonstrations, must lead to observations and reflections, which are then integrated into abstract concepts for future action and experimentation within the learning space (Kolb, 1984). While Kolb emphasises reflection on concrete experiences, Dewey highlighted the importance of active experimentation, suggesting that reflection is less valuable without actively disrupting the habitat or the usual way of doing things (Miettinen, 2000). These varying viewpoints on ELT were considered, as they allow for flexible teaching models to accommodate different learning preferences. The ELT framework, illustrated by Kolb's conceptual model, guided the investigation into how practical skills are acquired in Applied Photography, with a strong focus on the role of demonstrations in initiating and facilitating the experiential learning cycle.

To fully understand the context, an interpretivist method needed extensive data, which a qualitative approach offered (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Since exploratory research is a systematic, theory-driven approach that uses in-depth data to acquire insights, this study's methodology was an exploratory case study (Yin, 2009). A case study examines a phenomenon in its context (Schoch, 2020). The case study focused on the experiences of students enrolled in the BA in Visual Arts program's Visual Communication Design programme who were studying Applied Photography in various learning environments.

The context was the Applied Photography module at a higher education institution. The case study research methodology was especially helpful, as it is one of the best ways to assess causal relationships in real-world settings, allowing the researcher to value participants' subjective accounts in that setting (Yin, 2009). A case study was appropriate for this investigation because it enabled the researcher to gather diverse types of information regarding the issue, thereby facilitating a more thorough understanding of the situation (Schoch, 2020). Others may be able to apply the case's lessons to comparable circumstances using the case study approach (Schoch, 2020). The unit of analysis for this study was the experiences of third-year and alumni students who had studied Applied Photography as part of a BA in Visual Arts in the Visual Communication Design programme (Schoch, 2020).

1.7.1 Research Design

The researcher's use of the interpretivist paradigm allowed him to explore the participants' experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). According to Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), interpretivism generates deeper meanings by positing that people cannot be researched in the same manner as physical objects. According to interpretivists, individuals are distinct from physical phenomena because of the various cultural, contextual, and historical factors that have shaped different social realities (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). In contrast to positivism, which works to establish exact, universal laws that apply to everyone regardless of important circumstances and nuances, interpretivism takes context into account and tries to add complexity to the knowledge gained (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

There is a direct link between the research and the research participant because interpretivist epistemology assumes that people and their knowledge are inextricably linked (Scotland, 2012). Interpretivism is hence more sensitive to individual interpretations and contributions (Scotland, 2012). The interpretivist worldview holds that reality is arbitrary and malleable. It was less likely that the data in the current study would be generalised through the adoption of the interpretivist paradigm because the data is primarily dependent on a specific environment, viewpoint, and values (Scotland, 2012). Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm prohibited positivist-style generalisation and promoted research more specifically focused on participants (Myers, 2017).

1.7.2 Participants

The study was carried out at a private higher education institution in South Africa. Thirteen third-year students who finished their studies at the end of 2023 and fifteen recent alumni who graduated in 2022 were among the thirty students from the Bachelor of Visual Arts programme who were asked to participate in the study. Four alumni and six third-year students accepted the invitation to participate in the study. All participants had completed the Applied Photography module throughout their studies, both in person and online, and were therefore considered knowledgeable about the teaching and learning in the course at the time of data collection (June and July 2023).

Two lecturers from the higher education institution's School of Architecture, a design lecturer, the program coordinator, and another photography lecturer were invited to take part in the case study. Colleagues most familiar with the teaching and learning strategies used in the BA in Visual Arts in Visual Communication Design were guaranteed to be included in the selection of participants.

The study's final participant count was impacted by the employment of a volunteer sampling approach (Vehovar, Toepoel & Steinmetz, 2016). Having participants self-select or volunteer to participate in a study is known as volunteer sampling. Put differently, individuals are more likely to participate in a study if they are personally involved or interested in it than if they are not (Vehovar et al., 2016).

Volunteer sampling is commonly employed in studies that recruit subjects from an insider researcher's personal network (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1976). It is also commonly employed in situations where recruiting participants is challenging or when resources are limited (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1976). After obtaining ethical approval for the current study from both Stellenbosch University and STADIO Higher Education, the researcher approached the student body. The students' program coordinator was present when the research goal was explained to the class. Without the researcher present, students might consider taking part. Only half of the students chose to participate because they were in the middle of a busy academic period. After much deliberation, it was determined that only one additional student group studied using both distinct learning modalities (online and in-person). This was due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the institution to convert to online learning. The applicable group of students were alumni, and a convenient and effective number volunteered to participate.

1.7.3 Data Analysis

The Applied Photography course guide was the first document the researcher analysed. Document analysis is one low-cost way to collect empirical data in an unobtrusive, nonreactive manner. Information from observations and interviews is often combined with documentary evidence to lessen bias and increase credibility. Notwithstanding the many benefits of document analysis, the researcher should not substitute it for other forms of evidence that may be more appropriate to the study's conceptual framework and research challenge (Brown & Cruickshank, 2003).

The researcher gained background knowledge from a thorough, methodical review of the documentation, which enhanced his understanding of the Applied Photography module's context, teaching methodology, and learning style. Apart from providing the study with more background, the material was particularly useful before and after interviews. In this way, I used information from the document to confirm the interview data. The documents served as a starting point for deeper investigations. I reviewed the document's line, sentence, and paragraph portions to code the data. The initial codes of the document's content were derived from three sets of search terms: (1) photography equipment, (2) industry subjects, and (3) industry environment. I carefully analysed and contrasted the data using codes and themes to organise the codes and identify topics that seemed to cluster. The topics from these codes were compared across participant replies, interview transcripts, and document data after the codes were clustered into substantive themes.

To determine which teaching model was utilised for teaching and learning, I selected codes and labels based on the research question and the analysis (Karppinen & Moe, 2012). Using numerous industry-related tools, settings, and methods, it became clear that the teaching model's primary focus was on practical demonstrations, experiments, reflections, and experiences (Karppinen & Moe, 2012).

After that, the researcher listened to and transcribed the focus group and interview recordings. Over time, the researcher read the transcripts multiple times to become acquainted with the content (Griffie, 2005). To systematically identify, collect, and display patterns of significance (themes) within a data collection, a thematic analysis approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The researcher was able to find and interpret shared or common ideas and experiences by focusing on meaning across a data collection using theme analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The goal of theme analysis was not to uncover peculiar or particular meanings and feelings that could be found only in a single data item, but to identify commonalities in how the participants spoke, experienced, reflected, thought, and behaved (Kolb, 1984). One more recent contribution was that listening to a phenomenon rather than trying it out indicated a more thorough ELT (Jordi, 2011). According to Jordi (2011), the researcher found similarities in the participants' discussions about the novel phenomenon.

The patterns of meaning the researcher discovered through theme analysis were significant in relation to the specific topic and research question investigated (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Even though the exact question that needed to be answered wasn't evident until the analysis was completed, the analysis did provide an answer to one of the questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The data collection process revealed a number of patterns, the goal of which was to determine which were pertinent to resolving the controversy surrounding the most effective teaching strategy for practical photography (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

The researcher employed the following six steps in the thematic analysis:

- Familiarised himself with the data
- Generated initial codes
- Searched for themes
- Reviewed potential themes
- Defined and named themes
- Produced the report

(Braun & Clarke, 2012).

The themes were tabulated, with frequency values taken directly from the experiences. Coding worked through a method of commenting on each participant's statement. Each comment stated the theme under which it was coded.

1.7.4 Ethics

The study took participant ethics and other procedural ethics into account. When doing qualitative research on the lives of participants and colleagues, researchers must weigh the appropriateness and inappropriateness of their methods (Huberman & Miles, 2002). At every stage, the researcher maintained his ethical approach toward the study participants (Huberman & Miles, 2002). For instance, it was made very evident that participation was entirely optional and that no one was under any duress to take part.

1.8 Results and Findings

The findings of this study, categorised according to the open-ended questions, data analysis, and the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), provide valuable insights into students' experiences of studying Applied Photography in different learning modes. The primary and sub-research questions, focusing on student experiences and the suitability of learning modes for practical skills, were addressed.

1.8.1 Learning Modes and the Experiential Learning Cycle

The results underscore the critical importance of implementing the ELT, particularly its active phases, in higher education curriculum design for practical modules such as Applied Photography. Students' experiences predominantly favoured face-to-face learning activities for three key phases of the ELT cycle: observing, experimenting, and experiencing. This strong preference directly relates to the effectiveness of direct, hands-on demonstrations in these learning activities.

There was a clear preference for face-to-face learning in observation, experimentation, and experiential activities. Conversely, a very low percentage of students experienced a preference for these active learning activities in online and blended learning modes. While reflective activities

showed a slightly higher preference for online and blended learning, the overall data indicate that a module like Applied Photography (AP22) is better suited to a predominantly face-to-face learning mode, with blended learning serving as a supplementary option.

1.8.2 Motivation for Learning Mode Preferences for Practical Demonstrations

Student and lecturer responses were further categorised into themes of context, resources, and results, consistently highlighting the role of demonstrations within these categories.

1.8.2.1 Context of Experiential Learning

Atmosphere and Environment: Students consistently valued the atmosphere and environment experienced during face-to-face encounters. Student eight noted that "When watching demonstrations in person, I get to experience the kind of atmosphere because I also feel like atmosphere plays a huge role". This goes beyond merely carrying a camera; it includes understanding the "administration, and energy to try and get the best out of yourself and the model," as well as experiencing the "lecturer and the model in interaction". This direct observation during demonstrations helps students grasp the challenging yet crucial aspects of a photoshoot that are often left unstated. Similarly, physical demonstrations enabled students to "consider the environment" and "improve as an individual to be able to understand the kind of environment that I'm in and what's happening and to see and experience and feel everything throughout the whole demonstration". For Applied Photography, face-to-face is considered superior because "it is something that you need to see visually before you can apply it and you need to be in that moment to experience the movement, the atmosphere, the pressure around you, all the objects and equipment that one needs to be mindful of". These findings align with those of Clover (2006) and Farnsworth (2013), who emphasise the need for natural and technology-driven environments that simulate industry conditions to develop fundamental industry skills. The results further specify that this includes understanding pressure, planning, movement, and energy, aspects difficult to convey without direct, in-person demonstrations. Groves et al. (2013) concur, noting the negative impact if students cannot actively engage in the physical learning environment.

Viewing Reality and Troubleshooting: Lecturers highlighted the ineffectiveness of online sessions due to screen limitations. Lecturer two stated, "In online it might take days for an issue to be resolved, whereas if it is face-to-face, you can resolve an issue immediately and the students won't miss out on valuable time to progress in an assessment". This directly contrasts with the limited, flat view offered by a screen during online demonstrations, hindering effective troubleshooting and direct observation of complex processes. Students generally preferred recordings of demonstrations as supplementary material (e.g., for revisiting missed steps), not as a primary learning mode, as the live, in-person experience was deemed irreplaceable for comprehensive understanding.

Lecturer Guidance and Presence: Direct interaction with lecturers during demonstrations was highly valued. Students noted the immediate help and correction received when performing actions incorrectly. Student six described the advantage of face-to-face experimentation: "With online, you don't get to experiment with the new skill while the lecturer is there physically with you". Lecturer one expressed difficulty in teaching practical software editing modules online, stating, "You have no control over whether they are listening or watching you demonstrate... The students might tell you they are following along, but they might still be stuck at step one". The ability to facilitate hands-on experiences and provide immediate, physical guidance was identified as one of the most important factors in a practical module. The direct engagement with the lecturer during demonstrations mirrors real-world industry scenarios, where senior experts provide timely, effective guidance, unlike the limitations of online instruction.

Safe Space and Evaluating Progress: Face-to-face interactions provide a "safe space to make mistakes," where lecturers can immediately correct errors, unlike online environments prone to technical issues. Lecturers found it difficult to get a "clear overall view of the student's progress while they are experimenting" online, as reading facial expressions or body language is limited, making it hard to identify when students are struggling or losing engagement.

Productivity and Reflection: While face-to-face learning fostered immediate interaction, the asynchronous nature of a blended learning approach enabled "thorough thinking and reflection" at one's own pace, promoting self-regulated learning. This suggests that while core practical demonstrations benefit from in-person delivery, online components can support reflective activities.

1.8.2.2 Resources for Experiential Learning (Impact on Demonstrations)

Functionality of Equipment: Students reported that the functionality of equipment, including lights and camera settings, was more reliable in face-to-face activities. They highlighted the difference between being "just someone telling you, you must put your camera settings here, there. Turn the light here, here, here, and you just go ahead and shoot" online, versus physically observing and interacting with equipment during a live demonstration. Lecturers noted that in face-to-face settings, students could physically get a "closer look and investigate" a camera or studio light during a demonstration, which is limited online. Immediate assistance and feedback from lecturers or peers were deemed critical when students struggled with the technical aspects of studio lights during experimentation.

Limited Student Resources: A challenge for online demonstrations is the disparity in student resources. Lecturers two and three noted that they "can't always give the same experiences because of access to resources," such as slow bandwidth or limited internet access, which can cause students to miss live demonstrations or recordings. This limits the effectiveness of online demonstrations as a primary learning tool.

Virtual Reality and Demonstrations: The study explored virtual reality (VR) as an additional resource. Participants acknowledged that VR spaces offer benefits, including overcoming geographical boundaries and providing access to learning environments, potentially overcoming physical challenges such as travel and financial limitations. However, a crucial finding was that while it might be beneficial to practice with a virtual reality environment, students also need to experience the "adrenaline rush" of a real-world shoot with time constraints, as "It would be boring to do a studio shoot virtually, only". This aligns with the literature, which suggests that VR, despite its potential, cannot fully replicate the tactile, communicative, and pressure-filled aspects of a real studio for demonstrations and practice. Nonetheless, a valuable contribution of the study is the suggestion that a virtual studio could serve as an additional resource to alleviate the "bottleneck effect" of physical studios, allowing students to test layouts and compositions before booking the physical space, thus saving time. It is critical, however, that the virtual studio not replace the physical studio or other real environments, as direct exposure to the physical studio's feel, environment, and pressure (through demonstrations) is vital for industry preparedness. McNeil (2011) supports this, explaining that field-based experiential learning motivates students to apply skills to real-life situations and that practice, in terms of speed, precision, and strategy, is harder to teach online.

1.8.2.3 Results of Experiential Learning (Developed through Demonstrations)

Motricity and Industry Requirements: Face-to-face activities were found to contribute to the development of motricity and understanding industry requirements. Student two explicitly stated, "My motricity developed better due to face-to-face experimentations, as it helped me to understand that different types of light units have different types of weight, which is also more of a learning curve for myself going into the future, so that I will be able to know what kind of equipment needs certain movements and adjustments". This highlights an undervalued concept: the physical interaction with equipment (weight, tightness of screws) is essential and not effectively mimicked by current online functionality. This validates the value of face-to-face demonstrations for these specific skill developments. Furthermore, in-person experiences, including booking and scheduling studios, provide insight into how the industry works and teach equipment care, both of which are crucial for professional photographers.

Reflection and Critique (Post-Demonstration Feedback): While reflection online is "more subtle," students felt it could make them "weak" and unprepared for the industry. Face-to-face critique (a form of reflection following practical demonstrations and work) was highly valued because it allows students to "read body language and facial expressions" and "gauge when someone likes your photo or not without them even saying anything". This direct feedback mechanism, often a part of the post-demonstration learning process, is critical for preparing students for real-world professional feedback and developing resilience.

1.9 Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and extend existing literature on the role of experiential learning in practical, skills-based modules such as Applied Photography. Consistent with Groves et al. (2013) and Clover (2006), students strongly emphasised the importance of demonstrations as concrete experiences initiating the experiential learning cycle. The study adds nuance by highlighting that while reflective activities may be supported online, the core phases of observation, experimentation, and concrete experience require direct, in-person engagement. This supports Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, particularly the active experimentation and concrete experience stages. It also aligns with Kim et al. (2022), who found that access to physical studio demonstrations significantly improved student performance. The study therefore reinforces the point that while online tools provide valuable supplementary benefits, they cannot replace the immediate, interactive, and embodied aspects of physical demonstrations, which are critical for developing motricity, psychomotor coordination, and professional readiness.

1.10 Teaching and Learning Implications

This study's conclusions are based solely on the students' experiences. More information will be considered for future research. At the moment, blended-contact learning is used as the teaching and learning approach for applied photography. Online learning promotes access to higher education because of its affordances (Francis, 2010; McNeil, 2011). Thus, more online and remote learning programs must be created (Rojprasert et al., 2020). The study's qualitative findings support the idea that online instruction can be adapted from applied photography. Through online learning, one can develop their motricity, practical skills, and ELT approach. As a result, a hybrid learning strategy will be more effective than teaching and learning entirely online. According to the findings, a face-to-face approach will be ineffective because it lacks an online learning platform and synchronous and asynchronous learning, both of which encourage self-confidence and time management (Rojprasert et al., 2020). The findings suggest that for the Applied Photography module to be taught and learned as effectively as possible, a combination of in-person and online learning techniques should be used. The most effective learning will not take place if Web-centric models or blended learning are not used as the learning modality for applied photography. Students won't have the skills to enter the workforce. Students will learn less about digital procedures, efficient time management, making the most of their resources, and planning if Applied Photography uses a face-to-face learning style. There will be less access to resources such as study guides and tests (Rojprasert et al., 2020).

Students who observe and mimic patterned behaviour following a demonstration by an expert, such as a lecturer or guest speaker, will not efficiently acquire practical skills if the learning model is remote or online (Rojprasert et al., 2020). Because most students won't have access to the best equipment and atmosphere, they won't be able to experiment as successfully (Rojprasert et al., 2020). Scaffolding will be less successful, and students won't be able to reflect effectively

(Rojprasert et al., 2020). According to Rojprasert et al. (2020), a photographer's entire experience working in the field will be significantly less productive.

1.11 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

The experiences of students studying Applied Photography across different learning modes confirm a clear direction for effective pedagogical practice, particularly highlighting the irreplaceable role of demonstrations. The study's findings provide a robust solution for delivering this practical module in higher education.

Based on the results, the most effective solution for teaching and learning Applied Photography is the implementation of a blended-contact learning or a Web-centric model. This hybrid approach is paramount as it strategically combines the most suitable elements from both face-to-face and online learning. Crucially, this model ensures that students receive the vital in-person practical demonstrations necessary to master core photographic skills, while also benefiting from the organisational and supplementary resources of the digital age. Such a model allows flexibility in teaching approaches, adapting to students' NQF level, maturity, and motivation, enabling a mix of traditional learning, resource exploration, discussions, experimentation with practical skills, and creative expression, while always keeping the critical role of demonstrations at the forefront.

This study has implications for higher education, particularly for practical, skills-based programmes. It empirically confirms that for Applied Photography, the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provides a strong foundation for enhancing students' skills and creativity, primarily through its emphasis on concrete experience and active experimentation. This finding underscores the value of hands-on learning, which relies heavily on effective demonstrations, in a field that is fundamentally dependent on visual and practical engagement. The research highlights that ELT helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, as students in Applied Photography learn best by actively practising and experimenting with techniques, reflecting on their successes and mistakes, and continuously improving.

The study's results demonstrate that a face-to-face learning strategy, particularly through direct demonstrations, capitalises on critical benefits, including instant feedback, real-world practical experience, improved teamwork, access to industry-standard resources, and heightened engagement. These components, intrinsically linked to physical demonstrations, create a more comprehensive and successful educational experience that better equips students for the photography industry. Without the core element of face-to-face demonstrations, students will miss out on crucial development in motricity (e.g., understanding the weight and manipulation of equipment), tactile engagement with different light sources, and the ability to troubleshoot effectively in real time. Furthermore, the study revealed the importance of face-to-face critique (a reflective activity following practical work and demonstrations) for developing resilience and the ability to interpret non-verbal cues, which are essential for professional interactions. If the learning model is purely online or distant, students will not effectively learn practical skills by observing

and imitating expert demonstrations, nor will they have access to the most suitable environments and equipment, leading to less effective reflection and scaffolding, ultimately hindering their readiness for the world of work.

While this study provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of different learning modes in Applied Photography, it did not examine individual students' learning preferences in depth. There is a gap in understanding how teaching styles for demonstrations might be tailored to accommodate the diverse ways students prefer to learn, given that students themselves may not always be aware of the most effective learning methods (Kirschner, 2017). Additionally, although the potential of virtual reality (VR) studios was touched upon as an auxiliary resource, their full implementation and precise effectiveness as a complementary tool for practical demonstrations remain largely unexplored in this context. The current limitations of VR in fully replicating the tactile, adaptive, and communicative nuances of physical studio work, particularly for comprehensive demonstrations of complex interactions among lighting and equipment, suggest that further research is needed (Kirschner, 2017).

1.12 Further Research

Building on the insights from this study, several avenues for further research emerge.

Tailoring Teaching Styles to Learning Preferences: Future research should investigate how lecturers can adapt their teaching strategies and demonstration methods to accommodate diverse student learning preferences in Applied Photography. This could involve exploring different approaches to presenting demonstrations (e.g., highly structured vs more exploratory) and the subsequent reflective activities (e.g., short essays vs group discussions), depending on the cohort's preferences. The aim would be to identify the most effective teaching and learning strategies for different preferences, thereby optimising skill acquisition through demonstrations.

Effectiveness of Virtual Reality Studios as Supplementary Resources: A critical area for further investigation is the feasibility of implementing virtual reality studios as an additional learning resource in Applied Photography. Research could focus on designing and testing how a virtual studio can effectively complement physical demonstrations by allowing students to test and experiment with concepts and compositions before booking the physical studio, thereby reducing the "bottleneck effect" of limited studio availability. A thorough investigation into the pedagogical impact and effectiveness of such a hybrid studio approach, particularly in enhancing learning from demonstrations and experimentation, is warranted.

This study confirms the paramount importance of face-to-face components, specifically direct demonstrations, for the effective development of practical skills in Applied Photography within an Experiential Learning Theory framework. While online learning platforms and resources offer valuable supplementary benefits, they cannot replace the immersive, interactive, and immediate feedback-rich environment provided by in-person demonstrations for mastering complex

psychomotor, visual-motor, and auditory skills critical for industry readiness. The study unequivocally advocates for a blended or Web-centric learning model as the most suitable approach for Applied Photography, ensuring students receive comprehensive training that integrates essential hands-on experiences with the advantages of digital tools. It is hoped that this research will stimulate further discussion among academics and higher education lecturers involved in practical modules and programmes, ultimately contributing to students' success in an evolving educational and professional landscape.

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Chapter 2: Exploring The Challenges of Balancing Traditional and Technology-Based Teaching in Under-Resourced South African Public Schools

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Abstract

Purpose: *This study examines how student teachers navigate the tension between technology-based pedagogies promoted in teacher education and the realities of under-resourced South African public primary schools, with particular attention to handwriting instruction in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases. While digital tools are widely presented as essential for innovative teaching, many placement schools experience unstable electricity, limited connectivity, and scarce devices, making consistent technology integration difficult. Guided by Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), the study explores how student teachers interpret these constraints, adapt their instructional approaches, and make sense of the continued relevance of traditional skills, especially handwriting, within technology-oriented training contexts.*

Study design/methodology/approach: *A qualitative phenomenological design was used to capture participants' lived experiences. Twelve purposively selected participants (six from each of two teacher education institutions) who had recently completed or were completing teaching practice in under-resourced public schools participated in semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews conducted online. Data were analysed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological method, moving from significant statements to formulated meanings and clustered themes, culminating in an essential structure of the phenomenon. Trustworthiness was supported through member checking, an audit trail, reflexive notes, and detailed contextual descriptions. Thematic interpretation was aligned to ELT's cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation.*

Findings:

Participants consistently described infrastructural limitations, power outages, unreliable internet, and limited access to projectors, printers, and smartboards as factors that disrupted digitally planned lessons and increased workload. In response, student teachers demonstrated pedagogical agility by developing low-tech lesson plans, prioritising handwriting and board-based instruction, and improvising teaching aids using recycled or self-funded materials. These adaptations were accompanied by emotional and professional resilience, as participants reflected on the mismatch between training and practice, reconceptualised effective teaching as context-dependent, and experimented with blended strategies such as using WhatsApp where possible while maintaining analogue alternatives. Handwriting emerged not as a residual skill but as a practical and pedagogically significant foundation in low-resource environments.

Originality/value: *The study contributes a context-sensitive account of how experiential learning unfolds under infrastructural constraint and highlights handwriting as a critical, often under-theorised component of equitable early-grade pedagogy. It recommends strengthening teacher education through low-resource pedagogy modules, simulations of constrained classrooms, targeted practicum placements, resilience-focused preparation, and stronger partnerships between universities and education departments.*

Keywords: *Technology integration; Handwriting instruction; Student teachers; Under-resourced schools; Teacher education; Experiential Learning Theory*

2.1 Introduction and Background

Technology is widely promoted as a tool to enhance teaching and learning, yet its benefits are unevenly realised across South African public schools. Student teachers are trained to use digital pedagogies, but many find themselves in under-resourced classrooms where electricity, internet access, and functioning devices are unreliable (Maringe & Sing, 2014; Nhlapo, Marais-Botha & Botha, 2023). This mismatch between university-based preparation and classroom reality creates pedagogical tensions, erodes teachers' confidence, and adds to their workload, particularly in the early grades, where handwriting and foundational literacy remain central (Ngcobo & Mhlongo, 2020; Onwu & Mogari, 2004). This study explores how final-year student teachers and graduates navigate these challenges and adapt their practice, offering insights that can make teacher education and policy more practical, responsive, and grounded in real classroom conditions.

The traditional teaching approach is a rigid one in which the teacher is the dominant figure. The teacher organises the learning environment and prescribes the curriculum and teaching strategies. This method helps maintain classroom discipline and order and relies on repetition and memorisation to help students build a strong foundation of basic knowledge (Vaishwi, 2025). This approach provides an organised way to cover content and evaluate students through standardised exams (Falasi, 2024).

This paper is organised as follows: Sections 2.1-2.3 provide the background, problem statement, and study objectives. Section 2.4 reviews current research on integrating digital and traditional teaching methods in resource-limited settings. Section 2.5 describes the study methodology, while Section 2.5.1 discusses ethical considerations. Section 2.6 presents the results, and Section 2.7 interprets their implications for practical teaching and learning. Finally, Section 2.8 examines the study's limitations and suggests directions for future research.

2.2 Problem Statement

While promoting the integration of technology into education is common, many student teachers in South African public schools encounter substantial challenges when switching between digital tools and traditional teaching methods, such as handwriting instruction and creating teaching resources. Research has demonstrated that handwriting activates distinct neural pathways associated with literacy learning (Wiley et al., 2021). In contrast, most training programmes focus on digital education; however, issues such as load shedding, limited internet access, and malfunctioning devices make much of their preparation ineffective. The disconnect between training and real-world placement leads to frustration, pedagogical inefficiency, and increased stress for student teachers, especially in Grade R-6 subjects, where CAPS emphasises handwriting as part of the development of writing and presenting abilities (DBE, 2011a; DBE, 2011b).

This study seeks to understand how student teachers respond to these challenges to help teacher training institutions develop more context-aware educational models that combine traditional and digital teaching methods.

2.3 Research Objectives

The following are the research objectives for this study.

- To explore student teachers' experiences and challenges in using technology alongside traditional teaching in under-resourced South African public schools.
- To examine student teachers' perceptions of the value and relevance of traditional teaching skills, such as handwriting, within the context of technology-driven teacher education.
- To investigate how student teachers perceive their teacher education programmes in terms of preparation for integrating both traditional and digital tools in their teaching practice.

2.4 Literature Review

Integrating digital technologies into education is widely promoted for its potential to enhance learner Engagement, personalised instruction, and expanded access to resources (Canani & Seymour, 2021; Tleane, 2024). Globally, technology-enhanced learning supports innovative teaching practices, such as tracking learner progress, enabling interactive lessons, and promoting student-centred approaches. However, in South Africa, structural constraints hinder the implementation of such technologies, especially in under-resourced public schools (Theodoro, Waghid, & Wambua, 2024; Nhlapo et al., 2023).

Shatri (2020) emphasises the importance of using technology in education to share knowledge and skills effectively and systematically. Reinhold et al. (2020) agree, finding that technology helps students collaborate more effectively, engage more actively in their learning, and develop communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. However, Shatri (ibid) argues that the effectiveness of technology in education largely depends on teachers' beliefs about teaching and their comfort level with digital tools. Additionally, Shatri (ibid) warns that excessive reliance on technology without adequately integrating traditional methods may negatively impact the development of fundamental skills. From these perspectives, while technology offers significant opportunities to transform education, its success hinges on strategic integration, adequate teacher training, and careful management of its potential drawbacks. Das (2018) states that challenges such as insufficient teacher preparation, limited time, technical issues, and inadequate funding hinder the successful integration of technology in classrooms. According to Theodoro et al. (2024), Nhlapo et al. (2023), Shatri (2020), Das (ibid), and Reinhold et al. (2020), student teachers placed in under-resourced schools face infrastructural problems like unreliable power sources, lack of internet access, and insufficient Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) tools.

Although their training emphasises the use of classroom technology, they sometimes have to revert to traditional methods, such as creating teaching aids and mastering basic skills, such as teaching or scaffolding handwriting. The disconnect between theoretical preparation and practical expectations leads to inconsistent teaching and reduced teaching effectiveness, potentially affecting learner outcomes.

Studies highlight handwriting as an important skill in the early years of learning, as it supports children's memory, spatial reasoning, and brain development (Osman, 2023; Graham, 2019; Rueckriegel et al., 2008). According to Hobden and Hobden (2019), handwriting is the easiest and most effective way to teach in many underprivileged schools. Teacher preparation programs are often criticised for their excessive focus on digital pedagogy rather than on the realities of low-resource classrooms (Theodoro et al., 2024; Ezati et al., 2010).

The growing use of technology reduces learners' opportunities to develop handwriting skills, potentially negatively affecting their confidence and academic achievement (Majnemer, 2007; Koul et al., 2023). As a result, insufficient practice can cause learners to struggle with legibility, often leading to incomplete academic tasks. In agreement, Chang and Yu (2022) stress that children with handwriting difficulties often face negative impacts on their motivation, self-esteem, and academic performance. Reutzel (2015), Rueckriegel et al. (2008), and Sarsak (2018) also found that handwriting legibility and speed are strong indicators of academic success, as learners with good handwriting perform better on academic writing tasks. A student's handwriting clarity can affect how teachers assess their work and, in turn, the marks (Lee et al., 2022). According to Majnemer (2007), digital advancement does not surpass the importance of handwriting in education. For this reason, it is important to assess and manage handwriting movements, especially given the impact of technology on physical skills (Koul et al., 2023).

In a comparative perspective, China also evidences significant tensions when integrating technology into rural schools. Despite strong national policies emphasising ICT infrastructure, teacher capacity, and policy support, rural mathematics teachers report lower Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK), less confidence, and reduced access to devices compared with their urban counterparts (Li, 2024; Zeng, 2022). Within the SADC region, Zimbabwe faces significant resource constraints in Buhera rural district, where school heads report unreliable electricity, limited computer access, and undertrained teachers, all of which impede meaningful ICT integration (Tazvishaya & Mupambireyi, 2014). Moreover, in many rural Zimbabwean schools, only a small proportion are connected to the internet, with many students lacking devices and connectivity, forcing reliance on traditional (chalk-and-talk) methods (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2022). The literature further reveals that developing countries such as Kenya and India face infrastructure deficiencies that hinder efforts to incorporate technology into education (UNESCO, 2022). For instance, Safidon (2024) highlights the ineffectiveness of tech-focused teacher preparation in rural Indian settings, where internet and electricity reliability are recurring problems. These parallels suggest that South Africa's educational challenges are part of

a broader global issue, reinforcing the need for training models that are sensitive to contextual limitations.

David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (1984) provides a solid framework for studying how student teachers acquire, engage with, and reflect on knowledge. The theory describes learning as a repeating cycle with four connected stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation, through which learners combine practical experiences with critical reflection and theoretical understanding. When placed in schools with limited technological resources, student teachers encounter authentic challenges that serve as learning opportunities. These challenges prompt them to discover what works in their specific context, reconceptualise their instructional approaches, and try out new methods through ongoing experimentation (Thuketana, 2022). ELT promotes student teachers as active participants in their own learning and professional development

Context is crucial in teaching pedagogy, especially in South Africa, where significant gaps exist in pre-service and in-service teacher education and classroom practice. This study is set against this complex educational backdrop, where limited resources and conflicting expectations intensify these challenges. The study explores how student teachers manage integrating new technologies and traditional teaching methodologies.

2.5 Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of student teachers in under-resourced South African public schools as they navigate both traditional teaching methods and technology. As described by Darandi (2024), the phenomenological approach is particularly suitable for this investigation because it focuses on participants' subjective interpretations of their experiences. This method enabled the researcher to shed light on the emotional, cognitive, and logistical hurdles that teachers face in under-resourced schools. It also provides a nuanced view of how these student teachers blend digital learning with more traditional teaching methods (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Drawing from Durandi (ibid) and Alhazmi & Kaufmann (ibid), the phenomenology approach is informed by the assumption that meaning emerges through individuals' interactions with their environment, accessible through reflection and conversation.

Participants were purposefully selected from two South African teacher education institutions. Participants needed to be final-year Bachelor of Education student teachers, Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students, recent graduates, or student teachers who had recently completed or were completing their teaching practicum. The participants must have had experience teaching in under-resourced public primary schools with limited digital infrastructure and had worked with both traditional and digital instructional methods, including handwriting instruction, to ensure that the study captured experiences relevant to handwriting instruction. Participants were required to have taught subjects and grades where handwriting plays a significant role in

curriculum delivery. Specifically, participants must have had an experience teaching Foundation Phase (Grades R–3) or Intermediate Phase (Grades 4–6) subjects such as Home Language, First Additional Language, and Mathematics, where CAPS explicitly foregrounds handwriting as part of writing and presentation skills development (DBE, 2011a; DBE, 2011b). Including participants from these phases was critical because handwriting in the South African curriculum is not merely mechanical but is linked to the development of spelling, reading fluency, and written expression (Berninger & Richards, 2002; Medwell & Wray, 2007). This was to ensure that the sample reflected contexts in which handwriting instruction is an explicit pedagogical focus. Additionally, it allowed for comparisons of how digital and traditional writing modalities were integrated in different classroom contexts. Student teachers placed in private schools or those without current teaching practice experience, were excluded, as their contexts might not represent the infrastructural and pedagogical challenges prevalent in public schools.

A total of twelve participants, six from each institution, were recruited. Invitations and information sheets were sent via email and WhatsApp. Handwriting is not just a mechanical skill but is also important for literacy, given its impact on spelling, reading fluency, and written expression (Berninger & Richards, 2002; Medwell & Wray, 2007). For that reason, participants were selected from various programs to ensure different perspectives and experiences. Due to the examination period, it was challenging to reach student teachers; therefore, the final respondents were graduates from both institutions.

Semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews conducted through Teams calls formed the basis of the researchers' data collection. The interview schedule focused on how participants integrated digital tools with traditional methods such as handwriting instruction. Prompting follow-up questions encouraged deeper reflection on emotions, teaching choices, and support systems during teaching practice. Interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes.

Data were analysed using Colaizzi's 1978 seven-step phenomenological method. Firstly, the interviews were transcribed. Then, key statements were identified and coded. These codes were then categorised into themes, which formed the basis for a detailed description of what the participants experienced. The process clarified the core structure of the phenomenon being examined. To ensure accuracy and credibility, final interpretations were shared with the participants for confirmation. This method is useful in educational research as people often use metaphors and images to explain their complex teaching and emotional experiences (Edward & Welch, 2011).

Credibility was established through member checking to ensure the data's trustworthiness. Dependability was supported by following an audit trail; interview audio recordings, transcripts, coding memos, and codebooks were systematically stored and dated. Confirmability was enhanced by coding transcripts to reveal discrepancies and differences, and by keeping reflexive field notes that documented the researchers' assumptions. Transferability was enhanced by the provision of a

rich description of the contexts, participant numbers, and the criteria used for purposive sampling, allowing readers to judge the relevance to similar settings.

Choosing Experiential Learning Theory, phenomenology, and Colaizzi's method as the guiding framework was intentional. It aims to address the real challenges student teachers face in resource-limited classrooms. This combination provides the flexibility and depth needed to capture how these student teachers navigate the integration of digital training and practical realities, as well as the subtleties of their experiences. Essentially, this approach offers an academically sound perspective rooted in the everyday challenges of South African classrooms.

The findings are set to inform teacher education programs by highlighting the need for adaptable, context-aware training deeply rooted in experiential learning. For programs to be effective, this study advocates moving beyond a one-size-fits-all digital approach and nurturing skills that respond to the diversity and unpredictability of real classrooms. Furthermore, the study supports a shift towards more grounded and context-sensitive professional development for future teachers.

2.5.1 Ethics

Ethical clearance and a gatekeepers' letter were obtained from the relevant institutions' ethics committees. All participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw without consequences (BERA, 2018). Selection was based on fairness and relevance to the research goals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and measures were taken to prevent exploitation (Israel & Hay, 2006). Participant anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms (e.g., Participant 1, 2, 3, and so on) in the order they were interviewed. I referred to the institutions as 'Institution A' and 'Institution B'.

In line with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), all data were pseudonymised and securely stored on encrypted, password-protected devices. Hard copies were stored in locked cabinets. Only the researcher had access to the data, and participants retained the right to access, change, or request deletion of their data during the study. Data will be retained for 5 years and then destroyed in accordance with institutional guidelines.

2.6 Results and Findings

The following section presents the study's core findings, which explored student teachers' experiences in balancing traditional and technology-based teaching methods in under-resourced South African public schools. Using Colaizzi's phenomenological approach and Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), this analysis draws on semi-structured interviews with graduates who were placed in under-resourced public schools during their practicum, some of whom now work in similar contexts. The findings show how these educators build knowledge through real-time adaptation in resource-limited environments characterised by unreliable electricity, limited digital tools, and reliance on traditional teaching materials.

The themes presented here are organised to align with the study's research questions and the cyclical stages of experiential learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. They include: (1) infrastructural limitations and their pedagogical implications; (2) tensions between digital training and analogue realities; (3) emotional and professional resilience; (4) creative adaptation and resourcefulness; and (5) perceived gaps in teacher education programs. Participants' direct quotations are used to substantiate each theme and to highlight shared experiences and divergent perspectives across the sample. These findings provide a comprehensive picture of student teachers' lived experiences and contribute to the ongoing discussion of the contextual relevance of teacher education in technologically advanced yet unevenly resourced educational environments.

2.6.1 Infrastructural Limitations and Their Pedagogical Implications

A common theme in all the interviews was the serious infrastructure issues that the graduates faced during their practicum in under-resourced South African public schools. These challenges affected the teaching choices student teachers made. Often, they limited their ability to use the digital strategies they learned in training. While participants understood digital teaching methods, they often faced challenges due to a lack of the necessary resources and support to implement them effectively.

Participant 1 noted the severe infrastructure deficiency, stating: "Some classes didn't even have the normal board to write on... the HOD was printing out of pocket." Similarly, Participant 4 stated, "There are no resources that benefit the children directly. Wi-Fi was only used by some teachers," emphasising that learners were largely excluded from technological access and that even teachers had limited access to basic ICT infrastructure. These experiences support the findings of Maringe and Sing (2014) and Nhlapo et al. (2023) that teacher training programs tend to prioritise digital teaching without adequately preparing student teachers for schools lacking basic infrastructure, such as electricity, internet access, or working devices.

Participant 5 highlighted the gap between training and placement, adding, "There used to be two projectors. Now there is one... and it is fixed in one room," demonstrating the limitations of digital tool availability and portability. Participant 2 indicated that digital technologies were available only to certain grades: "The smartboards are in the Grade 7 classrooms only," suggesting uneven access to technology within the same school. These observations align with those of Theodoro et al. (2024) and Nhlapo et al. (2023), who note that systemic resource inequalities hinder technology integration, especially in schools with historical disadvantages. Furthermore, Das (2018) argues that infrastructural problems, limited funding, and time constraints are key barriers to the effective use of technology in teaching.

The challenges went beyond a lack of devices. Poor internet access and unreliable electricity were also issues. Participant 1 reported, "Even the staffroom Wi-Fi doesn't work. I used my own data to download a video clip." Participant 3 explained how power outages frequently disrupted

lessons: “The power goes off sometimes when I’m using the laptop... Then you have to start all over.” These comments highlight the infrastructural problems noted by Shatri (2020). Shatri asserts that effective digital teaching depends on a stable environment, which is lacking in many under-resourced schools.

Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (1984) helps explain how these student teachers faced contextual challenges. Rather than giving up on their teaching goals, many participants showed adaptive learning through real-life experimentation and reflection. For example, Participant 6 shared, “In public schools, I had to print my materials, if I could even find a teacher willing to help.” This shows a change from theoretical knowledge to practical innovation. These changes align with Thuketana (2022), who argues that ELT helps new teachers respond flexibly to real teaching experiences, enabling them to grow professionally through reflection, conceptualisation, and active experimentation.

Several participants who completed their teaching practicum in both private and public schools noted a clear difference in infrastructure and its impact on teaching. Participant 7 said, “At the private school, everything was digital. In public, it was only chalkboards and textbooks.” Participant 3 agreed, “In the private school, I used PowerPoint and videos. But I still used the whiteboard when the internet was down.” These comments back up Ezati et al. (2010), who point out the gap between teacher training programs and the actual conditions many South African teachers face. These findings show that student teachers often enter the classroom unprepared to handle the infrastructure issues they encounter. As Ngcobo and Mhlongo (2020) and Onwu and Mogari (2004) have observed, these gaps hinder teaching effectiveness and lower student teachers’ confidence and ability to help students grow. While many support the use of digital technology (Canani & Seymour, 2021; Tleane, 2024), this study confirms that successful integration in South Africa requires aligning teacher preparation with the realities of public education.

2.6.2 Tensions Between Digital Training and Traditional Realities

One of the interview themes was the disparity between university-based digital training and the lack of resources in schools during teaching practice. According to Participant 1, in every school she was placed in, there was a strong perception that the digital competencies promoted in her institution's curriculum were poorly aligned with the pedagogical realities in those schools. As participant 1 described, “You get cultural shock when nothing works. I was not prepared for that.” Similarly, Participant 4 observed that being trained in a tech-advanced environment led to reliance on digital tools, stating, “We are taught through tech. When it is gone, you lose your crutches.” Participant 7 echoed this frustration, explaining, “When I had to do some of my lessons, they required technological resources, like maybe I had a PowerPoint, or I had a video to show them. And it was quite difficult or impossible to do that with them... There was zero digital use in those public schools.”

This mismatch often left student teachers feeling unprepared and discouraged. Participant 6 reflected, “Not having those resources like the projector or being able to print out worksheets may be a bit discouraging... maybe they [the college] can also prepare us for that reality.” Participant 11 added that they often had to abandon their digital lesson plans altogether: “The majority of the time, we didn’t have electricity... I would use my own data and my own projector if there were electricity, but when there wasn’t, I had to write notes on the board and teach using the traditional method.”

Some participants shared how they had to improvise to keep learners engaged. Participant 2 stated, “I had to adapt... it was very difficult, especially coming from other schools where I was using technology a lot. I had to come up with creative methods like using recycled materials or creating posters so that learners wouldn’t be bored.” Participant 8 suggested that student teachers should expect disruptions, noting, “If you are planning on showing the kids a video and then you have load shedding, you can’t show them the video. Do not base your lesson purely on that video. Maybe have a backup like posters or physical objects they can see and touch.”

These experiences highlight the need for teacher training programs to balance digital pedagogy with practical preparation for low-resource environments. As Participant 10 concluded, “Honestly, no. I think on-the-job learning is the best... I could then make the information more relatable. I could understand what we are being taught theoretically only after being placed in a school with no resources.” Nhlapo et al. (2023) and Maringe and Sing (2014) agree that the lack of, or limited, technology infrastructure in South African schools poses a challenge to digital teaching. Das (2018) and Shatri (2020) agree and add that teacher training programs often overlook the ongoing challenges of resource shortages, time constraints, and technical issues in schools.

Although the focus on digital skills is laudable and aligns with global 21st-century teaching models (Reinhold et al., 2020), its application in South Africa should take the local context into account. Participant 5 summed up the problem well: “Training gave me tech tools, but nothing prepares you for teaching without electricity.” This view aligns with Ngcobo and Mhlongo (2020), who argue that teacher education in South Africa often fails to equip future teachers with the essential and contextual skills they need for immediate application.

2.6.3 Emotional and Professional Resilience

Despite their challenges, many student teachers showed exceptional emotional and professional resilience. Resilience was built on a sense of purpose and inner drive. As participant 1 noted, “It’s a career driven by passion. If you are not passionate, you won’t cope.” Participant 5 clarified: “Teach with your heart. Be holistic, a psychologist, motivator, and coach.” Thuketana (2022) also notes that, in Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory, student teachers enter an experiential learning cycle that requires them to analyse the limitations and then adjust based on the actual problems encountered in the classroom. This learning cycle is instrumental in fostering the participants’

agency and self-awareness. Participant 6 said: “It might cost you time and money, but it’s worth it when learners enjoy the lesson.”

As Vaishwi (2025) and Falasi (2024) point out, traditional teaching methods can be limiting, but they offer a reliable backup, especially when digital resources are inaccessible. Participants relied on these traditional methods when necessary to keep learners engaged and motivated.

2.6.4 Creative Adaptation and Resourcefulness

In navigating their complex environments, student teachers showed elevated levels of creativity and resourcefulness. Participant 3 said, “I created a balance myself. I was not told how. I just did it.” Similarly, Participant 7 noted, “Be open, be creative, be flexible. Find a way even when you have nothing.” These comments corroborate Hobden and Hobden's (2019) findings, which emphasise the relevance of teacher innovation in low-resource contexts.

Participants adjusted their lessons by reusing available tools and creating their teaching materials. For instance, Participant 1 mentioned, “I printed images from Google and pasted them on the board. Not tech exactly, but helpful.” This aligns with the conclusions of Theodoro et al. (2024) and Reinhold et al. (2020), which highlight blended strategies that combine traditional and digital methods. These creative strategies not only show practical problem-solving but also support Kolb’s (1984) idea of “active experimentation” in experiential learning. Through cycles of trial and error, participants developed teaching methods tailored to their context.

2.6.5 Perceived Gaps in Teacher Education Programmes

All participants agreed that these formal training sessions had their shortcomings. Most participants felt that the programs lacked grounding in the realities of teaching in under-resourced schools, though some recognised the usefulness of digital teaching tools. When asked if she was able to adapt in the public school classrooms, Participant 6 said, “Yes, and No, we were taught to adapt, but printing and projecting still became issues.” Participant 7 insists that, “We learnt about lesson planning, but they must also teach us how to adapt for farm schools.” This contrasts with studies of Ezati et al. (2010) and Theodoro et al. (2024), who highlight the clash between policy and classroom realities. Ngcobo and Mhlongo (2020) assert that, in the absence of digital options, a lack of exposure to traditional instruments during teacher education could undermine student teachers’ confidence. Research has demonstrated that handwriting activates distinct neural pathways associated with literacy learning (Wiley et al., 2021).

These findings suggest that, in South Africa, effective teacher education must go beyond preparing students with digital skills. It must also offer grounded, flexible, and context-aware training that prepares future teachers to operate effectively in both well- and under-resourced environments. The lived experiences of the student teachers in this study make clear that pedagogical agility,

emotional resilience, and creative problem-solving are not optional but essential components of professional readiness.

2.6.6 Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning in Practice

David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) of 1984 offers a valuable framework for understanding the professional learning paths of student teachers teaching in underprivileged classrooms in South Africa. ELT divides knowledge into four stages: Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualisation (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE). Student teachers in this study repeatedly cycled through this learning process as they navigated the gap between digital-focused teacher preparation and the actual conditions of their placement schools.

2.6.6.1 Concrete Experience (CE): Direct Engagement with Contextual Constraints

Kolb's model's first stage calls for engaging in new experiences. Often defined by infrastructural flaws such as a lack of electricity, internet access, or digital tools, participants were exposed to demanding classroom settings. This is supported by the statements below:

"I used my phone and data to show pupils a brief clip... then the battery died" (Participant 1) and "There was no power for two days, and I had to change my entire plan" (Participant 4). These narratives show the participants' real-time struggles and their motivation to respond practically and educationally in the moment, rather than ignore or avoid the situation.

2.6.6.2 Reflective Observation (RO): Recognising Gaps and Limitations

Participants reflected on their actual experiences by assessing failures, identifying potential improvements, and recognising their training limitations. Participant 3 notes, "I understood I depend too much on the smartboard; I freeze when it is turned off. "Looking back, I believe I should have printed the handout before the lesson" (Participant 6). These thoughts highlight an increasing recognition of the gap between college training and the challenges of teaching in resource-constrained contexts. Self-criticism, resiliency, and a will to improve often accompanied the reflective observation process.

2.6.6.3 Abstract Conceptualisation (AC): Developing Pedagogical Insight

In this context, participants engaged more holistically with instructional practice within resource-limited environments. For example, Participant 2 emphasised the importance of practical improvisation in resource-constrained contexts by combining technological and traditional approaches. She noted, "Training should include how to improvise, not only theory." Participant 5 confirmed this perspective by saying, "It's not about having smart tech, it's about smart teaching." Such comments signal a movement away from mere adaptation toward the more profound reconsideration of pedagogical strategy.

2.6.6.4 Active Experimentation (AE): Trying New Approaches

Some participants criticised their teacher training and demonstrated support for teaching methods that accounted for contextual realities. Participants shared adaptation strategies in practice; for instance, Participant 1 explained that they used printed Google images as visual aids: “I printed images from Google and pasted them on the board.” Participant 4 shared that they utilised WhatsApp to distribute homework, and the students performed well: “I used WhatsApp to send homework... even though it’s not ideal, learners responded well.”

These participants' comments demonstrated creativity and agency. Furthermore, their willingness to rethink teaching approaches and blend traditional and digital resources reflects professional growth and adaptability, key indicators of experiential learning.

The diagram below illustrates how participants’ experiences align with Kolb’s model

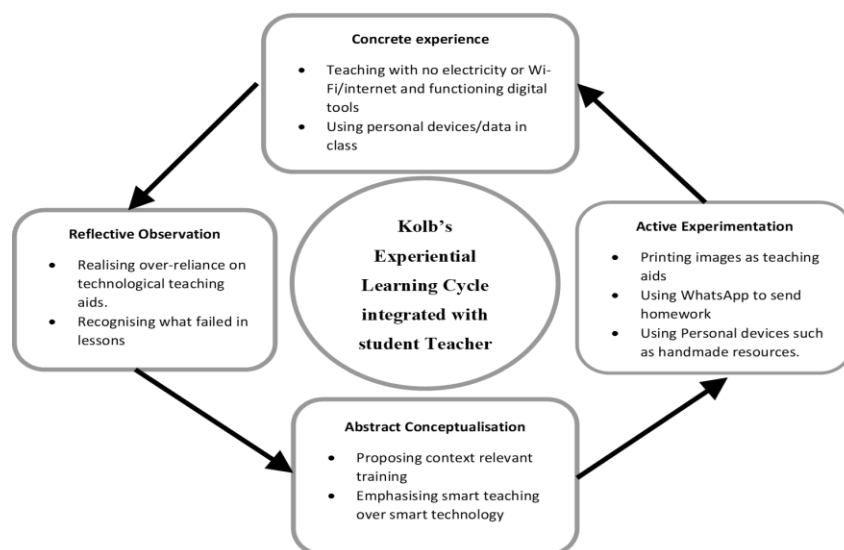


Figure 2-1: The organisation of the study’s core themes along Kolb’s four stages: Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualisation (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE). Source: Authors’ construction.

2.6.7 Embodied Learning and Emotional Dimensions

Participants' experiences with cognitive engagement were not limited to mental operations; they were also loaded with feelings and relationships. For example, several expressed feelings of self-pity, anxiety, or frustration when they believed that external limitations prevented them from meeting their teaching standards. On the flip side, others felt a sense of pride or personal growth when their students responded well to their spontaneous teaching methods. These emotional reactions highlight that experiential learning goes beyond following steps; it is deeply rooted in the classroom's emotional landscape.

2.7 Recommendations

These were participants' recommendations:

2.7.1 Recommendations for Teacher Training Institutions

- Incorporate classroom simulations for under-resourced students into the curriculum to better equip student teachers for the real world.
- Create modules for low-tech, hand-generated resource creation to promote creative pedagogy.
- Promote hybrid teaching methods that combine digital skills and traditional pedagogy.
- Offer training in emotional resilience and cultural flexibility to help student teachers thrive.

2.7.2 Recommendations for Student Teachers

- Developing a growth mindset and flexible teaching identity to manage diversity in the classroom contexts.
- Engage in reflective journaling to enhance learning and guide teaching.
- Utilise school-based peer learning and mentoring to enhance confidence and competence.
- Be proactive in creating and finding suitable resources and support when needed.
- Reflect regularly to help modify teaching techniques and methods.

These recommendations are intended to improve teacher education and the preparedness of student teachers to address the complexities of teaching in diverse environments.

2.7.3 Practical/ Teaching and Learning Implications

Findings reveal that Kolb's Experiential Learning Theoretical framework serves as a valuable lens for understanding the development of resilient, innovative, and contextually sensitive student teachers through authentic, real-world experiences. However, it also suggests that this learning is often imposed on them, rather than intentionally embedded within a teacher preparation programme. This points to an urgent imperative to rethink pre-service teacher education to explicitly integrate experiential learning cycles, particularly those situated in resource-limited contexts.

2.8 Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

2.8.1 Conclusions

This study highlights the complexities and limitations faced by student teachers in under-resourced South African public schools, due to technological integration constraints caused by infrastructural limitations. Although they are trained in digital pedagogy, student teachers still rely on traditional

teaching methods due to limited resources. However, their responses reveal impressive training, improvisation, and resilience in the face of such difficulties. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory may be useful to teacher training in South Africa. It sheds light on novel insights about teaching methods that adapt under pressure. Again, it highlights the need for a blended education model and context-responsive teacher training. The model may prepare prospective teachers to work in such a context by recognising the challenges and opportunities that under-resourced schools present.

This study further demonstrates that the challenges South Africa faces are not unique; they reflect a broader, global struggle with the digital divide in education, as evident in China, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and India. Addressing these issues requires more than isolated efforts; it calls for systemic solutions that learn from countries that have successfully narrowed the urban-rural technology gap through collaborative investment and focused teacher training.

2.8.2 Study Limitations

The study has some limitations. First, while it does provide deep insights, its sample was not representative of the entire student body or graduates across institutions and provinces. Secondly, only two institutions were targeted; therefore, the views of student teachers in rural or under-resourced institutions were not considered. Thirdly, data were collected via interviews, so some selective memory or bias may have been at play. However, given these limitations, the phenomenological approach added depth and nuances, thereby increasing the interpretative value of the study.

2.8.3 Future research

Future studies should develop practical lesson plans that integrate both traditional and digital methods with student teachers. This will help align their training with real classroom practices. Additionally, there is a need for long-term research to understand how these early experiences influence teachers' professional identity. Such research could also monitor how well student teachers perform in the classroom and how their students' outcomes evolve.

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Section B: Promoting Workplace Relevance: Bridging Education and Employment

This section examines how higher education can more effectively align curricula, pedagogy, and assessment with the evolving demands of the workplace. The chapters explore work-integrated learning, industry partnerships, digital and professional skills development, and curriculum innovation aimed at enhancing graduate employability. Emphasising adaptability, lifelong learning, and contextual responsiveness, the contributions highlight strategies that bridge the gap between academic preparation and meaningful participation in dynamic labour markets.

Chapter 3: Charting an Inclusive Path Forward with GenAI Chatbots: Exploring Ubuntu Philosophies in the Ethical Design of Educational AI

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Abstract

Purpose: As higher education systems increasingly integrate Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) chatbots into teaching and learning, ethical and cultural concerns emerge regarding whose values shape these technologies. This chapter explores how Ubuntu, articulated through the Collective Fingers Theory, can guide the ethical and inclusive design and implementation of GenAI chatbots as smart virtual tutors in higher education. While GenAI offers opportunities for personalisation and access, prevailing Western-centric ethical frameworks risk overlooking relational, communal, and culturally grounded pedagogies central to African educational contexts. The study investigates how Ubuntu's core values, Respect, Compassion, Dignity, Solidarity, and Survival/Wellbeing for All, can inform socially responsive AI systems that promote inclusive and humane digital learning environments.

Study design/methodology/approach: A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted following a PRISMA-informed process. Searches across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Connected Papers yielded 512 records, with an additional 36 identified through citation tracking. After screening and eligibility assessment, 20 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis in ATLAS.ti. The five Ubuntu values guided deductive coding, articulated in the Collective Fingers Theory, while inductive coding allowed additional themes to emerge.

Findings: The analysis revealed that Ubuntu-aligned values appear implicitly in GenAI ethics discourse, particularly in discussions of equity, bias mitigation, personalisation, and participatory design, but are rarely explicitly grounded in African philosophical frameworks. Five interconnected themes emerged: (1) Survival/Wellbeing for All, emphasising holistic development and equity; (2) Respect, highlighting cultural sensitivity, privacy, and bias mitigation; (3) Dignity, focusing on empowerment and ethical AI design; (4) Solidarity, promoting cooperative learning and decolonised governance; and (5) Compassion, supporting adaptive and emotionally responsive learning systems. The review identified a significant gap in culturally grounded AI design frameworks rooted explicitly in Ubuntu.

Originality/value: This chapter offers a relational, African philosophical lens to the global discourse on GenAI ethics in education. It advances Ubuntu as a normative framework for human-centric, participatory, and decolonial AI design, offering practical design principles for culturally responsive educational chatbots and positioning higher education as a communal digital ecosystem.

Keywords: GenAI chatbots; Ubuntu; Inclusive education; AI ethics; Collective Fingers Theory; Decolonial AI

3.1 Introduction and Background

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) offers enormous potential for the equalising, democratising, and decolonising of education. With the increased application of GenAI in education, the use of GenAI chatbots as smart virtual tutors, chatbots capable of providing on-demand, interactive academic support, has become more widespread (Al-Tamimi et al., 2024; Harry, 2023; Zebua, 2024). Several GenAI tutor chatbots are currently available, including AI Tutor Pro, developed by Contact North (Contact_North, 2023), Khanmigo, developed by Khan Academy (Khan_Academy, 2023), and the South African MindJoy AI platform (Mindjoy, n.d.). While promising for personalised learning, especially in distance education, such technologies are often developed within Western paradigms that may overlook relational and culturally grounded pedagogies (Bork, 2001). In African contexts, educational practice is deeply shaped by Ubuntu, a philosophy centred on human dignity, interconnectedness, and communal well-being (Letseka, 2012).

Poovan et al. (2006) present a novel conceptualisation of Ubuntu in their Collective Fingers Theory, which distinguishes five interdependent values: respect, compassion, survival, well-being for all, solidarity, and dignity. These values function collectively, much like the fingers of a hand. This paper presents the results of a systematic literature review to determine the extent to which Ubuntu-informed values can guide the ethical and inclusive development and implementation of GenAI chatbots as smart virtual tutors for use in non-Western and other inclusive educational contexts.

3.2 Problem Statement

Although GenAI chatbots are increasingly being integrated into educational settings to enhance access and personalise learning (Olivier & Weilbach, 2024), their design and deployment often reflect Western-centric ethical frameworks that may not align with African values and contexts (Wakunuma & Eke, 2024). Ubuntu, as a relational and humanising African philosophy, has the potential to guide more inclusive, contextually relevant, and ethically grounded AI development (Gwagwa et al., 2022). Yet, there is a limited systematic understanding of how to incorporate Ubuntu principles into the design and implementation of GenAI chatbots in education to support ethical and inclusive practices.

3.3 Research Objectives

The objective of this study is to systematically review and synthesize existing literature to determine the extent to which the Ubuntu philosophy as represented in the Collective Finger Theory can guide the ethical and inclusive design and implementation of GenAI chatbots in education, and to identify principles, practices, or gaps that inform the development of culturally grounded, socially responsive AI tools within African and other traditional and inclusive contexts.

3.3.1 Research Question

This study has been guided by the following research question: “How can Ubuntu, as represented in the Collective Fingers Theory, guide the design and implementation of GenAI chatbots to foster culturally responsive and socially cohesive learning experiences?”

This paper will next provide a literature review to situate the study within the current research. This will be followed by the methodology section, providing an overview of the research design and implementation. The results will be presented, and the study's findings will be discussed. Finally, a section presenting practical implications of the study will be presented. The paper will conclude with a section acknowledging the study's limitations and presenting suggestions for future research.

3.4 Literature Review

3.4.1 Ubuntu as a Guide to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The integration of Ubuntu principles, particularly as articulated in the Collective Fingers Theory, can significantly enhance the design and implementation of Generative AI (GenAI) chatbots in traditional, non-Western, inclusive educational contexts, fostering culturally responsive and socially cohesive learning experiences for all students. Ubuntu emphasises communalism, interconnectedness, and collective well-being, serving as a guiding philosophy for creating inclusive, responsive educational environments that are responsive to diverse cultural contexts (Odero et al., 2024). To operationalise this philosophy in educational GenAI chatbots, it is essential to align their functionalities with the expectations and needs of culturally diverse user groups. By adopting the Ubuntu framework, educators can ensure that chatbots facilitate compassionate, inclusive dialogue and encourage collaborative learning, essential components of culturally responsive pedagogy (Essel et al., 2022).

3.4.2 Enhancing Engagement through Inclusion

Effective chatbot design in educational contexts can significantly influence user engagement and learning outcomes. The personalisation of chatbot responses can enhance the learning experience by tailoring responses to individual students' preferences and cultural backgrounds (Olivier & Weilbach, 2025). This personalised approach aligns with Ubuntu values by promoting respect and understanding among students from different cultures (Baskara, 2023; Kouam & Muchowe, 2024). Implementing chatbots that not only deliver content but also acknowledge and celebrate cultural diversity can facilitate a more inclusive learning atmosphere. Such an approach improves user satisfaction and fosters collective cognitive development in educational settings (Parsakia, 2023).

3.4.3 Design for Communal Wellbeing

The role of chatbots in supporting critical thinking and engagement becomes vital, particularly in higher education settings where diverse student populations demand tailored educational approaches (Baskara, 2023; Wang & Raman, 2025). Adopting the Ubuntu philosophy in the technology development process can mitigate ethical concerns associated with AI deployment in education. Emphasising communal values ensures that chatbots are designed with equity and respect, creating educational technologies that serve the interests of all stakeholders in the learning community (Mensah & Van Wynsberghe, 2025; Odero et al., 2024). This collective framework can help address identified challenges in ethical AI integration and user experience, promoting practices that prioritise communal well-being over individual gains.

The representation of Ubuntu in the Collective Fingers Theory, therefore, provides a robust framework for designing GenAI chatbots that enhance culturally responsive learning experiences. By embedding the principles of communalism and interconnectedness into the chatbot functionalities, learning designers and educators can create more inclusive educational environments that facilitate learning, engagement, and collective growth among diverse student populations.

3.5 Research Methodology

3.5.1 Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to examine the extent to which Ubuntu philosophies can inform the ethical and inclusive design and implementation of Generative AI (GenAI) chatbots in traditional, non-Western, and inclusive educational contexts. The review followed the PRISMA process to identify, screen, and analyse relevant peer-reviewed and grey literature (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2023).

3.5.2 Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted across three major academic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. A combination of Boolean search techniques and keyword phrases was used to ensure comprehensive retrieval of relevant sources. Key search terms included 'Generative AI' OR 'GenAI', 'chatbots' OR 'virtual tutors', 'education' OR 'educational technologies', 'Ubuntu' OR 'African philosophy', 'ethical design' OR 'inclusive AI' OR 'AI in Africa'. Search strings were adapted for each database's syntax and functionality. Connected Papers (Smolyansky et al., 2019) was used to track backwards and forward citations and identify additional relevant literature.

3.5.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included in the review if they focused on the use or design of GenAI chatbots in educational settings, explicitly engaged with ethical, cultural, or inclusion-related considerations, referenced or aligned with Ubuntu or African philosophical frameworks, were published between 2015 and 2025, and had the full text available in English. Exclusion criteria included articles that discussed general AI without a focus on chatbots or education, studies lacking conceptual, ethical, or contextual framing, technical papers focused solely on algorithmic or engineering aspects, and duplicate or inaccessible full-text sources.

3.5.4 Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted software package for qualitative data analysis. Relevant texts were uploaded into the software and coded inductively and deductively. The five social values informed deductive codes articulated in Poovan et al.'s (2006) Collective Fingers Theory: respect, compassion, survival or wellbeing for all, solidarity, and dignity. Inductive coding enabled the capture of emergent patterns beyond the theoretical frame. Thematic patterns were reviewed, refined, and synthesised to address the research objective and identify conceptual gaps and opportunities in the literature.

3.6 Results and Findings

For the systematic literature review exploring the potential value of the Ubuntu philosophy in guiding the design, development, and implementation of GenAI chatbots as tutors in traditional, non-Western, and other inclusive educational contexts, a total of 512 records were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. An additional 36 were identified through Connected Papers (Smolyansky et al., 2019). After removing duplicates, 420 records were screened by title and abstract. Of these, 72 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Fifty-two articles were excluded due to the absence of an Ubuntu or cultural framework ($n = 30$), a purely technical focus ($n = 15$), or not focusing on GenAI chatbots ($n = 7$). Ultimately, 20 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis.

3.6.1 Thematic Analysis: Ubuntu and Collective Finger Theory for Ethical AI in Education

The thematic analysis explored how the African philosophy of Ubuntu, particularly the Collective Fingers Theory, can serve as a guiding framework for the ethical design, development, and implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in educational settings. Five key themes, aligning with the Collective Fingers Theory, have been identified for this analysis: (1) Survival/Wellbeing of all; (2) Respect; (3) Dignity; (4) Solidarity; and (5) Compassion. See Table 3-1.

Table 3-1: Final Five Themes and Sub-themes

Main Theme	Sub-themes
Survival/Well-being of all	Holistic Development
	Addressing Disparities
	Planetary Health
Respect	Cultural Sensitivity and Decolonization
	Privacy and Autonomy
	Fairness and Bias Mitigation
Dignity	Empowerment and Agency
	Avoiding Discrimination and Exclusion
	Ethical AI Design
Solidarity	Cooperative Learning
	Communalism and Knowledge Sharing
	Decolonising IT Governance
Compassion	Supportive Learning Environments
	Personalised and Adaptive Learning
	Ethical Considerations in AI Design

3.6.2 Ubuntu and the Collective Fingers Theory

Ubuntu is an African philosophy centred on the interconnectedness of all individuals, communal well-being, and mutual humanity, often encapsulated by the phrase "I am because we are" (Wójcik, 2024). The Collective Fingers Theory, conceptualised by Mbigi and Maree (1995), further illustrates Ubuntu by positing that individual ‘fingers’ (individuals) achieve greater strength and purpose when they function collectively as a ‘fist’ (community) (Nxumalo & Mncube, 2018). This theory underscores that individual potential is best realised within a supportive communal context. The prevailing landscape of AI development, largely Western-centric, often overlooks the distinct cultural and geographical nuances of regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, thereby perpetuating existing inequalities (Wójcik, 2024). Ubuntu offers a crucial ethical framework to bridge these gaps, advocating for an inclusive approach that integrates technological advancements with deeply rooted human values and communal prosperity (Molala & Zimba, 2023).

3.6.2.1 Theme 1: Survival / Well-being of All

Ubuntu inherently prioritises the holistic well-being and survival of every individual within a community, recognising that individual flourishing is intrinsically linked to the collective good (Matahela, 2025). In the realm of GenAI in education, this principle suggests that these systems should be developed to promote the comprehensive well-being of all students, educators, and the wider community, extending beyond mere academic performance.

- ***Sub-theme: Holistic Development:***

Ubuntu pedagogy emphasises creating supportive learning environments rooted in the Ubuntu values: " ... a supportive learning environment grounded on the core values of ubuntu, such as survival, solidarity, cooperation, compassion, communalism and love, was vital for the learning of challenging academic literacy skills among English second language students " (Ngubane & Gumede, 2018, p. 248). This indicates that AI in education should be designed to foster an

environment where all students receive support, can thrive, and have their diverse needs and learning styles addressed, thereby contributing to their overall well-being.

- ***Sub-theme: Addressing Disparities:***

Discussions on ethically sound GenAI in the Global South highlight the need to design these technologies to address existing inequalities and ensure universal well-being. “Africa, unlike the European Union member countries and their Global North counterparts, does not have its own AI ethical guidelines that are contextually, economically, politically and culturally relevant to the continent” (Molala & Zimba, 2023, p. 255). GenAI in education, guided by Ubuntu, should strive to close educational gaps and provide equitable access to quality learning experiences for everyone, particularly in underserved regions.

- ***Sub-theme: Planetary Health:***

Ubuntu extends the concept of well-being to include environmental considerations. "Ubuntu, grounded in interconnectedness and communal well-being, is uniquely positioned to address climate change challenges in the Anthropocene" (Matahela, 2025, p. 168). This suggests that GenAI in education should also consider its ecological footprint and promote sustainable practices.

3.6.2.2 Theme 2: Respect

Respect, within Ubuntu, transcends mere politeness; it embodies the acknowledgement of the inherent dignity and worth of every individual and their interconnectedness within the community (Wójcik, 2024). In education, GenAI means designing systems that uphold user autonomy, cultural diversity, and privacy while actively preventing algorithmic bias (Molala & Zimba, 2023).

- ***Sub-theme: Cultural Sensitivity and Decolonisation:***

The inclusion of indigenous knowledge and games in decolonising school curricula through Ubuntu perspectives underscores the need for GenAI in education to be culturally sensitive. “Indigenous methodologies and pedagogies have almost vanished, their existence confined to distant memories of some parents and members of the community” (Nxumalo & Mncube, 2018, p. 110). “..excluding certain groups can result in a lack of representation and failure to acknowledge diverse perspectives and experiences” (Obasa, 2024, p. 3). GenAI tools should integrate local contexts and traditions, avoiding the imposition of a singular, Western-centric view of learning.

- ***Sub-theme: Privacy and Autonomy:***

Human-centric GenAI, through an Ubuntu lens, links dignity with equality and emphasizes respect for human values: “The perspective of human-centric AI (HCAI) encompasses the development of technologies that not only “augment, amplify, empower, and enhance human performance but also embrace human values” (Wójcik, 2024, p. 28). GenAI technologies are susceptible to “.. the

violation of privacy and autonomy ...existing legislations like the Protection of Personal Information Act in the South African context can be strengthened or amended to include data protection and privacy as far as AI technologies are concerned” (Molala & Zimba, 2023, p251). This implies that GenAI in education must safeguard student data privacy and empower students with agency and control over their educational journeys, serving as a tool for empowerment rather than control.

- ***Sub-theme: Fairness and Bias Mitigation:***

GenAI technologies are prone to ethical risks, such as bias (Molala & Zimba, 2023). “Vulnerable populations, including those in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), are susceptible to various biases due to existing social bias against minority groups, lack of technical capacity, and digital divide” (Obasa, 2024, p. 67). Guided by Ubuntu, GenAI in education must be developed with explicit measures to mitigate algorithmic bias, ensuring fair and equitable treatment for all students, regardless of their background. “There is a need for these technologies to be bias-free, transparent, fair and just” (Molala & Zimba, 2023, p. 248).

3.6.2.3 Theme 3: Dignity

Dignity, a fundamental tenet of Ubuntu, refers to the intrinsic worth and value of every human being (Wójcik, 2024). In the context of GenAI in education, upholding dignity entails designing GenAI systems that empower students, foster their self-worth, and prevent dehumanisation or discrimination.

- ***Sub-theme: Empowerment and Agency:***

Human-centric GenAI aims to "augment, amplify, empower, and enhance human performance" while upholding human values (Wójcik, 2024, p. 57). In education, this means GenAI should empower students through personalized support; “chatbots offer a unique solution by providing students with on-demand access to resources, information, and personalized support” (Wang & Raman, 2025, p. 33) while fostering critical thinking, “online discussion forums, simulations, and collaborative projects can all be used to foster and develop critical thinking skills in online and blended learning contexts” (Baskara, 2023, p. 54), without diminishing human interaction or the role of educators.

- ***Sub-theme: Avoiding Discrimination and Exclusion:***

Human-centric GenAI explicitly addresses inequality and social exclusion perpetuated by algorithms. “The unavailability of data concerning minorities or their stereotypical, inaccurate representation in datasets leads to unlawful discrimination by algorithms” (Wójcik, 2024, p. 25). GenAI in education must be designed to be inclusive, ensuring that no student is marginalised or disadvantaged by the technology. “African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) are seen as the

'other', and this state of affairs sadly continues to perpetuate race and class divisions in society” (Nxumalo & Mncube, 2018, p. 106).

- ***Sub-theme: Ethical AI Design:***

Ethical GenAI guidelines for traditional non-Western contexts are crucial to prevent risks like privacy and autonomy violations. “The localisation of AI ethics in the Global South can assist in curbing systematic AI ethical concerns and contribute to congruent AI ethics” (Molala & Zimba, 2023, p.76). Preserving human dignity in GenAI education requires transparent, accountable systems that do not exploit user data or manipulate learning behaviours, but instead foster a safe, respectful learning environment. “A comprehensive strategy is necessary to mitigate these biases, including a thorough evaluation of data sources, inclusive and transparent algorithm development, conscientious application of algorithmic recommendations, and ongoing oversight to adapt, correct biases, and blend technical, ethical, and equitable approaches” (Obasa, 2024, p. 2)

3.6.2.4 Theme 4: Solidarity

Solidarity within Ubuntu emphasises mutual support, interdependence, and collective responsibility for community well-being (Ngubane & Gumede, 2018). In educational GenAI, this translates to fostering collaborative learning environments, promoting knowledge sharing, and building GenAI systems that facilitate collective problem-solving and community engagement.

- ***Sub-theme: Cooperative Learning:***

A learning environment "grounded on the core values of ubuntu, such as survival, solidarity, cooperation, compassion, communalism and love, was vital for the learning of challenging academic literacy skills" (Ngubane & Gumede, 2018, p. 248). GenAI in education should facilitate cooperative learning, enabling students to learn from and support each other. “Cooperative learning argues for positive interdependence, shared learning goals, accountability and interactive environment as prerequisites for maximum learning opportunities” (Ngubane & Gumede, 2018, p. 251).

- ***Sub-theme: Communalism and Knowledge Sharing:***

The positive effect of Ubuntu's social values on team effectiveness suggests that GenAI in education could support the creation and sharing of communal knowledge, allowing students to contribute to and benefit from diverse perspectives (Poovan et al., 2006). “Learning together unifies students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds as they learn more about each other, and when they understand each other, they respect one another and find better ways of supporting one another” (Ngubane & Gumede, 2018, p. 250).

- ***Sub-theme: Decolonising IT Governance:***

An Ubuntu approach to decolonising IT governance advocates for eradicating "adverse power imbalances" (Zubler et al., 2025, p. 33). This principle of shared decision-making can be applied to GenAI in education, fostering a collaborative approach where all stakeholders have a voice in technology development and implementation. "there is a need for civic education that targets marginalised groups and communities to equip them with knowledge with which they can participate in the design and regulation of these technologies" (Molala & Zimba, 2023, p. 57).

3.6.2.5 Theme 5: Compassion

Compassion in the Ubuntu philosophy involves empathy, understanding, and a desire to alleviate others' suffering or promote their flourishing within the community (Ngubane & Gumede, 2018). In education, this implies designing GenAI systems that are empathetic, adaptable to individual needs, and supportive of students facing challenges, thereby promoting emotional intelligence and overall well-being.

- ***Sub-theme: Supportive Learning Environments:***

The "spirit of ubuntu among students created a warm and non-threatening learning environment for interaction among students and with the lecturer and to engage meaningfully with learning tasks" (Ngubane & Gumede, 2018, p. 252). GenAI in education, imbued with compassion, would contribute to such an environment by providing personalised, sensitive feedback and offering additional support to struggling students. "The ubuntu pedagogy provided opportunities for students to speak freely without fear of being laughed at as the principles of respect were owned by everyone in the classroom" (Ngubane & Gumede, 2018, p. 248).

- ***Sub-theme: Personalised and Adaptive Learning:***

GenAI systems that tailor learning experiences to individual paces, styles, and challenges, offering targeted interventions, demonstrate a form of computational compassion. "... chatbots fitted with personalised support mechanisms, adaptive learning elements, and gamified features demonstrated their efficacy in bolstering the development of critical thinking skills" (Baskara, 2023, p. 55).

- ***Sub-theme: Ethical Considerations in AI Design:***

Ethical discussions on GenAI implicitly call for compassionate GenAI systems (Wójcik, 2024). This means designing GenAI to minimise harm, respect vulnerabilities, and actively contribute to positive outcomes for all users. "It can be argued that the development of AI ethics is an exclusionary process in which the voices of end-users and consumers, mostly vulnerable people, are not reflected. Therefore, a participatory design in the development of AI ethics is highly recommended" (Molala & Zimba, 2023, p. 24)

3.7 Practical Implications

The results strongly indicate that the Ubuntu philosophy, especially through the lens of the Collective Fingers Theory, provides a robust ethical framework for the design, development, and implementation of GenAI in education. The Collective Fingers Theory reinforces the Ubuntu principle that individuals flourish within a supportive and interconnected community. For GenAI in education, this means that these tools should not isolate students or replace human interaction. Instead, they should facilitate collaboration, peer support, and collective knowledge building.

3.7.1 Potential Benefits of Applying the Ubuntu Philosophy

GenAI systems can be designed to promote group learning by encouraging students to work together on projects, share resources, and provide mutual feedback, embodying the cooperative spirit of the Collective Fingers Theory (Nxumalo & Mncube, 2018; Ògúnremí et al., 2023; Swartz & Davies, 1997).

GenAI platforms could also foster a sense of community by creating virtual learning environments where students feel connected, supported, and collectively responsible for one another's success (Baskara, 2023; Ngubane & Gumede, 2018; Poovan et al., 2006). GenAI chatbots could help recognise and value the unique contributions and learning styles of individual students in group settings, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. By integrating the core values of Survival or Wellbeing for All, Respect, Dignity, Solidarity, and Compassion, GenAI in education can transcend purely technical considerations to address the profound human and societal dimensions of learning.

3.7.2 Practical Guidelines for the Application of the Ubuntu philosophy

To apply the Ubuntu philosophy in the development, design and implementation of GenAI chatbots in education, it is important to first prioritise Human-Centric AI design. Human-centric AI design prioritises the holistic well-being of all stakeholders, ensuring that technology serves humanity (Wójcik, 2024). Secondly, equitable access and inclusivity should be facilitated by actively reducing educational inequalities and providing accessible, culturally relevant learning experiences for everyone (Molala & Zimba, 2023; Nxumalo & Mncube, 2018). Then it should be ensured that GenAI developmental processes are transparent, accountable and actively focused on mitigating biases. They should also protect users' privacy while upholding human dignity (Molala & Zimba, 2023; Wójcik, 2024). Finally, collaborative learning environments should be created by fostering community, encouraging cooperative learning and promoting empathy and mutual support among students and educators (Baskara, 2023; Ngubane & Gumede, 2018; Poovan et al., 2006).

3.8 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

Embracing Ubuntu and the Collective Fingers Theory as guiding philosophies can ensure that GenAI in education is ethically designed and implemented, fostering a more inclusive, compassionate, and effective learning ecosystem for all. The results of the study highlight a significant gap in the ethical and inclusive development of GenAI chatbots from an African philosophical perspective. While Ubuntu offers a rich, values-based framework for socially responsive technology, its application in GenAI ethics remains underdeveloped in the reviewed literature. This reflects a broader trend in educational technology research, where Western paradigms dominate ethical discourse, often overlooking relational ontologies that are more representative of traditional African contexts. The few studies that engaged with Ubuntu-like values tended to do so implicitly, through principles such as student-centredness, empathy, and communal engagement, without grounding these practices in African philosophical frameworks. This suggests a missed opportunity to create culturally resonant GenAI systems that support not only cognitive learning but also relational, social, and ethical development in line with Ubuntu's emphasis on dignity, compassion, and interconnectedness.

Several limitations should be acknowledged; Firstly, the review was restricted to English-language literature, potentially excluding relevant work in other languages. Then, while Google Scholar offers breadth, its indexing of grey literature and inconsistent filtering may have influenced the results. In addition, Ubuntu-related values were sometimes inferred from implicit descriptions rather than explicitly stated, which may have introduced interpretive bias. The findings of this study reinforce the need for further research, including participatory design and co-creation with African stakeholders. Future research should aim to develop or refine ethical design frameworks explicitly grounded in Ubuntu and African epistemologies. It is also suggested that the outcomes of Ubuntu-informed GenAI tools, including their impact on student engagement, trust, equity, and perceptions of emotional safety, be investigated. Ubuntu should also be compared with other non-Western philosophies, such as 'buen vivir' in Latin America or Asian relational ethics, to develop truly pluralistic GenAI ethics. Finally, future research should examine policy and governance structures that can support the responsible deployment of GenAI in education, aligned with regional cultural values, to build ethical GenAI systems informed by the lived realities and philosophies of the communities they intend to serve.

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Chapter 4: Africanised AI Literacy in Action: Experiential Pathways for Ethical and Equitable Higher Education

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Abstract

Purpose: This chapter advances the development of an Africanised AI literacy framework for South African higher education, grounded in experiential learning and relational ethics. While generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) presents transformative opportunities for teaching and learning, prevailing AI literacy and ethics frameworks are predominantly shaped by Global North paradigms that often overlook African epistemologies, socio-historical inequalities, and contextual realities. Drawing on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Freire's Critical Pedagogy, the chapter proposes a human-centred, values-driven model that integrates ubuntu philosophy to cultivate ethical reasoning, critical digital agency, and equitable participation in AI-enhanced higher education.

Study design/methodology/approach: The study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach through a systematic desktop review of interdisciplinary literature, policy frameworks, and pedagogical models. Approximately 60 contemporary sources (2019 onwards) and foundational theoretical texts were thematically analysed using an iterative synthesis process. Guided by constructivist and critical-theoretical lenses, the analysis interrogated dominant AI literacy narratives and mapped emergent themes onto a conceptual framework integrating experiential learning stages with ubuntu-informed ethical principles. The result is a theoretically grounded, pedagogically actionable model tailored to the South African higher education landscape.

Findings: The review identified five intersecting gaps in current AI literacy initiatives: fragmented institutional strategies, underrepresentation of African epistemologies, ethical blind spots in GenAI adoption, limited use of experiential pedagogy, and uneven institutional readiness. Existing frameworks tend to emphasise technical competence and regulatory compliance rather than relational ethics and reflective engagement. In response, the proposed framework synthesises four core dimensions: (1) experiential learning as a pedagogical foundation; (2) ubuntu as a moral anchor; (3) structured AI-mediated learning activities promoting ethical inquiry; and (4) institutional scaffolding to support equity and professional development. This multidimensional model bridges policy and practice, positioning AI literacy as both a transformative pedagogy and a social justice imperative.

Originality/value: The chapter contributes a distinctly African, relational perspective to global AI literacy discourse. By fusing experiential learning, critical pedagogy, and ubuntu ethics, it reframes AI integration as a communal, reflective, and justice-oriented educational project. The framework offers strategic guidance for curriculum design, faculty development, and policy reform in the Global South.

Keywords: AI Literacy; Experiential Learning; Ethical AI; Ubuntu; Africanisation; Higher Education; Digital Equity

4.1 Introduction and Background

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and, in particular, generative AI (GenAI) has brought profound implications for higher education institutions globally. While AI promises increased efficiency, personalised learning, and improved access to information, it also raises ethical, pedagogical, and systemic concerns. South Africa, with its unique socio-economic and historical context, must carefully navigate this technological shift to ensure that AI integration in higher education promotes equity, inclusion, and ethical engagement.

This paper argues that a values-based framework for AI literacy is urgently needed to prepare both educators and students for a future in which generative AI (GenAI) will be pervasive. Drawing on experiential learning theory and ethical pedagogies grounded in ubuntu philosophy, the framework presented herein is designed to embed ethical awareness, critical thinking, and student agency into AI literacy programmes. In doing so, it seeks to address the significant philosophical, cultural, and power imbalances between the Global North and South that currently characterise mainstream AI discourse.

The article is structured around an interdisciplinary synthesis of literature, the development of a contextualised AI literacy framework, and pedagogical strategies that leverage experiential and transformative learning. The research responds to national and institutional calls for digitally skilled graduates who are also ethically informed and socially responsible (DHET, 2020; CHE, 2021).

4.2 Context and Rationale

South African higher education operates within a complex ecosystem marked by historical inequalities, digital divides, and cultural diversity. The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has exacerbated existing gaps, particularly between resource-rich and under-resourced institutions, and between rural and urban contexts (Marwala, 2020). In this milieu, the ethical deployment of AI becomes not just a technological issue but a question of justice, access, and equity.

The global proliferation of AI-driven tools in educational settings has largely been shaped by Eurocentric values and commercial interests (Birhane, 2021; Abebe et al., 2020). These frameworks often neglect the epistemic traditions, social realities, and ethical worldviews of the Global South. For example, dominant AI ethics frameworks, such as those developed by the OECD or IEEE, are predicated on liberal individualism and Western ontologies, which do not always resonate with African communal values, such as ubuntu (Metz, 2015; Floridi, 2019).

Ubuntu, a relational philosophy that centres on interconnectedness, care, and mutual respect, offers a compelling counterbalance to Western individualist paradigms. Informed by this worldview, the AI literacy framework proposed in this study advocates for a relational ethics framework - what

Goosen and Mugumo (2024) term ‘Relational AI’ - which foregrounds human dignity, contextual relevance, and co-learning.

Additionally, South African students and lecturers are at varying levels of digital readiness, making the uniform adoption of AI tools problematic without foundational training. Recent studies indicate that while students are eager to experiment with GenAI, many lack critical awareness about its limitations, biases, and ethical implications (Mhlanga, 2023; Mutemeri, 2022). Without guided pedagogy, students may unknowingly perpetuate misinformation, rely excessively on AI, or breach academic integrity protocols.

Considering these realities, a contextualised AI literacy framework must go beyond technical competencies. It must instil a set of values, dispositions, and ethical orientations that empower students and educators to navigate the AI age critically and responsibly.

4.3 Problem Statement

Despite the rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies within global education systems, particularly in higher education, there remains a significant disparity between the AI ethics frameworks developed in the Global North and the contextual realities of institutions in the Global South. Most prevailing frameworks do not account for regional epistemologies, socio-economic inequities, and infrastructural limitations unique to South Africa and similar contexts (Berisha Qehaja, 2025; Abulibdeh et al., 2024). Additionally, many current frameworks lack the pedagogical grounding necessary to equip students and academics with ethical, practical, and transformative AI literacy.

Problem Statement: There is currently no comprehensive, ethically grounded AI literacy framework tailored to the contextual, pedagogical, and cultural needs of South African higher education institutions.

4.4 Research objectives

This study aims to foreground the design of an AI literacy framework for higher education in South Africa. The envisaged framework should be grounded in ethical pedagogy and experiential learning theory, be contextually responsive to the Global South, and be aligned with African philosophies such as ubuntu.

- To explore the limitations of existing AI literacy and ethics frameworks developed predominantly in the Global North.
- To identify the pedagogical gaps in AI integration within South African higher education curricula.
- To incorporate Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory and Freire’s Critical Pedagogy into a contextually grounded overview of AI literacy.

- To propose consideration for a human-centred, values-based framework that addresses inclusivity, digital equity, and ethical concerns relevant to the South African context.
- To promote critical engagement with AI tools that fosters academic integrity, ethical reasoning, and long-term digital fluency among students.

4.5 The structure of the paper

The introduction provides the rationale for the study and outlines the increasing relevance of AI literacy in the Global South. The literature review examines existing frameworks of AI literacy and ethics, highlighting their limited applicability to South African higher education. The theoretical framework explains the use of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Freire's Critical Pedagogy as foundational lenses for the study. The methodology outlines the qualitative approach adopted, including literature synthesis and suggestions for a framework. The results and discussion section presents suggestions for an AI literacy framework and discusses its potential applications and implications. The conclusion summarises the findings and underscores the need for Africanised, ethically sound AI integration in higher education teaching and learning.

4.6 Literature Review

A growing body of literature underscores the urgent need for robust AI literacy frameworks in higher education. These frameworks are essential not only for enhancing digital fluency but also for promoting ethical engagement and critical thinking (Long & Magerko, 2020; Walter, 2024). Several global initiatives - such as the European Commission's AI Act and the OECD's AI Principles - have attempted to provide guidelines for responsible AI use. However, these remain largely Western-centric, often ignoring epistemologies and socio-political realities of the Global South (Abebe et al., 2020; Birhane, 2021).

AI literacy, broadly defined, entails more than technical skill. It encompasses the ability to understand how AI systems work, question their outputs, assess their societal implications, and make informed ethical decisions (Tuomi, 2018; Ng, 2021). Yoshija Walter (2024) suggests that AI literacy is becoming as foundational as digital literacy in the 21st century, necessitating targeted curricula in higher education institutions. However, the ethical dimensions of AI literacy remain underexplored in practice, especially in African contexts. Scholars such as Mhlanga (2023) and Goosen and Mugumo (2024) call for intersectional and contextualised approaches to AI literacy. Mhlanga argues for the decolonisation of digital education and the inclusion of African philosophies, while Goosen and Mugumo propose a Four-Dimensional AI Education Policy Framework. These developments highlight a shifting awareness of inclusive, ethical, and locally resonant frameworks.

The integration of experiential learning into AI literacy has also gained momentum. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), with its emphasis on active engagement, reflection, and transformation, aligns well with pedagogies that seek to cultivate ethical reasoning and digital

discernment. Similarly, Freire's (1970) Critical Pedagogy insists on the development of conscientisation - an awareness of structural inequalities and the power to act upon them. Both theories provide fertile ground for reimagining AI literacy in higher education as a relational, participatory, and emancipatory practice.

Nonetheless, there remains a gap in synthesising these theories with ethical AI usage in practical classroom settings. This paper aims to address that gap by offering a framework that is both theoretically grounded and pedagogically actionable.

4.6.1 AI Literacy in Higher Education

AI literacy has rapidly emerged as a foundational competency for 21st-century learners and educators, yet its integration in higher education remains uneven. AI literacy refers not only to the technical understanding of artificial intelligence but also encompasses critical engagement, ethical reflection, and purposeful use (Long & Magerko, 2020). In the South African context, where systemic disparities continue to shape digital access, AI literacy must also consider socio-economic and linguistic diversity (van Wyk, 2024). AI literacy initiatives must be embedded within broader digital transformation strategies aligned with higher education goals of inclusion, equity, and sustainable development. The literature reveals that although AI is increasingly present in educational systems, its pedagogical application is often reactive rather than proactive (Berisha Qehaja, 2025). Universities tend to approach AI adoption from a technological perspective, with insufficient attention to human-centred, values-driven educational goals. This misalignment creates gaps between institutional readiness and educators' and students' actual needs, particularly in under-resourced contexts. The implementation of AI in education thus necessitates holistic frameworks that balance technological possibility with epistemological responsibility.

4.6.2 Ethical Challenges and Risks of Generative AI in Education

The proliferation of generative AI (GenAI) tools in education has introduced both opportunities and ethical concerns. Key among these concerns are issues of academic integrity, algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the erosion of critical thinking when students outsource cognitive labour to AI (Abulibdeh et al., 2024). While AI can personalise learning and scaffold complex content, the risk of over-reliance on generative tools poses a threat to authentic learning and ethical scholarship. The uncritical use of AI has also exposed gaps in digital policy frameworks, particularly in Global South institutions where regulatory oversight may be limited or outdated. Furthermore, GenAI raises fundamental questions about authorship, epistemic agency, and the role of the educator. With AI capable of mimicking scholarly writing and producing essays that bypass traditional plagiarism detection, educators must rethink assessment practices to foreground student reflection, synthesis, and personal voice.

A pedagogy of ethical AI use must therefore be cultivated, enabling learners to navigate digital spaces responsibly and with critical awareness (Walter, 2024). Without deliberate strategies, AI risks reproducing existing inequalities and marginalising alternative ways of knowing.

4.6.3 Global North-Global South Divides in AI Ethics and Policy

The development of global AI governance structures has been largely dominated by the Global North, resulting in ethical frameworks that prioritise individual rights, data ownership, and techno-solutionism. Such paradigms often neglect the communal, relational, and culturally embedded epistemologies of the Global South (Taylor & Broeders, 2023). For African higher education systems, there is a pressing need to interrogate and reframe these dominant narratives, ensuring that local values, languages, and social contexts are reflected in AI ethics and practice.

The literature underscores that a Global South perspective must not merely replicate Euro-American frameworks but must challenge their ontological assumptions (Chakrabarty, 2021). In contexts where ubuntu philosophy emphasises interdependence, community, and collective good, ethical AI education should be designed to serve communal aspirations rather than market-driven individualism.

This divergence in worldviews demands a contextualised, decolonial approach to AI literacy, one that affirms African intellectual traditions and dismantles asymmetrical power dynamics in global tech discourse (Mhlambi, 2024).

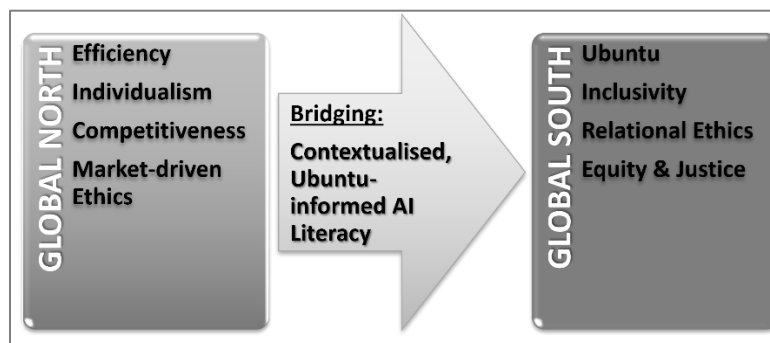


Figure 4-1: Bridging the Global North-South Divide. Source: Author’s own construction.

This diagram (Figure 4-1) contrasts Global North priorities, such as individualism, with Global South relational ethics, and contextualised, ubuntu-informed, communitarian AI literacy acting as the bridge.

4.6.4 Ubuntu and African Epistemologies in AI Governance

Ubuntu, the African philosophy of shared humanity encapsulated in the phrase ‘I am because we are’, offers a powerful ethical lens for AI integration. Unlike Western individualism, ubuntu foregrounds relational accountability, collective responsibility, and social justice (Letseka, 2012).

Within higher education, Ubuntu can serve as a framework for AI governance that prioritises inclusivity, community upliftment, and contextual sensitivity. An Ubuntu-informed AI literacy programme moves beyond technical competence to cultivate ethical sensibility, empathy, and civic agency. Incorporating African epistemologies into AI discourse also challenges the dominance of linear, rationalist, and often reductionist understandings of knowledge. African thought systems value orality, intergenerational wisdom, and embodied learning, which often stand in contrast to the algorithmic logic of AI (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

AI literacy frameworks must thus adopt a pluralist epistemological stance, enabling students and academics to engage critically and reflectively with AI tools, while resisting cultural homogenisation.

4.6.5 Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and AI Pedagogy

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which comprises four cyclical stages - concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation - offers a robust pedagogical framework for AI integration in higher education. AI tools can be strategically used to support each phase of the learning cycle: simulations and chatbots can provide concrete experiences, AI feedback systems can guide reflective prompts, and abstract conceptualisation can be scaffolded through AI-enhanced visualisation tools. When aligned with experiential learning, AI moves from a passive tool to an active co-participant in meaning-making. The literature affirms that experiential learning enhances student engagement, deepens conceptual understanding, and fosters lifelong learning competencies (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). However, integrating AI into this cycle demands critical oversight to ensure that the learning remains learner-driven and ethically grounded.

The experiential framework provides an antidote to the mechanistic deployment of AI, fostering reflective practitioners who can apply AI tools judiciously in real-world contexts.

4.6.6 Freirean Critical Pedagogy and AI Literacy

Freire's (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed positions education as a liberatory act, rooted in dialogue, critical consciousness, and resistance to oppressive systems. Applied to AI literacy, this pedagogy challenges the passive consumption of algorithmic outputs and instead promotes dialogic engagement with technology. Students become co-creators of knowledge, capable of questioning the assumptions, intentions, and biases embedded within AI systems. The infusion of Freirean principles into AI pedagogy shifts the emphasis from functional use to critical interrogation. Educators are called to demystify AI's workings, reveal its ideological underpinnings, and empower students to become ethical actors in the digital sphere (Selwyn, 2019).

In South African classrooms, this approach resonates strongly with post-apartheid commitments to equity, transformation, and curriculum decolonisation. AI literacy, viewed through this lens, is not merely a skill but a site of social and political agency.

4.6.7 Human-Centred and Values-Driven AI in Education

The call for human-centred AI in education is grounded in the belief that technological systems must serve human advancement rather than simply instrumental efficiency. Human-centred AI design involves empathy, ethical alignment, and stakeholder co-design, prioritising inclusivity and accessibility (OECD, 2021). In the educational context, this translates into AI systems that respond to diverse learner needs, respect cultural identities, and enhance pedagogical relationships rather than replacing them. Values-driven AI literacy ensures that learners understand not only what AI can do but also what it ought to do. This normative dimension of AI education is critical in an era where technological determinism often overshadows ethical deliberation.

The South African higher education sector, committed to transformation and social justice, must develop frameworks that embed human dignity, equality, and ecological sustainability into AI pedagogies (van Wyk, 2024). A values-based approach offers a moral compass for navigating an AI-saturated academic future.

4.6.8 Institutional Readiness and Professional Development for AI Integration

Successful AI integration requires institutional readiness at multiple levels: infrastructure, leadership vision, academic policy, and staff development. Current research highlights significant gaps in professional development opportunities for lecturers, many of whom lack confidence and conceptual clarity about AI (Goosen & Mugumo, 2024). This lack of preparedness undermines the pedagogical potential of AI and exacerbates inequities between well-resourced and marginalised institutions. Professional learning programmes must be contextually responsive and grounded in educators' lived realities. Rather than top-down compliance training, institutions should foster communities of practice, peer mentoring, and ongoing collaborative experimentation with AI tools.

Importantly, institutional support must extend to policy development, ethical guidelines, and curriculum design. Only when faculty feel empowered, resourced, and ethically supported can AI be integrated meaningfully into transformative teaching and learning.

4.6.9 Conceptual and Theoretical Underpinnings

This study draws on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (1984) and Freire's Critical Pedagogy (1970) as foundational lenses for conceptualising an AI literacy framework that is both ethically responsive and pedagogically sound. Kolb's ELT defines learning as a continuous, cyclical process comprising four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This process-based framework supports the

integration of AI tools in education not as static content-delivery mechanisms, but as catalysts for dynamic, iterative engagement that aligns with how students learn (Kolb, 1984). Freire’s pedagogy, meanwhile, demands a rethinking of how knowledge is constructed, emphasising the need for dialogue, emancipation, and a conscious rejection of education as a passive or neutral act (Freire, 1970). Together, these theories provide the conceptual scaffolding for a student-centred, ethically grounded framework for the use of AI in higher education.

Kolb’s learning cycle can be directly applied to the practice of AI literacy in the classroom. A student might, for example, use a generative AI tool like ChatGPT to produce a preliminary draft of an idea (concrete experience), then reflect on potential biases or inaccuracies (reflective observation), study the limitations or affordances of the AI framework (abstract conceptualisation), and finally revise their inputs or engage a new AI platform with deeper understanding (active experimentation). This cycle not only promotes practical digital engagement but also develops critical thinking, problem-solving, and agency among learners (Kolb, 1984).

In contrast, Freire’s Critical Pedagogy frames the use of technology as a deeply political act. He argues that education is either a tool for liberation or an instrument of oppression (Freire, 1970), prompting educators to ask: Who designs these AI systems? Whose perspectives are embedded in their code? Who benefits from their deployment? These questions are especially pertinent in the face of structural inequities and algorithmic bias, issues well-documented by scholars such as Benjamin (2019) and Noble (2018). Freire’s insistence on dialogical learning, co-construction of knowledge, and the cultivation of critical consciousness ensures that students do not merely consume AI outputs but interrogate and reshape their interactions with these tools as part of a broader struggle for justice and equity.

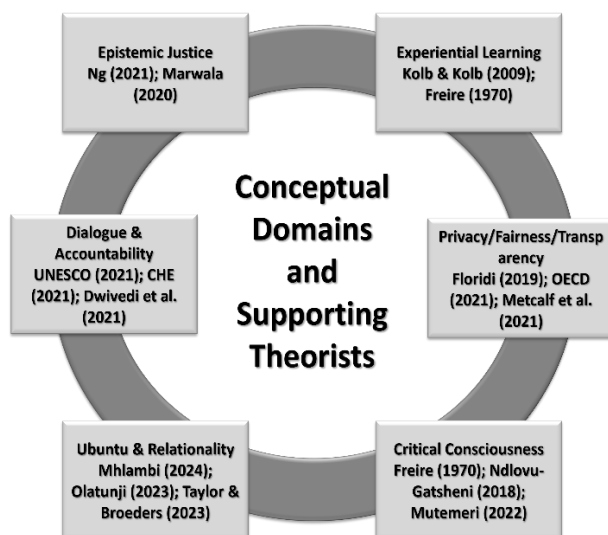


Figure 4-2: Conceptual Domains with Supporting Theorists. Source: Author’s own construction.

The diagram (Figure 4-2) offers clarity on the conceptual domains informing this research.

Bringing these frameworks into the dialogue, the study proposes consideration for a hybridised AI literacy framework that is experiential, ethical, and contextually anchored. While Kolb offers the pedagogical mechanism for cyclic, applied learning, Freire ensures that this engagement remains alert to issues of power, voice, and representation. Furthermore, by incorporating Ubuntu as a guiding ethical principle, the envisioned framework advances a relational framework of AI engagement - one that values human dignity, care, and mutual responsibility (Metz, 2015). This African philosophical grounding transforms the envisaged framework from a mere pedagogical tool into a relational ethic of practice for AI in higher education.

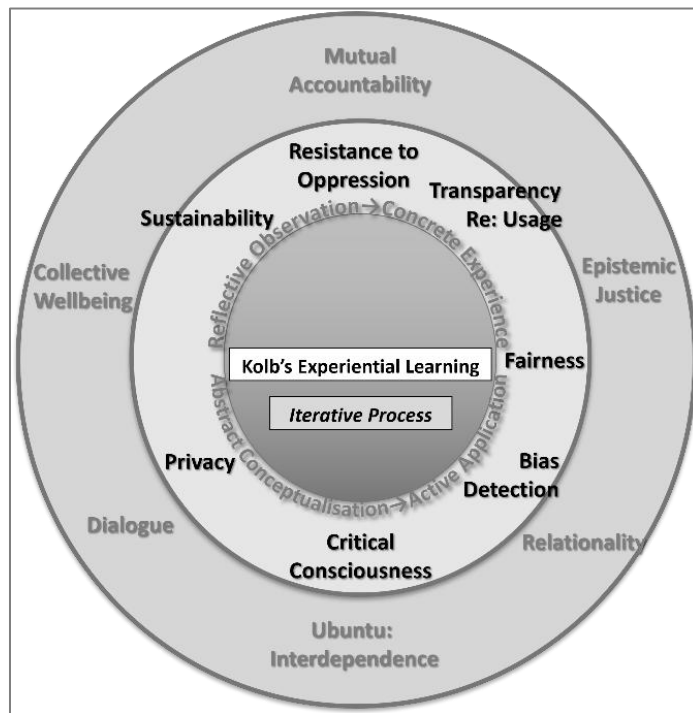


Figure 4-3: Integrated Ethical AI Literacy Framework. Source: Author's own construction.

The diagram (Figure 4-3) is centred on Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT)(1984), overlaid with ethical anchoring and encircled by ubuntu values (Letseka, 2012). As an iterative process, it suggests incremental growth and development in a communitarian environment.

4.7 Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, interpretivist approach within a constructivist and critical-theoretical framework to conceptualise an ethical, inclusive AI literacy model for higher education. Rather than collecting empirical data, the study conducted a systematic desktop review of interdisciplinary literature, policy frameworks, and pedagogical models to synthesise theoretical insights into a cohesive framework. This approach is particularly suited to explorative, theory-building research aimed at generating conceptual models rather than testing hypotheses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The analysis foregrounded the intersection of ethical and pedagogical discourses in AI literacy and examined how these ideas can be recontextualised for the South African higher education landscape. The framework was iteratively developed through critical interpretation, thematic coding, and reflective integration of insights drawn from both global and local sources, as well as professional dialogue with educators. These steps ensured that the conceptual synthesis was both theoretically grounded and practically relevant.

4.7.1 Research Paradigm and Approach

This study is situated within a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that knowledge is socially constructed, value-laden, and contextually mediated (Mertens, 2015). The constructivist stance enabled the identification of how educational stakeholders interpret AI’s role in teaching and learning, while the interpretivist orientation facilitated deep engagement with texts, frameworks, and policies to uncover patterns, assumptions, and ethical positions within the literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Guided by a critical-theoretical lens, the study interrogated how existing AI literacy narratives reflect power dynamics and epistemic hierarchies, particularly those that privilege Global North perspectives. Through synthesis rather than data collection, the paper proposed a new framework that integrates Ubuntu ethics, experiential learning theory, and critical pedagogy into AI literacy discourse for the Global South. The methodology thus prioritised interpretation, reflexivity, and theoretical integration over empirical generalisation.

4.7.2 Data Sources and Scope

The review was underpinned by a systematic, multi-stage process designed to ensure both breadth and rigour:

Source Identification and Selection - Approximately 60 primary and secondary sources were purposively sampled, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, government documents, institutional strategy reports, and AI ethics guidelines from 2019 onwards. Foundational texts (e.g., Kolb, Freire, and Letseka) were included to provide theoretical depth. Inclusion criteria prioritised works addressing AI literacy, experiential learning, ethical pedagogy, digital equity, and African epistemologies. Searches were conducted across databases such as Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar using keywords such as “AI literacy,” “ethical AI education,” “ubuntu,” “experiential learning,” and “higher education South Africa.”

Thematic Analysis and Synthesis: Following Braun and Clarke’s (2019) model, sources were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and conceptual linkages. Themes such as policy-practice gaps, ethical blind spots, institutional readiness, and Africanised digital ethics were clustered and compared across contexts. The synthesis then traced how these clusters could logically inform pedagogical design and policy reform.

Dialogues and Reflective Inputs: Insights from prior professional workshops and reflective teaching dialogues with South African lecturers were integrated as secondary interpretive data. These engagements did not constitute empirical interviews but served as reflexive triangulation, helping validate the relevance of the literature to actual classroom and institutional experiences. They also illuminated how theoretical constructs might translate into practical curriculum interventions.

Framework Construction: The emergent themes were mapped onto a conceptual model aligning experiential learning stages (Kolb, 1984) with ubuntu-based ethical principles. This iterative mapping process enabled theoretical ideas to be operationalised into pedagogical components, forming the backbone of the proposed AI literacy framework.

4.7.3 Limitations of the Methodology

As a non-empirical conceptual study, this research is limited by its dependence on secondary data and interpretive synthesis. While the inclusion of interdisciplinary and cross-continental sources broadens the scope, it may not fully capture the lived realities of all institutions or educators. The participatory dialogues were limited in scale and reflective rather than data-generative, thus offering indicative rather than generalisable insights.

In addition, the absence of quantitative validation constrains claims of efficacy; the proposed framework remains theoretical until it is empirically tested across diverse higher education contexts. Nonetheless, the interpretive design allows for deep theoretical insight and contextual alignment, laying a robust foundation for subsequent empirical validation. These limitations are acknowledged and further addressed in the concluding section of this paper.

4.8 Results and Findings

The desktop literature review revealed intersecting themes underscoring the urgent need for a context-sensitive, values-driven framework for AI literacy in South African higher education. Although enthusiasm for AI integration is growing, most institutions lack coherent strategies that connect ethical reflection, pedagogical innovation, and institutional readiness. Five dominant patterns emerged from the review, each informing the proposed framework for ethical and inclusive AI literacy.

4.8.1 Fragmented AI Literacy Landscapes

While global and national AI initiatives - such as UNESCO's AI Competency Framework for Educators (2021) and South Africa's National Artificial Intelligence Institute (DTIC, 2022) - have accelerated awareness, they remain predominantly technical and compliance-oriented. These frameworks seldom address classroom realities or pedagogical depth, resulting in fragmented adoption. Universities often implement AI tools without supporting educators through policy

alignment, staff development, or digital equity measures, leaving a disjunction between policy ambition and teaching practice.

4.8.2 Underrepresentation of African Epistemologies and Contexts

Most AI literacy models reflect Eurocentric values of autonomy and rational efficiency (Floridi et al., 2018), overlooking communal philosophies that emphasise interdependence and collective wellbeing. Emerging African scholarship (Chigona, 2023; Olatunji, 2023; van Wyk, 2024) advocates for epistemic inclusion through decolonised digital pedagogy, yet these ideas remain peripheral to institutional curricula. The absence of indigenous ethics such as ubuntu perpetuates a reliance on imported frameworks that inadequately capture the socio-historical and linguistic complexity of South African classrooms.

4.8.3 Ethical Blind Spots in AI Adoption in Education

The rapid uptake of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT has outpaced the development of ethical guidelines and educator training (Abulibdeh et al., 2024; Walter, 2024). Risks include plagiarism, over-reliance, and the erosion of academic integrity (Williamson & Eynon, 2020). Current institutional responses tend to be regulatory rather than developmental, focusing on detection rather than dialogue. Few examples exist of experiential tasks that enable students to interrogate AI bias or engage ethically with algorithmic systems. This gap underscores the need for pedagogically grounded interventions that cultivate critical digital agency.

4.8.4 Experiential Learning as a Missing Pedagogical Link

Despite recognition of AI's transformative potential, experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) remains underutilised in AI literacy initiatives. Prevailing approaches prioritise skill acquisition or policy oversight rather than the iterative processes of experience, reflection, and experimentation. Embedding experiential learning could bridge linguistic and socio-economic divides by situating AI use within authentic, collaborative, and problem-based activities. Such pedagogy transforms students from passive consumers of AI output into reflective co-creators of knowledge, nurturing ethical reasoning alongside technical competence.

4.8.5 Institutional Readiness and Pedagogical Capacity Are Uneven

Institutional preparedness for AI integration varies considerably. While some universities pilot innovative digital literacy programmes, others face infrastructure and training shortfalls (Goosen & Mugumo, 2024). Many lecturers report uncertainty about integrating AI meaningfully or assessing its outputs, revealing the need for sustained professional learning. Building cross-disciplinary communities of practice can strengthen collective confidence and help ensure that ethical, experiential AI engagement remains the preserve of individual champions. Leadership support and equitable access to technology are essential for systemic impact.

4.8.6 Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Practice

Across these findings, a unifying insight emerges: the need to embed ubuntu - with its emphasis on relational ethics, shared humanity, and social justice - into AI literacy pedagogy. Grounding AI education in Ubuntu provides both a moral compass and a practical guide for fostering empathy, accountability, and inclusivity. When combined with Kolb's experiential learning cycle, ubuntu offers a pedagogical pathway for students and educators to interrogate bias, reflect on ethical dilemmas, and co-construct meaningful, culturally situated learning experiences.

The synthesis of these themes culminates in a proposed multi-dimensional framework integrating four core dimensions: (1) experiential learning as a pedagogical foundation, (2) ubuntu ethics as a moral anchor, (3) structured AI-based learning activities promoting reflection and creativity, and (4) institutional scaffolding that sustains equitable access and professional capacity. Together, these dimensions form the conceptual bridge between policy aspirations and classroom realities, positioning ethical AI literacy as both a transformative pedagogy and a strategic imperative for South African higher education.

4.8.7 A Call for Africanised, Relational Ethics

The dominance of Eurocentric ethical frameworks in global AI governance has been widely critiqued for sidelining indigenous knowledge systems and relational worldviews (Olatunji, 2023; Metcalf et al., 2021). In South Africa, where social justice, historical redress, and inclusivity are enduring imperatives, there is a compelling need to embed African philosophical traditions into digital literacy and AI education.

Ubuntu, encapsulated in the maxim "I am because we are," provides a relational ethic that foregrounds interconnectedness, compassion, and shared responsibility. Grounding AI literacy in ubuntu-centred pedagogy reframes technological engagement as a collective act of care rather than an individual exercise in efficiency. It encourages educators and students to interrogate bias, uphold dignity, and co-create knowledge through empathy and accountability. Such an approach not only resists algorithmic discrimination and epistemic exclusion but also repositions AI as a means of communal flourishing and epistemic justice - an enabler of human development aligned with African values.

4.8.8 Experiential Learning as a Transformative Pedagogical Strategy

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) offers a robust pedagogical foundation for developing ethical AI literacy. Its iterative cycle - experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation - mirrors the dynamic process through which educators and students engage critically with evolving technologies. By applying experiential principles, AI literacy moves beyond technical skill acquisition toward active inquiry and meaning making.

Through experiential learning, students become participants rather than passive consumers, engaging AI tools to explore, critique, and refine their understanding. Structured activities such as analysing AI prompts, co-authoring with generative models, and moderating AI-generated outputs enable them to encounter ethical dilemmas firsthand and practise decision-making rooted in fairness, transparency, and accountability (Walter, 2024). Embedding reflective and experiential tasks within courses therefore cultivates both higher-order thinking and ethical reasoning - key competencies for responsible participation in a digital society.

4.8.9 Capacity Building for Lecturers and Institutional Alignment

The success of any AI literacy framework hinges on the preparedness of lecturers and institutional systems. The findings indicate that many academics feel under-equipped to meaningfully and ethically integrate AI tools into their teaching. This underscores the need for structured professional development that empowers lecturers to adopt, critique, and model responsible use of AI.

Cross-disciplinary communities of practice can play a vital role in building shared capacity, fostering collaboration, and sustaining reflective dialogue. Institutional leaders must complement this by aligning policy, infrastructure, and support systems with pedagogical objectives. As Goosen and Mugumo (2024) note, effective AI education extends beyond hardware and connectivity - it requires curriculum redesign, assessment innovation, and faculty engagement grounded in ethical awareness.

Establishing clear ethical guidelines, AI-use policies, and integrity safeguards will ensure that technological adoption supports rather than undermines academic values. Without this institutional scaffolding, educators and students risk oscillating between resistance and uncritical adoption - both of which constrain equitable and sustainable AI integration.

4.8.10 Towards an Integrated Framework for Ethical AI Literacy

Responding to these insights, the proposed AI literacy framework synthesises four interconnected dimensions:

- Pedagogical grounding in experiential learning: promoting inquiry, reflection, and adaptation.
- Ethical anchoring in Ubuntu and critical pedagogy: ensuring that AI use embodies social justice, empathy, and collective responsibility.
- Practical integration of AI tools through structured learning activities: facilitating applied, context-relevant engagement.
- Institutional scaffolding for sustainability: encompassing leadership support, professional development, and equitable access.

This multidimensional approach is designed to be adaptable across varied higher education contexts while remaining rooted in South Africa’s socio-cultural realities. It challenges deficit-based narratives that portray students as digitally illiterate or morally vulnerable, instead positioning them as capable, critical co-creators of knowledge.

The framework aligns with global imperatives to reimagine education for the digital age, as articulated in UNESCO’s Futures of Education report (UNESCO, 2021), yet resists homogenising Western ethics by asserting a relational, Africanised alternative. Through the convergence of pedagogy, ethics, practice, and institutional support, it advances a vision of ethical AI literacy as both a transformative pedagogy and a foundation for inclusive, future-oriented higher education.

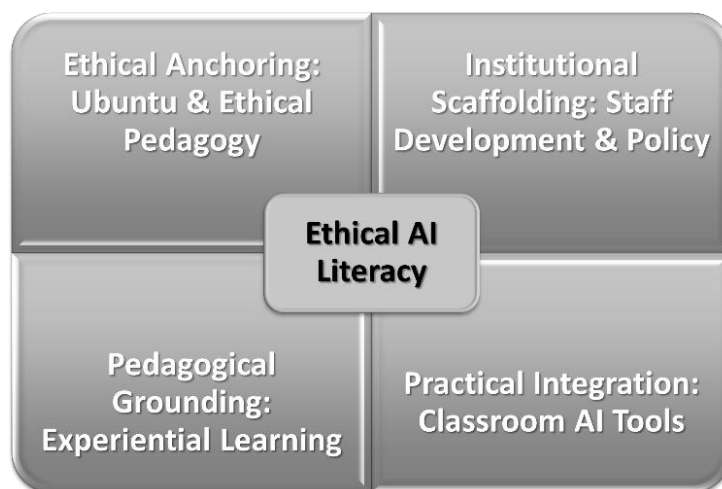


Figure 4-4: Dimensions of AI Literacy in HE. Source: Author’s own construction.

The four interlinked dimensions converge on Ethical AI Literacy (Figure 4-4), illustrating how pedagogy, ethics, practice, and institutional scaffolding integrate to foster responsible, equitable, and human-centred engagement with AI.

Collectively, these findings reveal both the promise and uncertainty of AI integration within South African higher education. The literature underscores that without deliberate pedagogical anchoring, ethical guidance, and institutional capacity building, AI adoption risks reinforcing inequality and superficial innovation. Conversely, by embedding Ubuntu-centred ethics and experiential learning within AI literacy initiatives, universities can transform these challenges into opportunities for inclusive, reflective, and contextually grounded teaching practice. The following discussion interprets these findings in practical terms, highlighting how ethical, pedagogical, and institutional dimensions can interact to foster a humanised and sustainable approach to AI in education.

4.9 Discussion

The findings underscore the need for a locally grounded and ethically responsive AI literacy framework that reflects the social, pedagogical, and infrastructural realities of South African higher education. While AI offers possibilities for innovation, efficiency, and personalised learning (Luckin, 2018; Holmes et al., 2021), its adoption often outpaces ethical reflection and pedagogical design (Selwyn, 2019; Knox, 2020). Over-reliance on generative tools risks diminishing students' agency, critical thinking, and academic integrity (Berisha Qehaja, 2025; Williamson & Eynon, 2020), particularly within contexts marked by digital inequality and uneven access to technological resources (Gillwald et al., 2019; Prinsloo, 2020).

To mitigate these challenges, universities must approach AI not as a neutral or purely technical instrument, but as a socio-technical ecosystem shaped by human values and institutional cultures (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). This requires deliberate pedagogical strategies that align technological use with educational purpose. Embedding AI literacy within experiential and reflective learning processes can cultivate critical awareness and ethical decision-making. Such integration encourages students to interrogate algorithmic bias, assess the credibility of AI outputs, and apply creative judgement within authentic learning contexts - key components of a constructivist, inquiry-driven approach.

Institutional readiness also emerges as a pivotal concern. Lecturers need targeted professional development to navigate the pedagogical implications of AI and to model ethical, transparent practice in their classrooms. Building communities of practice across faculties can foster shared experimentation and ongoing reflection, ensuring that AI implementation strengthens rather than supplants human judgement. Simultaneously, leadership structures should prioritise digital equity, ensuring that policy, infrastructure, and support systems enable inclusive participation for all students and staff.

Within this broader ecosystem, Ubuntu provides a normative anchor for ethical AI engagement. As a philosophy centred on relationality, care, and mutual accountability (Metz, 2015; Letseka, 2012), ubuntu reframes AI not as a mechanism of efficiency or surveillance, but as a collaborative space for the creation of shared knowledge. In practice, it can inform classroom dialogue, assessment design, and institutional policy, encouraging empathy, fairness, and collective responsibility in digital teaching and learning.

In synthesising these elements, the discussion positions AI literacy as a dynamic interplay between pedagogy, ethics, and institutional culture. When guided by experiential learning and ubuntu ethics, AI integration can move beyond compliance and risk management toward transformative, human-centred education.

4.10 Practical Teaching and Learning Implications

The implications of this study suggest that national and institutional policies must be restructured to explicitly embed AI literacy within academic programmes, prioritising experiential and ethical learning. Policymakers must move beyond compliance and commercialisation towards cultivating digital resilience and human-centred learning environments. Faculty development programmes should be established to train educators in prompt engineering, AI tool evaluation, and ethical use. Additionally, students should be equipped with the competencies to critically interrogate AI outputs, applying Freirean praxis in their engagements with machine-generated knowledge. The ethical AI literacy framework proposed offers a pathway for institutions to address not only the 'how' of AI integration, but the 'why' - ensuring AI serves humanity and not the other way around.

4.11 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

4.11.1 Conclusion and Implications

This study has explored the pressing need for an ethical, inclusive, and pedagogically grounded AI literacy framework in South African higher education. Grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Freire's Critical Pedagogy, it reconceptualises AI literacy as a relational, reflective, and value-based process rather than a technical skillset.

Existing global frameworks, though valuable, often overlook the social, ethical, and historical dimensions that shape South Africa's educational landscape. The proposed Ubuntu-informed framework addresses this gap by integrating experiential learning with a decolonial, humanising ethic. It positions AI literacy as a co-constructed journey that promotes communal responsibility, ethical reflection, and critical engagement with technology.



Figure 4-5: Pathway for Student AI Literacy Development. Source: Author's own construction

The model (Figure 4-5) outlines a progression from foundational digital competence toward collaboration, ethical practice, and responsible innovation, centred on human agency and collective well-being.

4.11.1.1 Implications for Policy and Practice

At the institutional level, universities must invest in professional development to build educators' capacity and confidence to use AI tools ethically. Creating communities of practice can facilitate shared experimentation and sustained reflection. Curriculum design should embed AI literacy outcomes across programmes through interactive and experiential activities that encourage ethical reasoning and creative problem-solving. AI tasks should explicitly address bias, misinformation, and academic integrity to foster a culture of responsible digital participation.

At the national level, policy frameworks must avoid simply replicating Global North models. Instead, they should anchor ethical guidance in Ubuntu and indigenous knowledge systems to ensure contextual relevance, equity, and inclusivity within South African higher education.

4.11.2 Limitations of the Study

This paper presents a conceptual framework rather than tested empirical findings. While theoretically robust, the framework's effectiveness remains unverified in practice. The absence of first-hand perspectives from students, lecturers, and institutional leaders limits insight into contextual realities such as linguistic diversity and uneven digital access.

The framework's geographic and pedagogical focus narrows its transferability to different global contexts. Additionally, it excludes broader institutional systems, such as research governance and administration. Given the pace of AI innovation (Walter, 2024; Berisha Qehaja, 2025), the framework must remain adaptable, evolving through continued evaluation and iterative refinement.

4.12 Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should empirically validate the proposed framework across diverse higher education institutions. Pilot projects integrating the model into curricula can assess its influence on ethical reasoning, student engagement, and digital fluency. Participatory and qualitative methodologies - focus groups, interviews, and classroom-based research - would enable a deeper understanding of user experiences and institutional readiness.

Comparative and longitudinal studies could explore how AI literacy evolves across disciplines and over time, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Collaborative research among educators, ethicists, technologists, and policymakers would help strengthen both the credibility and scalability of the framework.

4.13 Conclusion

This paper advances a values-driven, Africanised vision of AI literacy that fuses experiential learning with ubuntu ethics. By reframing AI as a catalyst for transformative and justice-oriented education, it challenges universities to humanise technology through empathy, equity, and critical reflection. South African higher education is uniquely positioned to lead this shift by modelling how ethical and inclusive AI practices can bridge digital divides and sustain academic integrity.

In essence, an Ubuntu-informed AI literacy framework is not only an educational innovation in the age of intelligence but also a moral and philosophical commitment to shaping a more humane and equitable digital future.

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Chapter 5: Institutional Capital as a Catalyst for Transforming Private Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Purpose: This chapter investigates how institutional capital can function as a strategic catalyst for transforming and strengthening the competitiveness and sustainability of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa. Operating within a highly regulated and competitive environment, PHEIs must balance academic integrity, financial sustainability, regulatory compliance, and stakeholder expectations. The study seeks to identify and prioritise the key drivers of institutional capital that most significantly influence institutional performance, long-term viability, and strategic positioning within the higher education sector.

Study design/methodology/approach: A pragmatic mixed-methods design was employed. The qualitative phase engaged 30 senior experts in higher education leadership to identify critical performance indicators (KPIs) associated with institutional capital. These indicators were synthesised into a structured framework. In the quantitative phase, 100 experts ranked the identified KPIs using the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) to determine relative importance and priority weights. This dual-phase approach enabled both exploratory identification and structured prioritisation of institutional capital drivers.

Findings: The study identified eleven interrelated institutional capital drivers. Among these, institutional leadership, alignment with industry, technology integration, and a positive institutional culture were ranked as the most significant contributors to performance. The findings demonstrate that institutional effectiveness in PHEIs is multidimensional, extending beyond financial capital to include human capital, structural systems, relational networks, governance capability, innovation capacity, and regulatory alignment. Leadership emerged as the integrative force that aligned academic excellence with business sustainability, while industry partnerships and technology were critical to maintaining relevance and competitiveness.

Originality/value: The chapter contributes an integrated, KPI-driven institutional capital framework tailored to PHEIs in emerging economies. By combining expert consensus with AHP prioritisation, it offers both conceptual clarity and practical guidance for strategic planning. The framework provides institutional leaders and policymakers with a measurable, multidimensional roadmap for enhancing resilience, differentiation, and sustainable transformation in private higher education.

Keywords: Institutional Capital; Private Higher Education; Strategic Leadership; Performance Indicators; Analytical Hierarchy Process; Higher Education Transformation

5.1 Introduction

Over the past three decades, higher education globally has faced enormous challenges regarding its accountability to various stakeholders. These include government, regulating authorities, industry, society, and students as concerned clients. These challenges have ranged from the increased demand for access to higher education (Stander & Herman, 2017) to the exponential growth in emerging technologies (Du Toit & Verhoef, 2018; Eager & Brunton, 2023). Higher

education institutions (HEIs) require visionary leadership and good governance to ensure their sustainability and to provide adequate responses to external environmental demands (Kok & McDonald, 2017; Welch, 2020).

The challenges HEIs face are exacerbated by increased competition among HEIs worldwide (Kok & McDonald, 2017; O’Leary & Wood, 2019), low-quality education (Bloch et al., 2021), and poor customer service (Khoo et al., 2016; Kruja et al., 2021). Challenges of sustainability (Pramjeeth et al., 2023) and difficulties in the acquisition and retention of talented academic staff, highlighted by Musakuro and De Klerk (2021), have further compounded the challenges.

In South Africa, HEIs face the issue of decolonisation of the curriculum (Bawa, 2019) and limited state funding (Bawa, 2019; Cheah et al., 2023; Musundire & Mumanyi, 2020). Limited state funding has severely impacted many potential learners' ability to pursue higher education. Additional pressing issues arose from changing societal expectations of HEIs' educational outcomes (Cheah et al., 2023). These expectations include the expectation that HEIs produce employable graduates able to compete in today’s limited and selective job market (Hernandez-Diaz & Escobar-Sierra, 2020)

5.2 Background

The continued demand for HE in South Africa, coupled with the government’s inability to meet it, led to the establishment of PHEIs (Bezuidenhout & De Jager, 2014). This was further driven by the state’s decline in funding for public HEIs (Badat, 2016; Hadji & Osunkunle, 2020; Maharaj, 2016). During the latter part of the 1990s, when the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (DHET, 1997) enabled PHEIs to offer degrees and diplomas, various new PHEIs were established, including those from abroad.

In 2021, PHEIs enrolled 232,915 students, an increase of 126% from 2011’s 103,036 students (Sithole, 2024). PHEIs account for around 18% of total student enrolment in South Africa (SAPHE, 2023). This demonstrates the greater demand for HEIs that public HEIs may not be able to meet and, in part, explains the popularity of PHEIs. Sithole (2024) indicates that an increasing number of students prefer PHEIs. According to South African Private Higher Education (SAPHE) (2023), an organisation dedicated to high-quality education in PHEIs, these institutions now garner around 18% of total student enrolment in South Africa. This growth has also significantly contributed to employment, as PHEIs currently employ approximately 15,857 people (Sithole, 2024).

As expected, the growth in the PHE sector has intensified competition in this space, coupled with the likelihood of more discerning customers who demand high-quality service and the prospect of their qualifications leading to employment (Bezuidenhout & De Jager, 2014). Bezuidenhout and De Jager (2014) indicate that students, as discerning customers, select service providers based on their value proposition, which encompasses sustainability driven by technology and high-quality

service and people, which, in combination, are a crucial catalyst for greater economic growth, social justice, the reduction of poverty and inequality, and an increase in revenue and competitiveness of the South African economy (Bekezela, 2018).

A 2016 publication by the CHE highlighted that PHEIs in South Africa are perceived to deliver programmes of questionable quality to maximise profits (Tankouepse Nukunah et al., 2019). It seems that PHEIs' business models are under the magnifying glass, with concerns about whether quality education and profit can be harmonised.

5.3 Problem Statement

De Jager et al. (2017) found that several PHEIs in South Africa rely on financial accounting indicators and frameworks to assess institutional performance. However, these frameworks fail to capture a multidimensional view of performance, particularly across different organisational levels (Al-Zwyalif, 2012; Ashraf & Javed, 2012; De Wet & De Jager, 2011; Martin & Sauvageot, 2011; Umayal Karpagam & Suganthi, 2012). Such indicators primarily focus on financial sustainability, neglecting academic quality, student satisfaction, and operational efficiency, which are critical to comprehensive performance management (Al-Zwyalif, 2012; Beard, 2009; Cronje & Vermaak, 2004). Al-Zwyalif (2012), Beard (2009), and Cronje and Vermaak (2004) further indicate that financial performance measurements and indicators alone are not sufficient to measure organisational performance, as financial data are historical and lack predictive ability, evident in financial performance indicators being referred to as "lagging indicators" (Drtina Gilbert & Alon, 2007, p. 4). While a business must be profitable to survive in the long run, other, non-financial indicators could also enhance profitability (Butler, 2017).

5.4 Research objectives

The article aims to identify key performance indicators for institutional capital that can drive the competitiveness and transformation of PHEIs.

5.5 Literature Review

Rapid growth in information technology and globalisation (Nadeau, 2017; Xing & Marwala, 2017), as well as pressure to improve the quality of education and a greater demand for accountability (Altbach, 2004; Richardson & Martinez, 2009), have significantly impacted how HEIs worldwide operate. AbuMezied (2016) and Xing and Marwala (2017) argue that these challenges have pushed HEIs into a highly competitive business environment in which efficiency and performance are essential to sustainability. This move has pressured HEIs to be characterised by excellence, relevance, and cost efficiency, to demonstrate their accountability to various stakeholders.

These challenges have necessitated that HEIs adopt new strategies in management, principles, processes, and methods to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of these institutions (Ruževičius & Serafinas, 2011; Vauterin et al., 2011). It requires defined goals and focuses on performance tracking and assessment (Al-Zwyalif, 2012; Asan & Tanyaş, 2007). Strategic planning, management, and performance tracking have become essential for HEIs to remain competitive and build sustainability.

5.5.1 Organisation Strategy and Performance

Hitt et al. (2017) postulate that organisations function in an extremely complex environment that requires flexibility and innovation to respond to these changes effectively and efficiently. Reference is often made on public platforms and in the literature to the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment in which organisations function. The VUCA concept was evident in the COVID-19 pandemic, which required organisations around the globe to fundamentally change their working methods, procedures, policies, and management styles to be driven by technology. Regarding academic institutions, Venusita and Dyani (2018) state that academic performance is also strongly influenced by globalisation, disruptive technologies, and the availability of services, all of which affect the institution's ability to achieve its desired outcomes.

It is generally acknowledged that businesses utilise resources to create products and services with a profit motive, aiming to ensure they are competitive and sustainable. The resource-based view complements the human capital theory (Becker, 1964), and Schultz (1961) in emphasising the strategic importance of internal resources, both tangible and intangible, in achieving a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). PHEIs operate in an increasingly competitive and resource-constrained environment, making it essential to leverage their unique institutional capabilities, including leadership, intellectual capital, brand reputation, and technological infrastructure. The resource-based view was thus considered relevant to the present study's aim of identifying performance metrics that capture the contribution of these internal resources to overall institutional effectiveness.

Most HEIs in South Africa seem to grapple with planning for future needs and growth, given its limited resources and constant changes in the external environment. However, HEIs still prioritise strategic planning as an important tool for navigating the challenges posed by internal and external environments (Davis et al., 2016; Nguyen & Frazee, 2009). Besides external and internal challenges, it is important to understand that PHEIs in South Africa operate in a harsh regulatory environment set by the DHET. For example, all new educational programmes are regulated by the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (DHET, 1997). Hilton (2012) postulates that a HEI's strategy should, at a minimum, address issues such as enrolment goals, relevant academic programmes, progressive educational initiatives, pedagogy enhancement, supporting facilities, staffing levels,

and training and development for all staff. These strategies must be complemented by the goals and innovations outlined in departmental plans that support them (Smith, 2012).

5.5.2 Organisational Quality and Performance

Organisational performance cannot be adequately debated without reference to quality. Sandrita Adomaitiene and Ruzele (2021) note ongoing debates about how quality management should be implemented in higher education. For this reason, quality has been at the top of the political agenda for years (Bloch et al., 2021). Quality in higher education is complicated by the global, ever-evolving economic, political, and social environment (Schindler et al., 2015).

Harvey and Green (1993) argued that quality must be viewed in relation to stakeholders and some form of standard or benchmark. Bloch et al. (2021) argue that quality must be conceptualised as the implementation and performance of specific activities that will enhance the overall quality of the institution. The measurement of these activities must be underscored as critical to tracking the institution's overall quality of work and performance. The nature and complexity of quality, driven by external and internal factors, underscore the importance of a more holistic approach to managing and optimising institutions' overall performance.

Asif and Searcy (2013) note that HEIs' growing interest in quality management and business excellence frameworks and models reflects their desire for performance excellence.

5.5.3 Organisational Performance

Organisational performance is widely defined as the extent to which an organisation achieves its objectives or desired outputs. De Silva and Armstrong (2015) postulate that organisational success is the benefits that all its stakeholders receive. HEIs' priorities are academic performance, achieved through research, teaching, and entrepreneurial activities that require considerable financial investment (Rube et al., 2021).

The focus on measuring non-financial performance was an essential step forward in understanding performance measurement systems. However, in a study on PHEIs in South Africa, De Jager et al. (2017) found that these institutions still predominantly use accounting measures to assess their performance. This approach lacks the comprehensiveness of also measuring the institution's technology, personnel, and service delivery. Rehman et al. (2019) note that, despite being situated in a highly competitive academic environment, PHEIs focus almost exclusively on financial performance.

Pitcher (2013) states that, because of their focus on accounting measurements, most HEIs have adopted a more market-led approach to strategic management. Pitcher (2013) further indicates a growing body of literature proposing managerial approaches to managing HEIs, with scant attention paid to the quality and value of education, which are critical to the success of these

institutions. Ashraf and Javed (2012) and Stander and Herman (2017) also argue that quality education must remain at the centre of these institutions. Rehman et al. (2019) caution that measuring the performance of PHEIs is complex, given the dynamics of these institutions.

Phuthi (2016), in a study on leadership quality and organisational performance, established a strong positive correlation between leadership quality, monitoring and evaluation, and organisational performance. This provides a clear signal that, although leaders and employees drive organisational performance, well-developed performance management systems that monitor and evaluate performance through KPIs are required to track and measure performance holistically. High-performance organisations will have a high-performance culture, characterised by a sense of a distinctive community (Serfontein & Hough, 2011).

5.5.4 People Driving Performance

The impact of COVID-19, a human catastrophe, has highlighted humanity's resilience. The pandemic necessitated a digital transformation, requiring changes in technology and work processes to enable organisations to perform tasks digitally and to reskill and upskill employees (Jacobs, 2020; Shankar, 2020). This crisis sparked interest in how organisations, through their people and leadership, managed the pandemic and eventually emerged successfully from it. The value of the pandemic was that organisations had to rethink sustainability, with a renewed effort to align people with the organisation's purpose while balancing short- and long-term objectives (Collings et al., 2020).

The pandemic also made organisations more aware of developments in Industry 4.0, particularly in automation, robotics, artificial intelligence, and data analytics. Warnich et al. (2022) argue that this has created a renewed urgency to develop people strategies that support the business strategy. Warnich et al. (2022) argue for a focus on building resilience, supported by flexible work practices, diversity, and inclusion, to manage a multi-generational workforce. This requires creating a new employee value proposition and reskilling and upskilling staff.

These renewed efforts to develop people are supported by the Human Capital Theory of Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961), which posits that individuals possess a range of skills, competencies, and knowledge that can be enhanced through education and training, ultimately contributing to increased organisational productivity (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). Both human capital theory and the resource-based view emphasise the importance of internal resources in building a sustainable and competitive advantage for the institution. In the context of PHEIs, human capital, especially academic and support staff, is a critical determinant of institutional performance. Thus, ongoing development and deployment of human capital are crucial to achieving key outcomes, including teaching excellence, research innovation, and administrative efficiency.

Serfontein and Hough (2011) and Phuthi (2016) postulate that high-performance leaders provide strategic direction to the organisation and ultimately influence the performance of people and

teams when implementing organisational strategy. Often, leaders implement various organisational efficiency strategies and techniques without the desired effect on the organisation's performance. Serfontein and Hough (2011) believe that one of the main reasons for this phenomenon is the lack of an integrated approach supported by the development of key organisational capabilities and leadership behaviour.

The pandemic further spotlighted talent management, innovation, creativity, business skills, and people's capabilities, which are an organisation's most dependable sources of competitive strength and future growth (Gautam, 2021; Tshukudu, 2021). Human capital attainment provides numerous economic benefits to individuals in the form of earnings and to society at large through economic growth (Johnes et al., 2017). Organisations depend on people's competencies in enhancing productivity and performance. Thus, organisations that prioritise talent management may be better positioned to enhance their competitive advantage (Hyde & Jain, 2021).

5.6 Research Methodology

5.6.1 Research philosophy and paradigm

This study is situated within a pragmatic research paradigm, which acknowledges the complexity of organisational performance in PHEIs and supports the use of diverse methods to explore both measurable and constructed realities. Pragmatism, as a meta-theoretical stance, integrates both positivist and constructivist epistemologies.

5.6.2 Research design

A multiple-case study design was employed for the qualitative portion of the study. The case study design helps to understand the meaning that participants attribute to their life experiences (Fouche et al., 2021). The quantitative research design was non-experimental. The non-experimental design is mainly used in descriptive studies in which the units selected are measured on all the relevant variables and do not aim at rigorous hypothesis testing (Fouche et al., 2021)

5.6.3 Research approach

A qualitative and quantitative approach, also known as mixed methods, was employed. Qualitative and quantitative data are collected, analysed, and integrated sequentially across different study phases. This method is believed to complement the other, providing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Bazeley, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

5.6.4 Population

The research was conducted in the private higher education (PHE) setting in South Africa. The total population comprises 87 DHET (2024) fully registered institutions that employ

approximately 15,857 staff (Sithole, 2024), representing 18% of South Africa's total student enrolment (SAPHE, 2023).

5.6.5 Sampling

A non-probability, purposive convenience sampling technique was employed to select 30 experts who met stringent inclusion criteria, assisting in the identification of key organisational performance indicators through one-on-one interviews with open-ended questions. Of the 30 experts selected for the qualitative part of the study, 70% had a PhD or Doctorate, and 30% had a master's degree. This includes 3% executive managers, 40% Senior Managers, and 50% professional academics, with an average of 12.7 years of experience in PHE and 21.9 years in HE. Many of these participants are recognised for their research contributions and for developing frameworks and policies for quality teaching and assessment. A substantial number of participants were involved in setting up PHEIs in South Africa or made significant contributions to the strategic direction of these institutions.

For the quantitative sampling, 100 experts were selected using a non-probability, purposive convenience sampling technique, meeting stringent inclusion criteria. These 100 experts were chosen to rate the KPIs identified in the previous step. Of the 100 experts for the quantitative part of the study, 43% had a PhD or Doctorate, 43% a master's degree and 14% an Honours degree. The number of years of experience in HE was 15% more than 15 Years, 16% between 11 and 15 years, 28% between 7 and 10 years, and 10% below 6 years.

5.6.6 Data collection method

A one-on-one interview with open-ended questions was conducted with 30 experts to identify a list of KPIs for PHEIs. Subsequently, a cross-sectional questionnaire was used to rate the KPIs in a descriptive context among 100 experts.

5.6.7 Data Analysis

The qualitative data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis (ITA) in ATLAS.ti v23. These analyses provided a set of KPIs and rich data to describe them. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics. Fouche et al. (2021) indicate that descriptive statistics describe numerical data by organising, summarising, and interpreting univariate sample data, focusing on frequency and central tendency. The diagnostic evaluation of the questionnaire indicated a reliability of Cronbach's Alpha of 0.972, and the descriptive analysis established the mean scores for each KPI, as reported in Table 5-1. Using descriptive statistics, a pairwise comparison was conducted via the AHP to determine the relative weights of each KPI, as shown in Table 5-1. This provided a final ranking of all KPIs by priority.

5.6.8 Ethics

All ethical protocols were adhered to during this study. Ensuring ethical compliance was a priority throughout the research process to uphold integrity and protect participants.

5.7 Results and Findings

Eleven key performance indicators (KPIs) of significant importance were identified, supporting the conceptualisation of institutional capital as presented in Table 5-1.

Table 5-1: Institutional capital KIPs ranked by importance

Perspective	KPI	Mean Score	AHP Ranking Priority
Institutional capital	High importance		
	Institutional leadership	9.17	.959
	Alignment with industry	9.13	.956
	The role of technology	8.92	.933
	Positive institutional culture	8.93	.933
	Regulator ensuring minimum standards	8.83	.925
	Institution's sustainability	8.80	.921
	Teaching and learning institution	8.78	.916
	Industry support for higher education	8.73	.911
	Institutional capacity	8.69	.910
	Institutional goals & objectives	8.64	.904
	Innovation	8.63	.903

5.7.1 Institutional Capital – the Implication for PHEIs

Institutional capital in the context of higher education refers to utilising resources, as well as institutional culture, structure, and processes, to improve productivity and reduce costs, thereby significantly enhancing the institution's efficiency and sustainability. It includes leadership, planning, industry engagement, infrastructure, resources, technology and innovation. Kaplan and Norton (1996) refer to the 'internal business process perspective', which includes concepts such as innovation, operations and after-sales service. It also encompasses aspects of the financial perspective, including revenue growth, cost reduction, productivity improvement, and asset utilisation. Smit et al. (2019) refer to the organisation's capabilities, including its strategic and internal factors. Hellriegel et al. (2017) hold a similar view, indicating that organisational capabilities refer to the organisation's assets, people (including leadership and management), and processes for transforming inputs into outputs. Organisational capital plays a major role in strengthening the institution and enabling it to achieve its vision, mission, and strategies. It is also the catalyst for developing the institution's human capital.

The study strongly suggests the importance of a shared vision and mission that define who the institution is and what its purpose is. It further emphasises the importance of clear, sustainable institutional goals and objectives that align with stakeholders' needs, as indicated by stakeholder

theory (Freeman, 1991), thereby contributing to social and economic development and ensuring the institution's long-term sustainability. Measuring the institutional impact in the broader community as a concerted effort to demonstrate the institution's value is pivotal.

Strategic decisions to be considered in this process include striking a balance between being a teaching, learning, and research institution; considering the importance of contact learning versus distance learning; and deciding on which niche and broad academic areas to pursue. PHEIs need to carefully consider the skills that should be developed for the future world of work, along with the role innovation and technology should play as enablers to achieve the strategy. These strategic decisions must be aligned with the institution's vision, mission, and strategy. Thus, PHEIs should not aim to be everything to everyone, but rather to make a sustainable difference where it matters most.

This suggests that effective and efficient management and leadership are crucial to the success and sustainability of HEIs. Leadership and strategic planning are key to effectively managing the various environmental challenges HEIs face. Through strong leadership, HEIs can foster a culture of academic excellence, striking a balance between academia and business, particularly in PHEIs, and create a positive learning experience for students. Leaders have to ensure that HEIs have sufficient resources and infrastructure, while managers have to optimise these resources to support a positive learning experience, in line with the resource-based view (Barney, 1991). Staff well-being is important, and creating a conducive work environment with open engagement and opportunities for development is a strong indicator of a successful institution. Ensuring that all regulatory requirements are met while balancing academic excellence and profitability is pivotal in creating long-lasting, sustainable PHEIs.

- ***Institutional Leadership***

Notably, previous studies on KPIs for HEIs do not widely acknowledge leadership as a critical KPI; it was mentioned only by Ruben (1999) and Zaki and Zaki Rashidi (2013), with no further references in later studies. Even though the literature strongly suggests that leaders of HEIs around the world are increasingly facing volatility in a fast-paced, changing environment, coupled with limited resources and increased competition due to the increasing number of HEIs (Allaoui & Benmoussa, 2020; Hong et al., 2021; Khalifa & Ayoubi, 2015). Lisdiono et al. (2022) argue that, in this volatile context, leadership has the executive power to create an enabling environment for institutional sustainability, underscoring the importance of leadership in HEIs.

Participant 15: "But I think the most important thing is your leadership."

In this context, it must be acknowledged that ethical and democratic leadership are critical to the success of PHEIs in South Africa.

Participant 11: “Leadership is absolutely crucial, and in an organisation like private higher education, you need democratic leadership to be seen to behave ethically, and that goes from the top to the bottom to the student.”

Democratic and ethical leadership share numerous values, such as fairness, transparency, ethical decision-making, and the pursuit of consensus across diverse viewpoints. Such leadership promotes trust and respect through inclusive, open, and honest engagement. These leaders promote and empower teams to be involved in decision-making, leading to a greater sense of ethical responsibility and accountability. Leaders in PHEIs should have an open-door policy, promote open and honest communication, work inclusively with the team, and develop the team to drive the business forward. Hubchen et al. (2024) support this approach and suggest that leadership is the catalyst for developing employees to achieve organisational goals.

Participant 15: “You need someone with an open-door approach who is willing to work with the team as a team to drive the business forward. Without that, there is always going to be miscommunication, missed targets, and misalignment with objectives.”

PHEIs should recognise leadership as a group quality that values both the position (individual traits and competencies) and the process and collaboration, to create a conducive and inclusive organisational climate that empowers teams to achieve organisational goals.

Participant 3: “...is that they must be able to assist as leaders or managers or workers in creating constructive organisational climates and culture, because I believe if there is a positive organisational climate in an organisation, that an organisation can really continue and continue.”

Bush (2013) postulates that HEIs should adopt shared leadership models with a distinct approach to distributed leadership, which contrasts with some older leadership theories that view leadership as confined to managerial positions within the organisation (Jooste et al., 2015). Bolden et al. (2009) argue that distributed leadership is seen as a departure from traditional hierarchical structures towards structures that promote collaboration, spread and shared across an institution. Distributed leadership will require that PHEIs change their institution’s structure to be more inclusive, as suggested in matrix, network, team-based, and project-based structures.

Leadership development should be encouraged at all levels, and individuals should be empowered to make a difference in their roles. Jooste et al. (2015) argue that, in HEIs, leadership is typically expected in formal roles, such as heads of school, but must also be developed in supervisors, who must master self-leadership. Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) argue that individuals who adopt self-leadership demonstrate a strong sense of ownership of their tasks. As a result, these individuals may indicate higher levels of commitment to their tasks, goals, teams, and the organisation.

Participant 3: “Where leadership is especially needed, and also to focus on leadership, teach people the basics of leadership, because leadership does not only belong to those. Leaders are not only the management of companies. We have informal leaders also, and just let them know that ‘You can make a difference where you are,’ and develop them as such.”

Chapman et al. (2017) postulate that academics must be the foundation for leadership, employee engagement, strategic direction, and the promotion of broader organisational roles to all stakeholders within its environment. PHEIs should embrace the characteristics and competencies of educational leaders to drive change nationally and internationally.

Participant 3: “Therefore, I sincerely believe that higher education must focus on creating experts and leaders for the day of tomorrow and the day thereafter.”

Leadership must include all staff, not just senior management (Davis & Jones, 2014). PHEIs should acknowledge that anyone can be a leader in one way or another, regardless of an individual’s formal or informal leadership responsibilities. Goleman (2002) supports the idea of leadership as a collective phenomenon, offering opportunities for a more democratic and collaborative vision. Bolden et al. (2009) advocate for an informal, bottom-up approach to leadership, arguing that it is the most effective way to operate in a dynamic, fast-changing environment.

- ***Alignment with Industry and support***

PHEIS must align the development and delivery of their programmes, curricula, and other academic initiatives with industry and community needs. Several countries worldwide are still confronted with discrepancies between what students learn and what employers seek (Hamdan et al., 2020). However, only Zaki and Zaki Rashidi (2013) include industry needs and support as a KPI, and Jorge et al. (2015) include society as a KPI in the broader context. The present study highlights this alignment as a significant KPI.

In the late 1990s, the USA’s Boyer Commission (1998) found that, although students graduate, they still lack a coherent body of knowledge and skills, including logical thinking, clear and coherent writing, and speaking. Although students earn credentials, they do not have a competitive advantage over their peers for limited job opportunities. Although Duderstadt (2000) proposed a market-driven perspective for restructuring higher education in the early 2000s, in which market forces and social policies are applied to serve a changing world, the uptake was rather slow.

The market-driven restructuring of higher education may be an opportunity for PHEI leadership to create a competitive advantage in building the sustainability of these institutions. Johnson and Stage (2018) and Kilgo et al. (2015) note that social scientists and educational researchers continue to observe that students are not adequately prepared with the knowledge and foundational skills

necessary to give them an advantage in the labour market and changing society. Critical graduate attributes include critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, communication (Biggs & Tang, 2011), time management, coping with stress, and understanding a society's historical, cultural, and global contexts (Gready, 2014). Furthermore, employers seek graduates with knowledge and analytical and practical skills spanning multiple work-related fields, which are critical for adaptability and innovation (An & Loes, 2023).

Participant 3: "I think it is very important to teach our students also where to find it, and different methods of acquiring knowledge, interpreting knowledge and applying knowledge to practical situations. And, with that, I believe, it is important that students, going forward, must really learn and be taught how to work together in a successful team environment, as teams; therefore, team leadership and team management are also important."

The South African government introduced workplace practice, also known as 'work-integrated learning', into the education system (Ojo, 2019). The aim was to equip students with skills to enhance their integration into the workforce (Naidoo & Van Wyk, 2016) and improve their employability (Rambe, 2018). It is expected of PHEIs to prepare students for the challenges and realities of modern work life, which is characterised by uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflicting values. It is also fair to argue that this initiative aims to foster responsible citizenship and personal development (Leiber, 2019).

Participant 6: "I am looking at what is the institution's graduate attributes. Is there a focus on preparing students for the 21st century and the world of work?"

Participant 10: "Alignment with the world of work. What I mean by that is we deliver students who are in demand in the workplace, graduating students who will become socially responsible citizens."

The ability of PHEIs to cooperate with businesses is essential to ensure they offer relevant qualifications and provide job opportunities. Such co-operation may include co-designing and co-delivering the curriculum to align the business needs with what PHEIs offer. Plewa et al. (2014) argue that HEIs should engage with businesses in their curriculum design to ensure alignment with business needs. HEIs must understand business needs to design relevant and market-driven courses (Yoeung et al., 2017). However, Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) (2016) argues that there is still a mismatch between business needs and HEIs' current offerings. Gonzalez-Torres (2018) notes the same concern and postulates that it is unclear whether institutions have the content available to equip students with the industry's needs. PHEIs should view industry as a means of creating a competitive advantage and of developing fully equipped students with competencies that meet current requirements.

Participant 3: “To get a competitive edge, they must closely work together with industry and the needs of industry and also involve industry experts to lecture or to give a glimpse to students of what they need from them.”

Participant 12: “It is not worth it to offer a qualification if there is no specific industry open to it. Some other universities offer programmes that are not aimed at specific jobs or industries. Still, we do not have that luxury, so I think co-operation with the specific industry is extremely important, and perhaps that should be a separate KPA.”

Several studies in a global context highlight the importance of collaborating closely with industry experts, involving industry in programme design and evaluation, and offering qualifications that are specific and relevant to job markets. Bean and Dawkins (2021) argue that Australian HEIs need to collaborate with industry partners to develop relevant workforce skills. HEIs in the UK and USA have also come under pressure to demonstrate that their degrees will enable students to secure high-quality employment with reputable employers (Tan et al., 2018). Developing graduates as an organisational asset in collaboration with industry can improve the quality of education and produce graduates who are competitive in the labour market (Yoeung et al., 2017).

Participant 10: “For me, that is vital. We invite industry into the institution from the beginning, starting with programme feasibility studies. In programme design, we invite them into the business as guest lecturers, and then in the evaluation process.”

The academic team of PHEIs is a valuable asset, and they should be allowed to practise continuously in industry to stay up to date with best practice and industry developments. This will enable academics to produce outstanding students who drive innovation and play a leading role in transforming businesses while creating innovative new companies (Patil et al., 2023). This ultimately has the potential to significantly impact the country’s social and economic transformation agenda by equipping graduates to actively participate as responsible citizens in improving their communities for the betterment of humankind.

Participant 23: “The other one for me, it is a very personal one, is that I personally think that my most important asset in the institution is my lecturers and the academic team. And they come with a very specific skill set, which has now become stagnant because they are not allowed to practise in industry. I would rather keep you on full-time, but almost like put it as a contractual obligation that you stay up to date with what is happening in the industry, because that is how they bring information from the outside to us. And, at the moment, that is my strategy.”

Schiller and Brimble (2009) and Liefner and Schiller (2008) acknowledge the contribution of HEIs to the development of responsible citizens who make meaningful contributions to socio-economic development involving societal stakeholders. For this reason, PHEIs should actively, sincerely, and meaningfully contribute to community development, with a focus on sustainability and long-

term benefits. This includes community engagement in a concerted effort to contribute to societal development. Engaging communities as societal stakeholders can also provide sustainable solutions and mutual ownership of the development processes (Littlewood & Holt, 2018). HEIs must be seen as social institutions well-positioned to address the societal challenges of the 21st century. (Cunha & Benneworth, 2013). Jakovljevic (2018) suggests that HEIs in South Africa form partnerships with community members, community-based organisations, private and public organisations, government, and other HEIs to advance social innovation, which could make a significant contribution to community development.

Participant 14: “So, it is also in terms of, as an institution, how are we giving back to societal change, to development, how we are contributing, in what spaces do we find ourselves in making a difference, which platforms, what voices, where we are being active. To me, those are important things to measure, because it is all good to be successful. Still, if you are not part and parcel and contributing to society and community, then, I think, that success does not have sustainability.”

By focusing on aligning with industry and community needs, PHEIs can ensure their programmes are responsive to the demands of the job market, contribute to the development of specialised skills, including graduate attributes, and positively impact society. Implementing these practices as core strategies driven by PHEI leadership has the potential to create a competitive advantage in a competitive environment and significantly contribute to their sustainability in the quest to establish long-lasting, efficient institutions of higher learning.

- ***The Role of Technology***

As early as 2001, Stewart and Carpenter-Hubin (2001) identified technology as a critical KPI in the transformation of HEIs. This KPI has been further supported by various studies in HEIs, including those by Cronje and Vermaak (2004), Asan and Tanyaş (2007), and Hernandez-Díaz et al. (2020). Various studies in higher education indicate that technology in these institutions is mainly focused on its impact on individual performance, rather than on the organisation’s overall performance (Englund et al., 2017). Technology is a critical resource that can positively influence the organisation’s performance and efficiency (Mao et al., 2016; Morteza, 2018). Institutions that embrace technology can leverage these resources to create a strategic differentiation and gain a competitive advantage. Roure (2013) suggests that the increased use of technology applications, including information and communication technology and immersive technology, has generated significant potential for unlimited innovation, such as innovative learning systems.

To enhance their growth and sustainability, PHEIs should make a concerted effort to invest in systems and technology that will enable them to adapt to the ever-evolving education industry. This may require that PHEIs change, adapt, and possibly restructure their operations in line with emerging technologies. However, Jayasingam et al. (2016) indicate that many institutions face the

challenge of staff who lack the necessary skills for emerging technologies. Thus, PHEIs have to prioritise upskilling staff in implementing technology as an enabler of higher levels of efficiency and sustainability.

Participant 13: “So, it is all these different elements that come in that actually, with advancement in technology, we have to keep abreast with. I mean, big data has been big for a couple of years now, and we have to keep track of this because that is what the industry needs, or what the industry will look like in the future. This is where a lot of skill will be needed.”

Technology could enable PHEIs to stay abreast of a fast-evolving market driven by artificial intelligence, robotics, machine learning, and quantum computing. Technology plays a crucial role across industries, enabling organisations to adapt and remain relevant in a dynamic, rapidly changing business landscape (Morteza, 2018). The role of technology as a tool in PHEIs has become more important in facilitating the implementation of strategies, achieving goals, and driving sustainability.

Participant 7: “Technology is a tool; we should be going towards your goals and look to technology to help you move into that space. If you do not have the resources and the capacity to deliver on them, and that includes your staffing, your infrastructure, your technology.”

Many organisations have invested in technology to reshape their operations and become more adaptive and flexible in implementing innovative ideas and responding to a fast, constantly changing environment (Hilman & Abubakar, 2017; Morteza, 2018).

Participant 10: “The second thing, then, for us, due to the big numbers that we are actually having in the business, is definitely your systems and processes and technology. The whole education industry is moving in the direction of becoming more dependent on technology and innovation.”

Studies have indicated a positive relationship between technology and organisational performance (e.g., Kim et al., 2016; Lin & Chang, 2015), and the current changes and challenges faced by PHEIs necessitate adopting technology to remain relevant and build sustainability. A study of 269 PHEIs listed in the 2015 QS Ranking found that integrating technology into overall organisational operations enabled these institutions to improve their overall performance (Hilman & Abubakar, 2017). The Fourth Industrial Revolution has made it imperative that PHEIs overhaul their traditional operational systems and invest in technology to remain competitive (Sani, 2018).

A focus on technological developments, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, could give PHEIs a competitive edge in a rapidly changing, competitive educational landscape. The flexibility associated with technology, along with the ability to move forward innovatively, are key advantages of embracing technology in a multi-dimensional approach. Using blended learning,

which combines traditional learning methods with digital and technological resources, can offer new and innovative pedagogical approaches (Kintu et al., 2017). Futuristic learning experiences utilising virtual or augmented reality and artificial intelligence are already becoming a reality, and they will continue to disrupt the future landscape of learning and teaching in HEIs, as postulated by McGuirt et al. (2015).

Participant 23: “So, basically, we are moving into Five IR [Industrial Revolution], but the technology we use is very much strapped in Three IR, so we theorise about what it should be for us actually to stay sustainable across the years. It is almost like we need a pocket of someone specialising in technology development, making sure that components such as AI, VR...”

With an efficient technology management system, PHEIs can revolutionise their curriculum through new teaching and learning technologies that meet the requirements of both students and industry. However, selecting the most suitable technologies is not always easy due to the complexity of technology (Farooq & O’Brien, 2012; Mao et al., 2016). The adoption of technology is often further hampered by low technology absorption rates, implementation failures, and the complexity of managing its social impact (Mao et al., 2016). Technology adoption in institutions faces myriad other challenges, including access, equity, and digital literacy (Becker et al., 2017), as well as training lecturers in technology and integrating technology into curriculum design (Georgina & Olson, 2008). Some other challenges include increased plagiarism and the use of software and other devices (Becker et al., 2017). It is crucial that PHEIs develop a sustainable business model that integrates technology into the academic journey. This would require educators to ensure that learning materials keep pace with the latest technological developments and incorporate innovations into teaching and research (Kaur & Bhalla, 2018).

Participant 1: “So, you need to be agile in terms of modes of delivery, and for now, modes of delivery are pre-empted by technology.”

Participant 9: “A lot of people are going to use technology for the knowledge they need.”

The literature acknowledges the changing environment brought about by information technology, globalisation, and the knowledge economy, which are altering educators' roles (Friedman, 2016). The changing role is particularly visible in curriculum development, professional academic development, blended learning approaches, and community partnerships (Adams et al., 2017). The application and uptake of technology largely depend on the institution's and state's ability to develop students' capacities to use, for example, the internet, through digital literacy development (Wankle, 2011; Waghid & Waghid, 2016). It is clear that technology can enhance teaching and learning, improve students' capacity and, ultimately, their role as responsible and active citizens (Waghid & Waghid, 2016).

- ***Positive Institutional Culture***

The organisational culture and structure of PHEIs can significantly impact the institution's success and sustainability. Kantabutra (2020) indicates that planning for sustainability and incorporating it into the institution's culture is integral to the organisation's vision statement. Popper and Lipshitz (2000) postulate that leaders must enable an institutional structure and culture conducive to organisational learning and growth, ultimately leading to sustainability. At the same time, all employees should develop a commitment to the institution's goals and objectives (Galpin et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2021). Notably, previous studies have not mentioned this KPI, and only Ashraf and Javed (2012) identified a well-defined structure and system as an important KPI for HEIs. The current study postulates a client-centred structure and a system that recognises the student as a discerning client. The importance of the institution's culture emerged only in later studies by Joubert and Sosibo (2020) and Yaakub and Mohamed (2019), and this is strongly supported by the current study.

The importance of creating an inclusive structure and culture that aligns with the institution's vision, mission, academic excellence, and student-centeredness has become pivotal to building sustainable PHEIs.

Participant 14: "Private institutions, they sometimes focus too much outside, on marketing and promotion and recruitment, but, in order to drive success, I think it needs to come from internally. If you have staff who are on board with your vision and mission and have internalised it as their own, I think they will create that success, and they will treat the students and the academic projects in that way."

Culture plays a significant role in how staff members experience an institution and why a student chooses to study at a particular institution. Brinkhurst et al. (2011) argue that staff members play a central role in achieving long-term goals. The role that staff fulfils by being innovative enables change within the institution.

Participant 20: "Okay, apart from quality programmes, student support, proper management is important, how you manage your institution, take care of your staff members, because, and this is what management in HR also tells us, no organisation can consist of and be sustainable without people."

Communication is regarded as the most critical instrument in management for creating a positive organisational culture and climate, and it includes employee involvement in setting goals and standards. Constructive, open, and inclusive communication can substantially impact how employees, students, and other stakeholders perceive and experience the institution.

Participant 24: "Okay, so for me, the most important thing there is communication, top-down and bottom-up communication, that there is engagement with staff at all levels, that staff have a voice in terms of being"

able to contribute towards the strategy, because I do believe that, if the contribution is heard, and if it is taken into account, then buy-in increases in terms of the strategy.”

Mintzberg, in the 19th century, proposed an adhocracy structure that promotes inclusivity, flexibility, and the devolution of power to enable the institution to respond adequately to rapid change and increasing competition. PHEIs should foster flexible structures and a culture that enable rapid adaptation to change, thereby ensuring the effective and efficient meeting of students' and stakeholders' needs.

Participant 2: “If we look at the organisational structure, I think the flatter it is, the better it will work.”

Building a positive, progressive organisational structure and culture while remaining flexible can enhance staff motivation and the institution's ability to attract students who want to be associated with the institution. Attracting students through a positive, progressive, and flexible structure, culture, and environment can contribute to the institution's long-term success.

Participant 24: “...that is where, for me, we need to focus on transformation, recirculation, quality engagements, or all of those industry or stakeholder involvement, to ensure relevance.”

- ***Regulator ensuring Minimum Standards***

Quality assurance institutions have become increasingly relevant in higher education worldwide, playing a crucial role in evaluating and accrediting HEIs and their programmes (Beerrens, 2015; Salto, 2022). This accreditation and quality assurance process places a significant administrative burden on institutions to comply with regulatory requirements (Salto, 2022). So-called 'bureaucratic red tape' is understood as a regulation that fails to pass a cost–benefit criterion and is more costly than beneficial (Dixon & Rimmer, 2016). A strong emphasis is placed on compliance with South African regulatory requirements, including the position of PHEIs.

Participant 2: “And the fact that it retains its accreditation for all its programmes, because, obviously, if you start losing accreditation, you start losing reputation in the environment.”

PHEIs operate in a stringent regulatory environment established by the DHET, with new educational programmes governed by the Higher Education Act (RSA, 1997). PHEIs, therefore, cannot launch new programmes without approval, and the application process is slow. This results in a slow time-to-market, hampering rapid response to market needs. It has definite negative implications for PHEIs that wish to adopt business principles for sustainability and react promptly to market demands. To manage this, PHEI leadership will need to utilise strategic planning and forecast future skills development requirements in the workplace. This again highlights the

importance of stakeholder engagement and ongoing research to understand these demands and respond promptly within a slow regulatory approval process.

While PHEIs must comply with regulations and quality standards, this must not be their primary focus. They should focus on aligning education with students' and industry's needs. High-quality, relevant education is the key to graduates' employability. PHEIs in South Africa need not prioritise profit over the quality of the education they provide; they need to strike a balance between the two imperatives. Both the quality and quantity of graduates, coupled with high-performing staff, networking, and community impact, are important factors in ensuring these institutions' long-term sustainability. However, these institutions must recognise that financial metrics and economic viability are crucial to ensuring the affordability and quality of the education they offer to current and prospective students.

Participant 10: "So, I think it is a good thing for us in this industry to have a regulator responsible for ensuring minimum quality standards. So, that is your CHE, SAQA [South African Qualifications Authority], for us or for me to focus on quality. It is really, how do you trick and align to, firstly, students' expectations and needs, but then, very important, and that is one of our focus areas, is the world of work."

- ***Institutions Sustainability***

The United Nations Sustainable Development Programme 2030 has spotlighted sustainability in higher education (Elfert, 2019). Although the programme focuses on areas such as lifelong learning, effective teaching, resource utilisation, and quality education, leadership focused on strategic planning, organisational structures, and collaboration is also pivotal (Amui et al., 2017; Moore, 2005). Tan et al. (2017) define sustainability as a programme to promote green initiatives in HEIs; however, no other study on KPIs for HEIs refers to sustainability as a KPI. The current student postulates that sustainability is a critical KPI. The identification of sustainability as a KPI is widely supported by current thinking on business development in a volatile external environment.

The transformation of institutions towards sustainability is complex and challenging, characterised by a lengthy, progressive process with various elements of resistance and barriers (De Castro & Jabbour, 2013). Achieving sustainability requires the institution to focus with dedication and to set clear, measurable objectives (Van Looy & Shafagatova, 2016). Elfert (2019) defines sustainability in HEIs as an outcome of an international effort to catalyse changes in mindsets and actions in this area. Sustainability encompasses strategies for developing a core curriculum, pedagogy, and activities that enable students to acquire skills and knowledge that contribute to sustainable development (Holm et al., 2015). UNESCO (2020) suggests that sustainable development entails everyone benefiting from quality education and learning the values, behaviours, and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and positive societal transformation. This requires that institutions

develop a more inclusive understanding of the term, i.e., one that includes all its stakeholders (Bice & Coates, 2016; Sterling et al., 2013), and that this understanding be reflected in HEIs' vision, mission, strategies, and practices. Sustainability has to be integrated into all institutional activities, where effectiveness becomes the key driver of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) (2020). To ensure their sustainability, PHEIs should invest in student development beyond graduation, focus on high-demand skills, and adapt to market needs while measuring their impact on socio-economic development.

Participant 15: "To be sustainable, I think it is to invest in your students beyond graduation. They are going to be the leaders in the industry."

Leadership in HEIs has often been associated with these institutions' sustainability (Dyer & Dyer, 2017; Figueiró & Raufflet, 2015). The lack of leadership has frequently been cited as a reason for the ineffective implementation of sustainability policies and regulations (Pietsch et al., 2018).

Participant 15: "So, what I think, and what a lot of you are talking about, is how you achieve your strategies, but I think the most important thing is your leadership."

Although an institution's operational activities and management are often seen as examples of sustainability, they cannot guarantee sustainability without a well-developed management system that promotes continuous quality improvement (Isenmann et al., 2020). Achieving sustainability further requires that leaders in PHEIs create a positive, trust-based environment in which staff connect with the organisation's values and identify with its brand. Aligning staff with the organisation's goals can ensure long-term sustainability (Srivastava et al., 2020). The more transparent leaders are in implementing policies and procedures, the more they can assist the institution in developing its sustainability (Ni et al., 2018). Developing a comprehensive framework that describes the institution's long-term approach to sustainable development is imperative (Tamrat, 2021).

- ***Teaching and Learning Institution***

Although the work of several authors in the development of KPIs supports research as a KPI in HEIs (e.g., Camilleri, 2021; Farid et al., 2008; Sahney & Thakkar, 2015), teaching as a KPI is also widely supported (e.g., Asan & Tanyaş, 2007; Leibner, 2019; Umayal Karpagam & Suganthi, 2012). Although research was not identified as a KPI for PHEIs in the present study, these institutions should have a unique perspective on research and teaching and refrain from imitating public institutions. PHEIs should focus on uninterrupted education, quality teaching, and relevant, unique programmes that enhance students' employability by creating an exceptional learning environment as a differentiator. The backing of business and industry for PHEI programmes could significantly enhance their suitability. To enable this, PHEIs need to prioritise the institution's

financial sustainability and staff well-being, adopt a student-centred approach, and involve business and industry in teaching and learning.

Participant 13: “Well, we are student-centred; we want to look at every student.”

Participant 20: “I think a private university must have its own values, vision, and mission, a type of institution that is different from a public university. I do not think we should try to be public universities, and what makes privates different is that they are far more workplace-directed. It is more context-based and, hopefully, more aimed at creating students who can step into the workplace and start contributing.”

PHEIs in South Africa also need to balance providing broad and niche programmes that focus on developing scarce skills. At the same time, they should build their capacity to provide niche and expert knowledge to students as differentiators. PHEIs could also endeavour to play a more active role in challenging the status quo in certain fields, a freedom not often associated with public institutions. It is further suggested that PHEIs emphasise online and distance learning to attract international students as part of their internationalisation strategy and widen access to higher education.

Participant 20: “...offers a range of qualifications, not only a niche area, but a range of qualifications that such an institution should actually be qualified to be called a university. I think it is an advantage of privates, provided that you provide proper support and you provide niche knowledge, expert knowledge, to students.”

Participant 14: “I think there is a role there for private higher education to play where the publics cannot, and that is that activist voice that is innovative but also challenging the status quo in certain industries and fields.”

The more pressing question, however, for PHEIs is the balance between teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. Achieving balance may require that PHEIs have a clear strategy and plan for the institution's future. The experts in the present study strongly suggested that PHEIs be part of both the business and higher education communities, and that they focus on both research and tuition. Contrary to this suggestion, Nasim et al. (2019) found, across 9 studies, that HEIs in developing countries prioritise teaching and learning over research and industry engagement. It again underscores the importance of PHEIs determining the kind of institution they want to be. The experts in the present study presented strong arguments for recognising PHEIs in South Africa as universities, coupled with government funding. In this regard, it is essential to note that, in addition to quality teaching and learning, one of the key requirements of a university in South Africa is research and other academic services.

Participant 26: “Also, a good private institution must be able to fulfil the three core responsibilities of a university or higher institution, which are research, teaching and learning, and community engagement.”

This poses a significant challenge for PHEIs, as research and community engagement do not generate direct income and may significantly affect PHEIs' bottom lines. Teaching as the primary source of income for PHEIs may also influence lecturers' willingness to take on research for intellectual development (Oleksiyenko & Ross, 2019), with negative implications for the growth of knowledge in the field. Asif and Searcy (2013) argue that teaching and learning must be strengthened by research to be effective, and that a focus on teaching alone cannot meet the requirements of all stakeholders. A limited focus can potentially hinder the development of a knowledge-oriented environment. Although PHEIs may have teaching and learning as the core of their business, Asif and Searcy (2013) argue for a balance between teaching, research, and professional service.

Participant 14: “The quality of a lecturer is their knowledge of their field, networks, research, and keeping up to date.”

In South Africa, a notable distinction exists between public and private institutions, unlike in the USA and other parts of the world, where this distinction is less pronounced. In South Africa, public institutions are generally regarded as higher quality than private institutions. A CHE (2016) publication highlighted that PHEIs in South Africa are perceived to deliver programmes of questionable quality to maximise profits (Tankouepse Nukunah et al., 2019). A key strategy for changing this perception is PHEIs' leadership in positioning these institutions as a valuable alternative to public higher education. Leaders would need to demonstrate this value by ensuring PHEIs provide quality education that adequately prepares students for the current and future world of work, thereby ensuring their employability in a highly competitive job market.

Participant 5: “If you look at America, or if you look at the UK, you have a lot of private institutions that have equally long been in operation, and all of these private ones, you find that they have managed to set themselves up as these elitist organisations. And even though they are private, as opposed to public, they have this long-standing history, and they have filled this brand over so many hundreds of years.”

Participant 6: “The one thing I do think is that we need to end this split between, that exists between universities and private higher education at a national level. We have got to find a way in which private higher education becomes supported by the government, because there is very definitely a need for it, and the data is showing us that the NDP [National Development Plan] goals will never be achieved without private higher education.”

PHEIs in South Africa appear to be navigating a delicate balance as they establish the kind of institution they aspire to be. On the one hand is income-generating teaching and learning; on the other, the imperative that research be fundamental to teaching and learning. Providing the resources required for research and motivating academics to embark on research are challenging for PHEIs in South Africa. Addressing these issues requires that the leadership of PHEIs place them on the strategic agenda, decide what type of institution they should be, and simultaneously bridge the gap between private and public HEIs in the quest to attain full university status in South Africa.

- ***Intuition Capacity***

Notably, and in contrast to the current study, no prior studies have identified institutional capacity as a KPI, underscoring the importance of viewing a PHEI as a business. PHEIs in South Africa mostly rely on student tuition for funding; for this reason, PHEIs should position themselves as both a business and part of the academic community to be successful. De Boer and Goedegebuure (2009) argue that HEIs have become like large corporations with professional management.

Participant 5: “I think it needs a management team that cohesively believes in those strategies, and, obviously, there is always this big divide between academics and the business development people, but I think that the type of academic that we attract is probably one that is more understanding of the business side of things, and I have seen this also at Milpark...”

Akshubiri (2020) postulates that HEIs should invest in assets such as buildings and equipment to enable the academic community to grow and be productive. In most private institutions, success is determined by return on investment, a mathematical formula or performance measure. Ghosh (2019) postulates that a HEI's financial sustainability makes it an attractive investment.

Participant 1: “Finance would be very important, as there will have to be finance metrics available. These finance metrics will have to be forecasted, and they will have to be traced, and it will depend on the ROI [return on investment] of this private institution.”

In some cases, PHEIs have investors who purchase the institution's shares and expect a fair return on their investment (Reham et al., 2019). Jegede (2016) indicates that African HEIs provide an average return of 21% on investments.

Participant 24: “So, for me, there is an understanding and appreciation that privates do not receive any government funding; they are businesses often, as we are a listed entity, and they have shareholders that they need to satisfy. So, it is about bottom-line profit, but, at the same time, it cannot be at the expense of academic quality, academic credibility and integrity.”

The failure of PHEIs to cover their costs through the single revenue of students' tuition fees may lead to their closure and, ultimately, the collapse of PHEIs. Additionally, poor financial management skills can lead to these institutions' inability to effectively manage their expenses and revenues (Akshubiri, 2020). However, managing the financial sustainability of PHEIs goes beyond managing revenue and expenses. The quality of education is pivotal in this equation, and the concept of value for money, as presented by Harvey and Green (1993), becomes central to the discussion of the sustainability of these institutions. The idea of value for money integrates the return on investment and quality education (Thian & Alam, 2015). Akshubiri (2020) and Altbach (2004) argue that HEIs must focus on factors beyond financial indicators, including student achievements, research, community engagement, capacity, risk, systems, and infrastructure.

Participant 14: "We are in the business of education, and the business of education cannot be stagnating and, especially if we look at the two variables I mentioned, about the quality of the graduates and the uptake in society and in industry."

Balancing academics and business while driving the institution's financial sustainability requires the involvement of all stakeholders in decision-making, including students, industry, and communities. In addition, PHEIs should prioritise staff buy-in to create a successful learning environment. In this regard, the leadership of PHEIs needs to be aware that academics are more academically oriented and less business-oriented (Thian & Alam, 2015), which may require a concerted effort to help academics understand the nature of business rather than splitting the concepts.

Participant 24: "So, for me, it is very much the balance between the business side of things and academics, and not in any way compromising one in favour of the other."

PHEIs can play an active role in activism and innovation if the institution's leaders understand the balance and can effectively lead it towards both academic and business success. However, management is often torn between senior management and shareholders' requirements regarding managerial efficiency and effectiveness and academics' expectations of autonomy concerning education and research (Bryman & Lilley, 2009).

Participant 6: "I think it needs a management team that is cohesively believing in those strategies, and, obviously, there is always this big divide between academics and the business development people, but I think that the type of academic that we attract is probably one that is more understanding of the business side of things."

Management leveraging business and academic-related competencies can establish a competitive advantage for the institution's offering through external recognition of the quality of its education

(Thian & Alam, 2015). A management team must believe in the institution's strategies and be able to bridge the gap between academia and business. The focus of PHEIs should not be solely on the financial side of the business, but also on students' experience, without compromising the quality of teaching and learning.

Participant 6: "The other thing I am going to say from the competitive thing is that there needs to be a much stronger focus on allowing the academic side of the business to be an equal partner. Then it does not become a purely financial economic engagement, because, in my view, your competitive advantage will always be focused on either your teaching and learning or your students. It will have an academic character, and when you decide or define what it is going to be, you need to look at that and ask yourself, 'Okay, how long is it going to take us to put it down, and what do we need to put it down?' And it is not just a financial discussion; it is very much the academic discussion. So you need to bring all your role players into it, which often does not happen."

The ability of institutions to integrate their financial strategy into the academic plan, as noted by Akshubiri (2020), could be a major factor in creating a competitive advantage in their quest to enhance sustainability. The leadership of PHEIs should acknowledge and understand the balance between academia and business in achieving the institution's strategies.

Participant 4: "Often a lot of politics in most of these privates, because they get good academics or academic leadership, and then they have to fight with businesspeople who have other interests than a quality learning experience."

Participant 15: "So, do you achieve your strategies? But I think the most important thing is your leadership. Just because someone was a professor at a public university and then went to a private one does not make them a dean. That is not the answer. As I have mentioned previously, there is a fine line between business and academic excellence in private, and you need to get a leader."

- ***Institutional Goals and Objectives***

It is notable that, in previous studies on KPIs in HEIs, only Brown (2012) explicitly treats setting objectives as a KPI. The current study highlights the importance of measurable goals and objectives as critical KPIs, a view that is supported by Kaplan and Norton (1996). The Fourth Industrial Revolution, globalisation, the continuous demand for higher education, and competition are among the factors that have pushed both private and public HEIs into a highly competitive business environment where efficiency and performance are essential for survival (AbuMezied, 2016; Xing & Marwala, 2017).

Institutions must adopt a progressive, flexible, and adaptive planning process that is responsive to a dynamic environment and an uncertain future (Duderstadt, 2000). Fernandes and Singh (2021) argue that the lack of leadership and strategic planning capabilities in HEIs often leads to deterioration in the quality of these institutions. However, the strategic planning process is not the only focus; HEIs also need to develop and apply KPIs within it (Parada et al., 2019). An example of such KPIs is HEIs' readiness to support their students in achieving their academic goals (Epstein & Roy, 2001; Kerzner, 2011). PHEIs should foster an environment characterised by capable staff and sufficient resources and infrastructure to proactively implement strategic plans and adapt to future challenges, such as the impact of artificial intelligence on higher education.

Participant 7: "Obviously, you have got to plan, there is no doubt about it, and a strategy. But the most important thing is capacitating that strategy; you have got to make sure that you have got sufficient staff and resources and infrastructure in place, because there is no point in having these plans and goals if you do not have the resources and the capacity to deliver on them, and that includes your staffing, your infrastructure, your technology."

The success of the strategic planning process, driven by educational leadership and PHEIs' long-term planning, depends on several factors. These include sound financial management while maintaining academic quality, compliance with regulatory requirements, recognition of relevant qualifications for the future world of work, and a strong brand, image, and market focus. The enablers of these factors must include verifiable quality control procedures, qualified staff, and staff and student well-being, as well as stakeholder satisfaction. The criteria strongly support a customer-driven institution with adequate employee involvement and information-based management. Badri et al. (2006) postulate that HEIs could utilise criteria to implement quality programmes and establish benchmarks to measure progress.

Participant 1: "So, I would say finance, academics, image, and brand image."

Participant 11: "Firstly, being a financial guy, obviously, financial stability is the first that hooks onto student numbers. Then, obviously, the throughput rate; they must be shown to be successful in their student numbers and throughput rate, not just pass rate, but throughput rate, and coupled to that, I would say, the brand."

- **Innovation**

Due to the challenges HEI faces, innovative research, pedagogies, and organisational structures are critical to their sustainability (Tierney & Lanford, 2016). Jakovljevic (2018) supports this notion, indicating that innovation encompasses scientific, technological, organisational, financial, and commercial activities. In the present study, innovation was strongly supported as a KPI, consistent with Beard (2009), Cronje and Vermaak (2004), and Umayal Karpagam and Suganthi (2012). Mazorodze and Mkhize (2024) postulate that HEIs create and share knowledge and are

therefore generally regarded as innovative and competitive. However, HEIs in developing countries, unlike those in developed countries, still lack certain innovation capabilities (Obeidat et al., 2017). This lack of innovation is often caused by inflexible organisational structures (Gaspary et al., 2020), policies (Swanger, 2016), and cultures (Okeke, 2015) that do not promote innovation in research, knowledge creation, and new teaching, learning, and assessment practices. Cheng et al. (2016) argue that HEI policies should continually support and promote innovation. Swanger (2016) supports this view, indicating that innovation policies should be integral to institutions' structures and culture. The current business models of HEIs could help address some of the universal barriers to innovation and change (Armstrong, 2014).

The key driver of innovation in HEIs is the knowledge held by academics (Lee & Trimi, 2018). However, Jakovljevic (2018) postulates that academics often perform many tasks that may conflict with innovation tasks, such as administrative duties. Thus, HEIs need to allow academics time for reflection and grant them the required flexibility to engage in innovation activities. This innovation includes academic staff's ability to challenge and change the status quo in their subjectfield. PHEIs should develop academic staff's innovation competencies as part of a strategy to ensure institutional sustainability.

Participant 2: "And I think our staff development, if you do not develop your staff, there is not going to be any innovation in teaching."

Participant 14: "You have got to have a voice, and you cannot sit on the fence then. I think there is a role there for private higher education to play where the publics cannot, and that is that activist voice ... being innovative but also challenging the status quo in certain industries and fields."

Nurturing employees' ability to innovate has become critical for all organisations (United Nations, 2015). As part of its strategy, HEI leadership should foster an innovative, entrepreneurial approach to teaching, education, assessment, and research. As many institutions have embraced innovation, it is now recognised that HEI innovation can play a prominent role in these institutions' sustainability and competitive advantage (Amjad, 2019; Elrehail et al., 2018).

Developing appropriate competencies in students enables them to play an active role in social innovation as responsible citizens. This social innovation can empower community members through mutual ownership and shared responsibility. Littlewood and Holt (2018) postulate that people actively participate in addressing community challenges through collaborative action that creates social cohesion and contributes to social and economic growth (Sibhensana & Maistry, 2023). As part of its innovation, a PHEI should also acknowledge the institution's broader impact, recognising education's wider purpose as a key driver of social and economic development and transformation.

Participant 19: “I think if we go into the social development aspect of it, the graduate’s attributes, leadership skills, and those kinds of things will definitely help them build their own companies.”

PHEIs must invest in systems and processes to adapt to the evolving education industry, which may require that they change, adapt, and possibly restructure their operations.

Participant 10: “The second thing then for us, due to the big numbers that we are actually having in the business, is definitely your systems and processes and technology. The whole education industry is moving in the direction of becoming more dependent on technology and innovation.”

Participant 14: “So, again, maybe that is another key indicator, is our flexibility and our ability to be innovative, and our ability to change and evolve.”

The leadership of PHEIs should be acutely aware of what it would take to build an institution that embraces innovation as part of its sustainable development. Armstrong (2014) notes that a business model could facilitate innovation in HEIs in South Africa. However, Armstrong (2014) and Jakovljevic (2013) strongly argue that academics possess creative knowledge, skills, and the desire to produce original ideas, but are often limited in engaging in innovative activities due to work overload, insufficient modelling of innovative behaviour, and inadequate funding.

5.8 Recommendations

To create a competitive advantage in PHEIs with institutional capital as the catalyst, the following recommendations are made:

- Adopt technology that can replace routine tasks to improve the institution’s efficiency and bottom line.
- Build a customer-centred culture and approach that positions the student as a discerning customer at the centre of the institution.
- Continuously engage with industry to ensure the institution’s educational practices are aligned with industry needs.
- Create a culture of academic excellence to ensure that students are adequately prepared for the world of work.
- Embrace ethical, democratic, and distributed leadership, and acknowledge that everyone in the institution can make a difference.
- Do not prioritise profit over the quality of education.
- Align the institution with industry needs to ensure its programmes are responsive to the job market.
- Structure the institution to be part of both the business and university community.

- Regulatory requirements and standards must not be the institution's primary focus. PHEIs should focus on aligning education with students' needs and the world of work.
- The graduation rate, employability, and the quality of graduates should be the ultimate measure of PHEIs' success.
- Ensure a flexible structure and processes that adapt to an ever-evolving educational environment.
- Develop a broader quality assurance framework and strategy that are continually improved.
- Adopt technology that enables the institution to respond to an ever-evolving education and business industry driven by innovation.
- PHEI leadership should create an environment that embraces innovation as part of its sustainable development.
- Actively, sincerely, and meaningfully contribute to community development, with a focus on sustainability.

5.9 Conclusion

This study underscores the vital role of institutional capital, comprising human, structural, relational, and financial assets, in driving the transformation and competitiveness of PHEIs. By effectively leveraging institutional capital, PHEIs can enhance their institutional resilience, foster innovation, and establish a distinct competitive advantage in a dynamic educational landscape. The identification and strategic management of key performance indicators for institutional capital are essential to facilitate sustainable growth and position PHEIs as leading players in the higher education sector. Moving forward, policymakers and institutional leaders should prioritise the development and nurturing of these assets to support continuous improvement and long-term success in a rapidly evolving environment.

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Chapter 6: Evolving Legal Education: Adapting for Modern Practice

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Abstract

Purpose: This chapter examines how legal education must evolve to meet the demands of a rapidly transforming, technology-driven legal profession. Responding to longstanding critiques that law curricula remain overly theoretical and insufficiently practice-oriented, the study explores curriculum adaptations implemented within a Legal Skills module at a Private Higher Education Institution in South Africa between 2023 and 2025. The chapter focuses on three strategic pillars: technological integration (including AI tools and digital research platforms), structured soft skills development, and industry and cross-faculty collaboration. The purpose is to demonstrate how a holistic, skills-integrated model can bridge the persistent theory–practice gap and enhance graduate employability in modern legal contexts.

Study design/methodology/approach: The study adopts a qualitative, conceptual research design grounded in constructivist learning theory, Laurillard’s Conversational Framework, and Activity Theory. A systematic thematic desk review of academic literature, policy documents (including Legal Practice Council directives), curriculum materials, and reflective practitioner insights was undertaken. The analysis examined how digital tools (MyJuta, LexisNexis, ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Grammarly), experiential learning strategies (debates, role-plays, simulations), and collaborative partnerships were integrated into the curriculum to support the development of professional competence.

Findings: Effective legal education reform requires integrating digital literacy, ethical use of AI, and critical oversight alongside core professional competencies such as communication, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence. Technology integration enhanced research efficiency and digital readiness, but required structured guidance to prevent over-reliance. Simulation-based and collaborative learning activities, aligned with Laurillard’s six learning types, strengthened professional identity formation and practice-readiness. Industry engagement (e.g., partnerships with Juta and guest lecturers) and interdisciplinary initiatives with Commerce and IT faculties expanded students’ applied knowledge, networking capital, and workplace preparedness.

Originality/value: The chapter contributes a practice-oriented, theoretically grounded framework for modernising legal education in emerging economies. By synthesising digital transformation, soft skills integration, and collaborative partnerships within an Activity Theory lens, it offers a replicable model for institutions seeking to cultivate adaptable, ethical, and technologically competent legal professionals.

Keywords: Legal Education; Legal Skills; Technological Integration; AI Ethics; Soft Skills Development; Industry Partnerships; Curriculum Reform

6.1 Introduction and Background

As legal practice and workplace technologies evolve, law educators must adapt teaching methods, assessments, and materials to prepare students for a technology-driven profession. At the 2025 South Africa Law Teachers Conference, Justice Dunstan Mlambo stressed the need for law schools to equip students with the skills to use AI responsibly and uphold ethical standards.

Recent judgments, including *Northbound Processing (Pty) Ltd v South African Diamond and Precious Metals Regulator*¹ and *Mavundla v MEC: Department of Co-Operative Government and Traditional Affairs*², have revealed the growing use - and misuse - of AI in legal drafting, where fabricated case citations have appeared. These developments highlight the urgent need for legal education to strengthen research capabilities, to strategically integrate technology, and to promote the ethical use of AI.

This underscores the critical need for legal education to prioritise (1) the development of proficient research skills among students, (2) the strategic integration of technology into legal curricula, and (3) the ethical training of future practitioners in the responsible use of AI tools. Ensuring that law students are equipped to navigate the intersection of technology and legal practice is not merely beneficial but imperative in maintaining the integrity of the profession.

This research examines the recent enhancements to the Legal Skills module at a Private Higher Education Institution in South Africa, aimed at making it more practical and aligned with real-world practice. Implemented across several campuses between 2023 and 2025, the changes focus on blended learning and developing both legal and soft skills essential for employability.

Responding to longstanding critiques of overly theoretical teaching, our team redesigned the module to ensure graduates are workplace-ready. This article outlines four key focus areas:

- Integrating technology and AI into training and assessment;
- Developing professional and ethical competencies;
- Fostering industry and cross-faculty collaboration; and
- Aligning curriculum with evolving professional needs.

6.2 Problem Statement

Many students entering and progressing through higher education face significant challenges in language proficiency, digital literacy, academic writing, and research skills. These deficits severely hinder their ability to recall, integrate, and apply theoretical knowledge effectively in practical legal scenarios, leading to reduced efficiency and potential errors in professional tasks. Furthermore, the ethical use of artificial intelligence and the development of digital literacy remain problematic, limiting students' capacity to engage responsibly with modern learning and professional environments. A lack of soft skills, graduate attributes, and core professional competencies further compounds the problem, leaving students inadequately prepared for the

¹ *Northbound Processing (Pty) Ltd v South African Diamond and Precious Metals Regulator and Others* (2025/072038) [2025] ZAGPJHC 661 (30 June 2025)

² 2025 (3) SA 534 (KZP)

demands of the contemporary workplace and undermining their potential for successful career progression.

6.3 Research Objectives

This research aims to demonstrate practical approaches to enhancing the teaching of legal skills through the integration of technology, the cultivation of soft skills, and the establishment of collaborative partnerships with industry stakeholders and other educational institutions. Specifically, it seeks to outline effective strategies for integrating digital platforms and AI tools into legal skills training to enhance research proficiency and ethical use of technology. Detail pedagogical methods for developing essential soft skills, such as critical thinking, communication, and emotional intelligence, within the legal curriculum. Illustrate successful models of industry and cross-faculty collaboration that provide students with real-world experience and interdisciplinary perspectives. Ultimately, equip students with supplementary, relevant competencies that enhance their employability and effectiveness in the professional legal environment, thereby bridging the gap between academic preparation and modern practice requirements.

6.4 Literature Review

Traditional learning used multiple prescribed textbooks and hard copies of text that had to be carried physically from place to place. However, E-learning [electronic] allows for easy access to various sources of information at the touch of a button.³ Online learning proved beneficial during the 2020 lockdown, when conventional learning methods were restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ “Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer a futuristic concept, it is redefining industries, including the legal sector.”⁵ The foundation of a legal career begins in the classroom; hence, this section focuses on integrating digital platforms and AI into legal education.

6.4.1 Leveraging Digital Tools and AI for Future-Ready Legal Education

The advent of technology has impacted various sectors of the economy, including the legal profession. Artificial intelligence is on the brink of reshaping how legal research is conducted, how documents are drafted and how cases are analysed. Moreover, the General Notice 3086 of 2025 from the Legal Practice Council of South Africa has announced that, as of 2026, Paper 2, which forms part of the Attorney Admission Examination, will include an examination on Information and Communication Technology for Practice and Associated Aspects of Cyber Law. Hence, to fully prepare legal scholars for the Admission Exam and for further practice, students must begin

³ Hosseindoost S, Hussain Khan Z, Majedi H, A Shift from Traditional Learning to E-Learning: Advantages and Disadvantages. *Arch Neurosci*. 2022;9(2): e128031. <https://doi.org/10.5812/ans-128031>.

⁴ Pokhrel, S., & Chhetri, R. (2021). A Literature Review on Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Teaching and Learning. *Higher Education for the Future*, 8(1), 133-141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347631120983481> (Original work published 2021)

⁵ <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/ai-and-lawtech/partner-content/how-ai-is-reshaping-the-future-of-legal-practice>

learning about the use and impact of technology in legal education and practice from the outset. Thus, law schools must reevaluate their approach to legal education.⁶

The integration of AI tools and the use of digital platforms in legal education can no longer be considered a luxury; it has become imperative for students to be prepared to thrive in the modern world of work.⁷

Whilst traditional legal education has provided the foundation for the legal profession for centuries, previous pedagogical methods may now fail to meet the realities of modern practice.⁸ Passmore correctly notes that modern lawyers habitually use digital research platforms such as MyJuta and LexisNexis, which have revolutionised the discovery, analysis and application of legal precedents. Compared with manual research, which would have required weeks to locate a mere one or two case laws or precedents, these online platforms offer advanced search algorithms, comprehensive databases, and analytical tools that provide vast amounts of legal information within minutes.

6.4.2 Legal Practice- A Digital Transformation

More recently, AI tools such as Grammarly, DeepSeek and ChatGPT have become increasingly popular and significant within legal workflows.⁹ Whilst these tools assist with preliminary case analysis, research synthesis, document drafting, and grammar correction, integrating them into legal practice demands more than technical proficiency. It requires ethical awareness, critical thinking skills, and the ability to distinguish between sound legal judgment and AI-generated suggestions.¹⁰

6.4.3 A Strategic Integration of Technology in Legal Curriculum

Progressive law schools have begun to incorporate digital platforms and AI tools into their curriculum through practical applications rather than mere theoretical discussions of technology in learning.¹¹ In such instances, students are encouraged to engage with AI tools and digital platforms as critical evaluators rather than passively relying on technology. The aim is to hone critical thinking skills and actively learn to appreciate the benefits and limitations of using technology in legal education. Some assignments require students to use ChatGPT for initial

⁶ Susskind, R. (2017). *Tomorrow's lawyers: An introduction to your future* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

⁷ Tran, M. (2018). The law school of the future: Technology-enhanced learning and the transformation of legal education. *Stanford Technology Law Review*, 21(2), 204-241.

⁸ Christensen, C. M., & Eyring, H. J. (2011). *The innovative university: Changing the DNA of higher education from the inside out*. Jossey-Bass.

⁹ Remus, D., & Levy, F. S. (2017). Can robots be lawyers? Computers, lawyers, and the practice of law. *Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics*, 30(3), 501-558.

¹⁰ McGinnis, J. O. (2017). Machines vs. lawyers: The legal system's response to the digital revolution. *Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics*, 30(4), 817-842.

¹¹ Furlong, J. (2019). Digital transformation in legal education: Technology-enhanced learning and the future of legal practice. *Legal Education Review*, 29(2), 145-168.

research and, thereafter, to conduct meta-analytical reflections on the AI's responses; this develops both their critical thinking and technical skills.¹² White and Williams concur that this approach actively transforms students from recipients of knowledge into active participants in advancing their legal profession through technology. This teaches students to question content generated by AI, verify information and sources, and understand the ethical implications of automated legal assistance. In doing so, this enhances their skills, which are essential in the legal profession, where accountability, ethical conduct, and accuracy are paramount.

Moreover, students should develop the ability to communicate efficiently with AI tools and systems by utilising appropriate prompts and further refining queries. In doing so, it indicates that students are equipped with the skills necessary to achieve the precision required when drafting legal documentation and litigating, thereby creating synergy between traditional legal skills and the competencies of the modern technological era.¹³

6.4.4 Preparing the Landscape of the Future Legal Profession

Although the use of technology has been accelerated in this segment, the argument aligns with Armour and Sako's view that the future of the legal profession will not see humans replaced by technology and AI, but rather evolve into a collaboration between the two. Thus, legal professionals who are competent in integrating AI tools and technology whilst maintaining critical oversight will possess significant competitive advantages compared to those who continue to utilise traditional methods of practice.¹⁴ The advantages include being able to process and interpret information more efficiently, research within shorter periods of time and provide clients with more cost-effective services since the duration of the preparation of the matters will be significantly shorter in comparison to using

- ***Conclusion***

However, insofar as the use and collaboration with technological platforms such as MyJuta and Lexis, as well as AI tools such as Grammarly, ChatGPT and DeepSeek, in legal education and the legal profession are hortatory, it is of paramount importance that this is balanced with human skills that AI cannot replicate. These human skills include creative problem-solving, emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and the ability to navigate complex interpersonal relationships. Thus, the inference is that a holistic approach must be adopted by combining traditional legal education, which relies on human-centric skills, with technological skills to thrive in the modern legal profession.

12 Wahab, E. A. A., & Kadir, S. A. (2021). Integration of artificial intelligence in legal education: Opportunities and challenges. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 11(3), 567-578.

13 Haapio, H., & Passera, S. (2013). Visual law: What lawyers need to learn from information designers. *Lapland Law Review*, 4(2), 26-49.

14 Susskind, R. (2017). *Tomorrow's lawyers: An introduction to your future* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Legal education has traditionally focused narrowly on preparing students for legal practice, often without a serious or holistic examination of the evolving demands of the modern legal profession.¹⁵ A comprehensive evaluation of the curriculum and the methods of legal instruction reveals that the LLB programme does not adequately prepare students to become competent candidate legal practitioners.¹⁶ Universities must equip law students with the practical skills necessary for effective professional performance, skills that should be cultivated and demonstrated through teaching and learning activities.¹⁷ Given the persistent emphasis on soft skills in the corporate sector, there is a growing concern and an overarching need to revise the curriculum to effectively integrate the development of these skills.¹⁸ Soft skills are the personal and interpersonal abilities that influence how you interact with others and approach your work or daily life. This section explores the reasons for and approaches to incorporating soft skills into legal training to foster the development of human-centred, practice-ready legal professionals.

6.4.5 Shifting Expectations of Legal Professionals and Challenges in South African Legal Education

Higher education aims not only to educate but to equip students with the skills needed for their careers.¹⁹ Yet, a gap remains between the soft skills employers expect and those that graduates possess.²⁰ Employers increasingly value both technical and soft skills in candidates.²¹ Owing to globalisation, the rise of multiculturalism, and the recent emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the skill sets required in the labour market have undergone a significant transformation.²² Fundamentally, job requirements are evolving due to rapid technological advancements and the increasing demand for digital skills, both of which are redefining the contemporary work environment.²³ By adopting a forward-thinking approach to both technical and soft skills development, the Institution can ensure that its legal education program remains relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of the legal profession, thus better preparing students for future challenges.

¹⁵ C Marumoagae “Progressive legal education for candidate legal practitioners: What role should universities play?” THRHR (2024) https://www.derebus.org.za/progressive-legal-education-for-candidate-legal-practitioners-what-role-should-universities-play/?utm_source [accessed 2 June 2025].

¹⁶ Marumoagae 2024 THRHR https://www.derebus.org.za/progressive-legal-education-for-candidate-legal-practitioners-what-role-should-universities-play/?utm_source [accessed 2 June 2025].

¹⁷ G Quinot and L Greenbaum “The contours of a pedagogy of law in South Africa” 2015 Stell LR 29 at 38.

¹⁸ M F Vezi-Magigaba and R Utete “Enhancing graduate employability: Inculcating soft skills into the tertiary institutions’ curriculum” 2024 Journal of Curriculum and Teaching 62 <https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v13n5p62>.

¹⁹ D E Yawson, F A Yamoah, F Owusu Sarpong and G Abban-Ampiah “Inculcating employability skill sets in undergraduates through employability embedded courses: Students experience anatomisation” 2020 Archives of Business Review 8(6) 165–179.

²⁰ Yawson et al 2020 Archives of Business Review 172.

²¹ Vezi-Magigaba and Utete 2024 Journal of Curriculum and Teaching 62.

²² Vezi-Magigaba and Utete 2024 Journal of Curriculum and Teaching 62.

²³ N I Adha, Z Mustapa, S Mohamed, J M Di and M Osman “Developing a model for graduate employability transfer of training” 2023 Information Management and Business Review <https://ojs.amhinternational.com/index.php/imbr/article/view/3775/2473> [accessed 3 June 2025] 139.

In today's competitive job market, employers are looking for more than just technical knowledge; they also expect graduates to possess strong soft skills.²⁴ Research suggests that hard skills account for just 15% of a person's ability to secure, keep, and grow in a job, while soft skills largely influence the remaining 85% of career success.²⁵ While many graduates may have the hard skills needed to enter the workforce, their lack of soft skills often makes it difficult for them to adjust and succeed in a professional environment.²⁶ Without these interpersonal and behavioural skills, employees may struggle to perform effectively, leading to uncertainty and underperformance in the workplace.²⁷ As a result, organisations across various industries now view soft skills as essential for achieving business goals and maintaining strong client relationships.²⁸

Defining the concept of soft skills poses a significant challenge given its diverse interpretations.²⁹ Soft skills encompass a broad spectrum of attributes, including personality traits, social behaviours, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, interpersonal relations, time management, and stress management.³⁰ These are typically contrasted with hard skills, which encompass formal educational credentials, technical proficiency, and linguistic competence.³¹

Professionals today are expected to demonstrate a broad set of skills that go beyond technical expertise.³² These include the ability to interact respectfully with colleagues, persuade and influence clients, negotiate with business partners, communicate effectively with peers and superiors, contribute to teamwork, and handle work-related challenges efficiently.³³ Although hard or technical skills may help secure employment, it is often the integration of soft skills that enables meaningful career progression and enhances the overall effectiveness of those hard skills.³⁴

These soft skills do not replace hard or technical skills; rather, they complement them by enhancing the potential for high performance in individuals who already possess strong technical

²⁴ Vezi-Magigaba and Utete 2024 *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching* 62.

²⁵ Yao and Tuliiao "Soft skill development for employability: A case study of stem graduate students at a Vietnamese transnational university" 2019 *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* 250.

²⁶ Vezi-Magigaba and Utete 2024 *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching* 62.

²⁷ Vezi-Magigaba and Utete 2024 *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching* 62.

²⁸ Vezi-Magigaba and Utete 2024 *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching* 62.

²⁹ Sreehari "Essential soft skills for workplace success" 2021 *Revista Geintec* 2648 <https://revistageintec.net/old/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/2306.pdf> [accessed 3 June 2025].

³⁰ Sreehari 2021 *Revista Geintec* 2649.

³¹ Sreehari 2021 *Revista Geintec* 2649.

³² Vezi-Magigaba and Utete 2024 *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching* 64.

³³ Misni, Mahmood and Jamil "The effect of curriculum design on the employability competency of Malaysian graduates" 2020 *Management Science Letters* 909.

³⁴ Vezi-Magigaba and Utete 2024 *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching* 64.

abilities.³⁵ It can be argued that soft skills are essential for enhancing job performance and are likely to lead to more effective and positive outcomes in the workplace.

6.4.6 Core competencies

Soft skills are essential for workplace success, including communication, problem-solving, teamwork, decision-making, leadership, time management, and creativity.³⁶ However, in the context of legal practice, two skills stand out as particularly vital: effective communication and critical thinking.

- ***Critical thinking***

Critical thinking is a vital soft skill that contributes significantly to both personal development and professional achievement.³⁷ Critical thinking is the ability to evaluate information objectively and draw logical conclusions. It involves the careful examination of diverse sources, such as empirical data, factual evidence, observable phenomena, and research findings.³⁸ Being able to think critically about different situations, ideas, or theories and to form a well-informed opinion is an important skill for university students, especially in fields such as law.³⁹ This kind of thinking is at the centre of how students are taught and how they learn, as it focuses more on asking questions and thinking deeply than just memorising facts.⁴⁰ It is a complex skill that integrates various forms of knowledge and abilities, making it difficult to define precisely.⁴¹

6.4.7 What Are Soft Skills and Why Do They Matter in Law?

- ***Soft skills and hard skills***

A legal practitioner needs critical thinking because the job involves analysing complex information, identifying relevant facts, and applying the law logically. In practice, you often deal with multiple sides of an argument, and critical thinking helps you assess each side carefully before forming a well-reasoned opinion.⁴² It also helps in problem-solving, making sound legal judgments, and avoiding errors.⁴³ Whether you're writing legal documents, advising a client, or

³⁵ Vezi-Magigaba and Utete 2024 *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching* 65.

³⁶ Sreehari 2021 *Revista Geintec* 2652.

³⁷ A Rasool and F Dayan "Submit, defend, and persuade: The renaissance of eloquence and communication skills for lawyers" 2023 *Global Legal Studies Review* VIII(III) 9–19.

³⁸ Rasool and Dayan 2023 *Global Legal Studies Review* 18.

³⁹ Rasool and Dayan 2023 *Global Legal Studies Review* 18.

⁴⁰ U C Okolie, P A Igwe, H E Nwosu, B C Eneje and S Mlanga "Enhancing graduate employability: Why do higher education institutions have problems with teaching generic skills?" 2020 *Policy Futures in Education* 301.

⁴¹ Rasool and Dayan 2023 *Global Legal Studies Review* 9.

⁴² Rasool and Dayan 2023 *Global Legal Studies Review* 9.

⁴³ Rasool and Dayan 2023 *Global Legal Studies Review* 9.

presenting a case in court, critical thinking helps ensure your decisions are fair, accurate, and grounded in solid reasoning.⁴⁴

Many law students believe that writing well in exams is the most important skill for success, but before you can write like a lawyer, you need to think like one.⁴⁵ This means learning to question and reflect on everything, what you read, see, hear, and even feel.⁴⁶ First impression of a case or argument may not always be right, and critical thinking helps you dig deeper and reassess.⁴⁷

The Socratic method used in law schools is a good example of how critical thinking is developed.⁴⁸ When professors ask students to explain whether a court's decision is reasonable or challenge you with hypothetical situations, they are not trying to confuse you.⁴⁹ Instead, they are encouraging you to stretch your thinking and consider how you would reason through a case where there may not be a clear answer, just like in real legal practice or future exams.⁵⁰ Additionally, incorporating practical exercises such as reflective writing, moot courts, and peer-review assignments can further develop and assess critical thinking while complementing the Socratic method.

- ***Communication***

Communication is fundamental to the legal profession, as it enables practitioners to convey complex legal arguments clearly, engage with clients, and advocate persuasively in both oral and written form.⁵¹ Strong oral skills involve persuasive speaking, attentive listening, and the ability to tailor messages to different audiences.⁵² Success often depends on clearly presenting arguments, addressing opposing views, and showing empathy.⁵³

Moreover, employers have consistently noted that graduates often lack proficiency in key areas such as communication, an essential competency for effective performance in the legal profession.⁵⁴ Communication skills, including both articulate speech and persuasive writing, have long been instrumental in influencing legal outcomes, from the speeches of ancient orators to the

44 Pusuluri Sreehari "Essential soft skills for workplace success" 2021 Revista Geintec 2648–2654 <https://revistageintec.net/old/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/2306.pdf> [accessed 3 June 2025] 2652.

45 Sreehari 2021 Revista Geintec 2652.

46 R Medina Plana "Critical thinking inside law schools: An outline" 2012 Oñati Socio-legal Series 7 at 12.

47 Medina Plana 2012 Oñati Socio-legal Series 12.

48 Medina Plana 2012 Oñati Socio-legal Series 12.

49 L Lee and J Naccarato Legal skills for law school and legal practice (2022) 1.

50 Lee and Naccarato Legal skills for law school and legal practice (2022) 1.

51 Lee and Naccarato Legal skills for law school and legal practice (2022) 1.

52 Lee and Naccarato Legal skills for law school and legal practice (2022) 1.

53 Lee and Naccarato Legal skills for law school and legal practice (2022) 1.

⁵⁴ Lee and Naccarato Legal skills for law school and legal practice (2022) 1.

compelling courtroom arguments of today.⁵⁵ A lawyer's success often hinges on their ability to present legal arguments clearly, eloquently, and convincingly.⁵⁶

Ultimately, language is central to law, and in an increasingly globalised and complex profession, communication skills are essential for both effective practice and maintaining public confidence in the legal system.⁵⁷ In conclusion, strong communication skills are not merely desirable, they are indispensable to the legal profession, enabling practitioners to advocate effectively, serve clients with clarity, and uphold the principles of justice.

- ***Conclusion***

As the legal profession continues to evolve in response to globalisation, technological advancement, and shifting employer expectations, legal education must undergo a transformative shift to remain relevant. Traditional approaches that prioritise technical knowledge over soft skills leave graduates underprepared for the complexities of modern legal practice. Bridging the gap between education and employment requires universities to embed critical soft skills, such as communication, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking, within the LLB curriculum. These competencies not only complement hard skills but also empower future legal practitioners to engage meaningfully with clients, navigate complex legal challenges, and adapt to the demands of dynamic professional environments. To promote workplace relevance and ensure graduates are practice-ready, legal education must embrace a more holistic, skills-integrated model that nurtures both intellectual rigour and human-centred professionalism.

In addition to developing these core competencies within the classroom, legal education should increasingly create opportunities for students to apply soft skills in collaborative, interdisciplinary, and practice-oriented environments. To further bridge the gap between theoretical learning and real-world practice, legal education should emphasise industry engagement, enabling students to interact with legal professionals and gain hands-on experience across diverse legal environments.

6.4.8 Enhancing Legal Education through industry and cross-faculty collaboration

In addition to developing core professional competencies, one must create the environments in which such skills can be meaningfully applied. This section examines how industry engagement and cross-faculty collaboration can bridge the gap between theoretical legal education and the realities of professional practice. By exploring practical partnerships with industry professionals, inter-faculty initiatives, and academic networks such as Juta, it considers strategies to equip the

⁵⁵ Lee and Naccarato Legal skills for law school and legal practice (2022) 1.

⁵⁶ Lee and Naccarato Legal skills for law school and legal practice (2022) 1.

⁵⁷ Lee and Naccarato Legal skills for law school and legal practice (2022) 1.

institution's law graduates with the adaptability, insight, and professional networks needed to excel in a complex, interdisciplinary legal landscape.

Success in both legal studies and professional practice increasingly depends on effective collaboration. In practice, even more so than in university, clients can stem from any academic background.⁵⁸ As such, people skills and other soft skills mentioned above are crucial for meeting shifting employer expectations. To further expand on 'real-world readiness', we further propose interdisciplinary collaboration. This idea is not novel. Almost two decades ago, the Carnegie Report, *Educating Lawyers*, called upon law schools to adopt an integrated approach to professional education that teaches practical skills and professionalism throughout the curriculum.⁵⁹

This section explores the roles of both practical industry partnerships and academic collaborations in achieving goals such as student readiness and skill development, helping bridge the gap between education and employment. More specifically, suggestions for industry partnerships, including collaborations with working professionals and inter-faculty projects, will be made, and programmes with platforms such as Jura and guest lecturers will be considered the best means to prepare our students for their future careers.

Engagement with interdisciplinary teams during tertiary studies equips students with the practical competencies necessary for real-world legal contexts. For this reason, we recommend partnerships with other faculties, such as the School of Information Technology (SOIT), the School of Commerce (SOC), and the School of Arts and Humanities (SOAAH), as well as with industry role players considered potential future employers for our students. Below are some ideas and examples from similar projects around the world that the institution can learn from.

6.4.9 Interdisciplinary collaboration on campus:

Interdisciplinary collaboration involves students, academics, and graduates working in relevant fields of study to achieve a common goal. This can equip students with versatile skills, enhancing their readiness for the workforce and their understanding of other fields or roles within their field.

One such proposed partnership is between the School of Law and the School of Information Technology, combining technology and legal practice to create a dynamic partnership that enhances both fields.

⁵⁸ Lee and Naccarato *Legal skills for law school and legal practice* (2022) 11.

⁵⁹ Cassidy, R.M. 2012. "Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now" *Boston College Law Review* 1515.

- *SOL ↔ SOIT (Technology & Legal Practice)*

In an era in which disciplines are no longer firmly separate, policymakers and enforcers alike need to understand the risks and opportunities created by digital advancements.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Couch, Harroz, and Levit state that law schools must train students to research, organise, create, and present information online from the inception of their education, as this is now the expectation upon entering the workplace.⁶¹

When considering the problems a democracy often faces, technological illiteracy among policymakers and policy illiteracy among computer scientists are staggering.⁶² This has happened because traditional academic disciplines such as law and IT, as they currently operate, often are not designed to help students study and apply technical expertise to advance the public interest. Real industry projects can, however, greatly enhance student learning, but require a significant commitment by academics and industry practitioners.⁶³

A practical example of how interdisciplinary collaboration can work in practice is seen in the Melbourne Zoo application project, where technology and business students came together to solve a real-world problem, highlighting the potential for similar partnerships between law and IT. Shi wrote a paper on a project conducted to create an interactive ‘app’ containing a digital map for the Melbourne Zoo and brought together students and staff from three higher education faculties of the University of Melbourne.⁶⁴ Students from multimedia, computer science, and business degrees teamed up to create a user-friendly, effective application.⁶⁵ As students from computer science programmes needed to learn oral, written and interpersonal skills, business and multimedia students benefited from learning the technological processes involved in bringing their ideas to fruition.⁶⁶ All while zoo-goers no longer had to struggle with the confusion of traditional paper maps. The programme was so well received that it was expanded to other zoos and locations across Australia, showcasing the benefits of collaboration across fields to improve technology in business and learning.

While not legal in nature, the Melbourne Zoo app project illustrates the value of interdisciplinary collaboration. This approach could equally benefit law students working alongside IT and business peers on technology-driven legal solutions.

⁶⁰ Crawford, S. 2018. *Why universities need ‘public interest technology’ courses*. *Wired*. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/story/universities-public-interest-technology-courses-programs/> [Accessed 12 June 2025].

⁶¹ Couch, V.K., Harroz, J. & Levit, J.K. 2014. ‘Adapting to change in legal education’. *Oklahoma Bar Journal*, 2247–2248.

⁶² Crawford, S. 2018. *Why universities need ‘public interest technology’ courses*. *Wired*. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/story/universities-public-interest-technology-courses-programs/> [Accessed 12 June 2025].

⁶³ Shi, H. 2010. “An interactive zoo guide: A case study of collaborative learning” *International Journal of Multimedia & Its Applications* 2(2), pp 57–67.

⁶⁴ Shi, 2010, p. 59.

⁶⁵ Shi, 2010, p. 65.

⁶⁶ Shi, 2010, p. 57.

While students can benefit greatly from such projects, we do anticipate some difficulty with finding time in the already very full curriculum. Careful planning will be required.

- ***SOC ↔ SOL (Commerce and Law: Bridging Disciplines)***

The above example also speaks to the interplay between law and commerce. Another example of the collaboration of law and commerce is ‘LawWithoutWalls’ (LWW), founded and run by University of Miami law professor Michele DeStefano.⁶⁷ LWW has achieved success in South Africa, Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and beyond. The programme pairs law and business students with legal and business professionals in industry to assign them a challenge from a corporate legal department, law firm, or legal services company.⁶⁸ Companies and law firms sponsor each LWW project, which presents a real-world challenge the sponsoring entity is facing while keeping an eye out for good future candidates for their firms. It can relate to operations, process or corporate social responsibility.

Other sources also describe a similar idea, calling it “externships”.⁶⁹ Externships can allow students to receive academic credit for working in a supervised capacity under a licensed attorney or business professional.⁷⁰

Such initiatives foster innovation in the legal profession, which is traditionally slow to adopt change because of its regulatory processes. Participants develop empathy, self-awareness, cultural competency, inclusivity, flexibility, the ability to take risks and to question with an open mind, skills that usually aren't taught in law schools.⁷¹

It prepares students to function in corporate legal roles, with business acumen and understanding of regulatory environments. By fostering collaborations among the institution’s law and business schools and industry partners, the institution can create a pipeline of skilled graduates ready to enter roles that demand both legal expertise and business acumen, thereby significantly improving employability. A potential challenge we anticipate is ensuring firms provide meaningful opportunities for students to contribute, rather than merely keeping them busy with administrative tasks. Steps will need to be taken to ensure the experience is uniform and meaningful to all students involved.

⁶⁷ Niesche, C. “Can you change how lawyers think and work? Inside LawWithoutWalls’ international initiative” *Law.com Legaltech News* (14-12-2021) <https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2021/12/14/how-do-you-change-the-way-lawyers-think-and-work-397-53800/?slreturn=20250612102812> [Accessed 12.06.2025].

⁶⁸ Niesche *Law.com Legaltech News* (14-12-2021).

⁶⁹ Couch et al 2014 *Oklahoma Bar Journal* 2251.

⁷⁰ Couch et al 2014 *Oklahoma Bar Journal* 2251.

⁷¹ Niesche *Law.com Legaltech News* (14-12-2021).

6.4.10 Academic partnerships

Apart from practical and industry collaboration as discussed above, student readiness can also be improved through academic partnerships that extend beyond the institution's various campuses. This includes guest lecturers who can bring in a fresh perspective from other learning institutions, as well as collaboration with platforms such as Juta.

- ***Guest lecturers***

The School of Law has already derived substantial value from its academic partnerships, particularly through the integration of expert guest lecturers into the curriculum. An example is the collaboration with Juta, which facilitates the identification and allocation of subject matter specialists from its extensive academic network. In early 2025, Juta was approached to recommend an expert in Constitutional Law, and a Professor from the University of Pretoria agreed to give the guest lecture. His guest lecture, delivered to students enrolled in the Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies, proved intellectually stimulating and well-received. It offered learners an enriched, practice-oriented perspective on the subject matter. This collaboration not only enriched students' understanding but also connected them with established experts in the field, enhancing the relevance and applicability of their education.

- ***Increased alumni interaction***

To further leverage the benefits of academic engagement, the SOL may consider strengthening ties with its alumni network in future. Inviting graduates to return as guest lecturers not only reinforces institutional identity and community but also provides students with access to practitioners who bring current, real-world insights into the classroom. This alumni engagement strategy has long-term potential to create a dynamic academic ecosystem where theoretical knowledge and practical experience intersect to benefit both students and alumni. Alumni moving abroad after completing their studies is an unavoidable challenge that the process must consider.

6.4.11 Conclusion

These interdisciplinary experiences mirror real-world scenarios, fostering adaptability, critical thinking, and collaboration. By engaging our students across multiple disciplines, we will help them gain a holistic understanding rather than a mere academic knowledge base.

By leveraging robust industry engagement through platforms like Juta, legal professionals, and guest lectures, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration with the Commerce, IT, and Arts faculties, the School of Law can substantially enhance students' readiness for legal practice.

Inter-faculty initiatives provide experiential learning that sharpens critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and adaptability, responding directly to the longstanding Carnegie Report call to integrate professionalism across legal education. Additionally, students benefit from expanded professional

networks: contact with alumni, industry mentors, and cross-disciplinary teams builds social capital that consistently correlates with improved employability. This will provide the institution's students with an edge over other law graduates.

Through this real-world exposure and interdisciplinary insights, we hope to adequately equip students not only to understand the law but to embody it as skilful, multidimensional professionals ready to thrive in the complex and evolving legal ecosystem.

6.5 Introduction

Balancing the preservation of long-standing academic and professional traditions⁷² with the imperative for innovation presents ongoing challenges in meeting the evolving expectations of both students and the legal profession. In a rapidly transforming global and technological landscape, a central concern emerges: how best to prepare students for meaningful and successful careers in law within this dynamic and complex context.

The Carnegie Report highlighted long-standing criticisms of legal education for prioritising theoretical content over practical training and for often relying on outdated teaching models. In response, our academic team undertook research, evaluation, and reflection to reimagine the delivery of this module and ensure it meets the expectations of a dynamic, skills-driven legal profession.

6.5.1 Adapting Legal Skills Instruction to Meet Evolving Workplace Demands

The traditional emphasis in legal education on teaching students to “think like lawyers”, primarily through the analysis of appellate court decisions, has increasingly come under scrutiny for its limited capacity to prepare graduates for the demands of the modern legal profession. As highlighted in a series of articles by David Segal in *The New York Times*,⁷³ the structure, content, and escalating cost of legal education have been the subject of significant critique. Segal contends that law schools have historically privileged abstract theory over practical competency, often relying on pedagogical methods that no longer align with the expectations of the legal marketplace. Notably, law firms now anticipate that graduates will be more practice-ready, having acquired substantive experiential training during law school.

In response to such critiques, the Carnegie Report⁷⁴ offers a compelling call for reform. It advocates for a more holistic and integrated approach to legal education, one that bridges the

⁷² Couch, V.K., Harroz Jr, J. and Levit, J.K., 2014. Adapting to change in legal education. *OKLA. BAR J.*, 85, pp.2247.

⁷³ Cassidy, R.M., 2012. Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now. *BCL Rev.*, 53, p.1515.

⁷⁴ Cassidy, R.M., 2012. Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now. *BCL Rev.*, 53, p.1516.

doctrinal and clinical divide and foregrounds not only analytical reasoning but also the development of practical skills and professional identity throughout the curriculum.

In line with these objectives, Cassidy proposes nine actionable reforms that faculty members and academic leaders can undertake to enhance the quality and relevance of legal education:

- Collaboration: While law schools often promote individual academic performance, the legal profession functions primarily through collaboration. Legal education should reflect and support this reality.⁷⁵
- Oral Communication: Given the oral demands of legal practice, particularly in advocacy and negotiation, law schools must place greater emphasis on developing and assessing students' oral communication skills alongside written competencies.⁷⁶
- Problem Solving: Legal reasoning extends beyond interpreting case law. Effective education should engage students in addressing multifaceted, real-world legal problems, thereby cultivating core problem-solving abilities.⁷⁷
- Global Perspective: As legal practice becomes increasingly transnational, curricula must address the global dimensions of law and equip students to operate within diverse international frameworks.⁷⁸
- Practical Judgment: The ability to exercise sound judgment, evaluating complex situations and making prudent decisions, is essential for legal professionals and should be actively fostered in legal training.⁷⁹
- Professional Formation Retreats: Legal education should support students' personal and ethical development by creating spaces for reflection on professional identity, emotional resilience, and moral responsibility.⁸⁰
- Career Paths Course: To support informed career planning, law schools should offer structured guidance on the full range of legal careers, encouraging students to explore diverse opportunities beyond conventional practice settings.⁸¹
- Law Practice Management Course: Recognising that many graduates will enter solo or small-firm practice, a dedicated law practice management course should address essential topics such as billing, conflict checks, marketing, business planning, and legal technology.⁸²

⁷⁵ Cassidy, R.M., 2012. Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now. BCL Rev., 53, p.1518-1519.

⁷⁶ Cassidy, R.M., 2012. Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now. BCL Rev., 53, p.1519-1520.

⁷⁷ Cassidy, R.M., 2012. Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now. BCL Rev., 53, p.1520-1522.

⁷⁸ Cassidy, R.M., 2012. Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now. BCL Rev., 53, p.1522-1523.

⁷⁹ Cassidy, R.M., 2012. Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now. BCL Rev., 53, p.1523-1524.

⁸⁰ Cassidy, R.M., 2012. Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now. BCL Rev., 53, p.1524-1526.

⁸¹ Cassidy, R.M., 2012. Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now. BCL Rev., 53, p.1526-1528.

⁸² Cassidy, R.M., 2012. Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now. BCL Rev., 53, p.1528-1529.

- Faculty Appointments: Lasting curricular reform requires investment in human capital. Strategic hiring and support for clinical faculty are essential to ensure sustainability and to bridge the persistent divide between doctrinal and practice-oriented instruction.⁸³

Together, these recommendations underscore the need for legal education to evolve in both substance and structure, aligning more closely with the demands of the profession and the needs of students who will become future legal practitioners.

6.5.2 Rationale and methodology for adapting legal skills education.

Integrating practical competencies into legal education requires law faculties to make informed decisions about both the selection of skills to teach and the pedagogical approaches to employ.⁸⁴ This article proposes guiding principles to help navigate these decisions.

- ***Determining Which Skills to Teach***

While establishing clear learning outcomes is fundamental, there remains limited consensus on which practical skills should be prioritised or how they should be structured within curricula. Frameworks such as Australia's Priestley 12 outline essential skill areas, such as ethics, advocacy, and legal writing, while academic literature typically categorises practical legal knowledge into three interrelated domains:⁸⁵

- Theory-context skills, which reinforce understanding of legal doctrine;
- Legal culture skills, including communication and professional ethics; and

Technical practice skills, such as administrative procedures and document preparation. These categories are best conceptualised as points along a continuum, rather than as discrete classifications.

- ***Pedagogical Approaches to Skill Development***

Effective instruction in practical legal skills is grounded in educational theories such as constructivism, social learning theory, and situated cognition, which emphasise active engagement, contextualised learning, and the social nature of knowledge construction. Pedagogical strategies, including scaffolding, experiential learning, and apprenticeship models, have been shown to facilitate the development of professional competencies.

⁸³ Cassidy, R.M., 2012. Beyond practical skills: Nine steps for improving legal education now. *BCL Rev.*, 53, p.1529-1531.

⁸⁴ Hewitt, A. and Toole, K., 2014. The practical knowledge conundrum: what practical knowledge should be included in a law school curriculum and how can it be taught?. *U. of Adelaide Law Research Paper*, (2014-18), pp.6.

⁸⁵ Hewitt, A. and Toole, K., 2014. The practical knowledge conundrum: what practical knowledge should be included in a law school curriculum and how can it be taught?. *U. of Adelaide Law Research Paper*, (2014-18), pp.9.

Although frameworks like the Priestley 12 86 provide a foundation for identifying core skill areas, but they fall short in offering detailed curriculum design guidance. Organising practical skills by their educational purpose can help address this gap, thereby enabling a more coherent and effective integration of practical knowledge within legal education programmes.

Hall and Sylvester argue that Clinical Legal Education (CLE) should no longer be seen as a supplementary, vocational element of legal training, but rather as a core pedagogical method that integrates theory and practice. They challenge the traditional divide between abstract legal knowledge ("Mode 1") and applied, contextual learning ("Mode 2"),⁸⁷ contending that this separation limits curriculum development and student growth.

Drawing on Aristotle's concepts of *theoria* (thinking), *techne* (making), and *praxis* (doing),⁸⁸ the authors present CLE as a dynamic educational space where students not only learn legal skills but also develop ethical judgment and professional identity. CLE, they assert, offers deep, inquiry-based learning that conventional classroom methods cannot match.

The chapter critiques the marginal status of CLE in legal education, which is often unassessed or exclusive, and calls for its integration into mainstream curricula. By referencing reforms in the UK, US, and Australia,⁸⁹ the authors demonstrate a growing global shift towards embedding clinical work as a central, socially engaged component of legal education. They conclude by advocating a holistic, reflexive legal education that integrates theory and practice to cultivate thoughtful, skilled, and ethical legal professionals.

Sullivan critically reflects on the ten-year impact of the Carnegie Report (Educating Lawyers, 2007), reaffirming its central argument that legal education must integrate intellectual training, practical skills, and the formation of professional identity. He maintains that legal education still overemphasises doctrinal reasoning, "thinking like a lawyer"⁹⁰ at the expense of experiential learning and ethical development.

While the report inspired reforms such as integrated curricula and initiatives like Educating Tomorrow's Lawyers (ETL),⁹¹ Sullivan argues these changes remain incremental. Considering

⁸⁶ Hewitt, A. and Toole, K., 2014. The practical knowledge conundrum: what practical knowledge should be included in a law school curriculum and how can it be taught?. *U. of Adelaide Law Research Paper*, (2014-18), pp.8.

⁸⁷ HALL, E. and SYLVESTER, C., 2016. Clinic as the Crucible for Theorised Practice and the Practice of Theory in Legal Education. *Education*, 3(2), p.3.

⁸⁸ HALL, E. and SYLVESTER, C., 2016. Clinic as the Crucible for Theorised Practice and the Practice of Theory in Legal Education. *Education*, 3(2), p.13.

⁸⁹ HALL, E. and SYLVESTER, C., 2016. Clinic as the Crucible for Theorised Practice and the Practice of Theory in Legal Education. *Education*, 3(2), p.9.

⁹⁰ Sullivan, W.M., 2018. After ten years: The Carnegie Report and contemporary legal education. *U. st. thomas LJ*, 14, p.334 .

⁹¹ Sullivan, W.M., 2018. After ten years: The Carnegie Report and contemporary legal education. *U. st. thomas LJ*, 14, p.334.

economic pressures, technological shifts, and evolving professional expectations, he calls for a more transformative approach.

Drawing on insights from medical and business education,⁹² Sullivan advocates for a legal curriculum that intentionally fosters ethical judgment, adaptability, and leadership.⁹³ He concludes that meaningful reform will require a collective effort driven by faculty leadership and institutional exemplars to reimagine legal education for a changing professional landscape.

Simulations function as effective teaching tools in higher professional education by bridging the gap between theory and practice.⁹⁴ Through case studies in nursing, management, and legal education in Norway,⁹⁵ the authors show that simulation-based learning enhances student engagement, practical skills, and the development of professional identity.

Simulations integrate theoretical knowledge with procedural application by placing students in realistic, low-risk environments. In nursing, high-fidelity clinical simulations promote decision-making and collaboration, though students may experience performance anxiety.⁹⁶ Management students benefit from roleplays simulating job interviews, gaining insights into human resource processes and self-awareness.⁹⁷ Law students participate in moot court simulations, which improve their understanding of legal procedures,⁹⁸ although they express a need for more targeted feedback.

Overall, simulations foster deep, experiential learning by engaging students emotionally and cognitively, encouraging reflection, and supporting authentic skill development. Challenges include maintaining consistent engagement, resource demands, and balancing emotional safety with educational rigour. Nevertheless, well-designed simulations, supported by preparation and

⁹² Sullivan, W.M., 2018. After ten years: The Carnegie Report and contemporary legal education. *U. st. thomas LJ*, 14, p.335.

⁹³ Sullivan, W.M., 2018. After ten years: The Carnegie Report and contemporary legal education. *U. st. thomas LJ*, 14, p.343.

⁹⁴ Nordkvelle, Y., Stalheim, O.R., Fosslund, T., de Lange, T., Wittek, A.L. and Nerland, M.B., 2019. Simulating: Bridging the gap between practice and theory in higher professional education. *Ensuring Quality in Professional Education Volume I: Human Client Fields Pedagogy and Knowledge Structures*, pp.54.

⁹⁵ Nordkvelle, Y., Stalheim, O.R., Fosslund, T., de Lange, T., Wittek, A.L. and Nerland, M.B., 2019. Simulating: Bridging the gap between practice and theory in higher professional education. *Ensuring Quality in Professional Education Volume I: Human Client Fields Pedagogy and Knowledge Structures*, pp.54 .

⁹⁶ Nordkvelle, Y., Stalheim, O.R., Fosslund, T., de Lange, T., Wittek, A.L. and Nerland, M.B., 2019. Simulating: Bridging the gap between practice and theory in higher professional education. *Ensuring Quality in Professional Education Volume I: Human Client Fields Pedagogy and Knowledge Structures*, pp.57.

⁹⁷ Nordkvelle, Y., Stalheim, O.R., Fosslund, T., de Lange, T., Wittek, A.L. and Nerland, M.B., 2019. Simulating: Bridging the gap between practice and theory in higher professional education. *Ensuring Quality in Professional Education Volume I: Human Client Fields Pedagogy and Knowledge Structures*, pp.60.

⁹⁸ Nordkvelle, Y., Stalheim, O.R., Fosslund, T., de Lange, T., Wittek, A.L. and Nerland, M.B., 2019. Simulating: Bridging the gap between practice and theory in higher professional education. *Ensuring Quality in Professional Education Volume I: Human Client Fields Pedagogy and Knowledge Structures*, pp.63.

debriefing are shown to be powerful methods for connecting academic knowledge to professional practice.⁹⁹

6.5.3 Bridging the Theory to Practice Gap in Legal Education through Curriculum Design and the Application of Laurillard's Six Learning Types

Diana Laurillard¹⁰⁰ conceptualises six core learning types that underpin effective pedagogy, each of which fosters distinct dimensions of student learning.

- Acquisition involves the assimilation of knowledge through engagement with instructional resources such as lectures, academic readings, and multimedia content.
- Inquiry (or Investigation) requires students to engage in independent exploration of information to address specific questions or problems, thereby cultivating skills of critical evaluation and analytical reasoning.
- Discussion facilitates the exchange and contestation of ideas among learners, promoting deeper comprehension through comparative analysis, critical engagement, and reflection.
- Practice entails applying acquired knowledge in authentic or simulated contexts, supported by formative feedback that enables iterative improvement and the development of problem-solving competencies.
- Production focuses on creating tangible outputs, such as research reports, presentations, or projects, reinforcing understanding through the synthesis and application of knowledge.
- Collaboration encourages learners to engage in cooperative tasks aimed at the co-construction of knowledge, leveraging diverse perspectives to enhance collective problem-solving and conceptual development.

In the 2025 iteration of the Legal Skills module, class and participation activities were deliberately structured to integrate Laurillard's six learning types. During the instructional unit on interviewing skills, students engaged in a structured role-play exercise in which they interviewed peers based on a predetermined factual scenario. Peer evaluation formed an integral component of the activity, enabling participants to receive constructive feedback on their performance. This approach effectively incorporated all six learning types that include acquisition, investigation, discussion, practice, collaboration, and production, within a single learning experience. Nordkvelle explained the benefits of introducing simulations in legal education, and this activity received highly positive

⁹⁹ Nordkvelle, Y., Stalheim, O.R., Fosslund, T., de Lange, T., Wittek, A.L. and Nerland, M.B., 2019. Simulating: Bridging the gap between practice and theory in higher professional education. *Ensuring Quality in Professional Education Volume I: Human Client Fields Pedagogy and Knowledge Structures*, pp.65.

¹⁰⁰ Laurillard, D., 2013. *Teaching as a design science: Building pedagogical patterns for learning and technology*. Routledge.

feedback from students, who reported gaining valuable insight into a professional competency essential to legal practice.

6.5.4 Conclusion

The evolving demands of the legal profession require law schools to transcend traditional, theory-heavy pedagogies and embrace integrated, practice-oriented approaches that cultivate both competence and professional identity. As the Carnegie Report and subsequent scholars affirm, meaningful reform lies in bridging the doctrinal-to-practical divide, embedding skills such as collaboration, problem-solving, ethical reasoning, and global awareness into the core of legal education. Pedagogical strategies grounded in experiential learning, Clinical Legal Education, and simulation-based methods have demonstrated their capacity to connect theoretical understanding with authentic professional practice.

By intentionally aligning curriculum design with frameworks such as Laurillard's six learning types, educators can create learning environments that actively engage students across cognitive, practical, and collaborative dimensions. The positive reception of the 2025 legal skills module, particularly in role-play interviewing exercises, illustrates the transformative potential of such an approach. Ultimately, equipping graduates to navigate complex legal landscapes requires a holistic, reflexive, and skills-rich educational model, one that prepares them not only to "think like lawyers," but also to act with competence, adaptability, and integrity in a rapidly changing world.

6.6 Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, specifically employing a conceptual and theoretical framework methodology to analyse the evolving landscape of legal education and its adaptation to modern practice. The primary aim is to provide a structured understanding of how technological integration, soft skills development, and industry partnerships prepare law graduates for the contemporary legal profession.

6.7 Research Design

The research design is primarily descriptive and analytical, drawing on existing literature, policy documents, and the authors' practical experience in curriculum development at a Private Higher Education Institution in South Africa. It is not an empirical study involving primary data collection from participants but rather a critical examination and synthesis of current pedagogical practices and their alignment with theoretical underpinnings. The analysis was conducted through a systematic thematic review of the collected textual data, identifying recurring themes, patterns, and relationships related to the integration of technology, soft skills, and partnerships within legal education. The methodology is designed to articulate a coherent framework for understanding and implementing innovations in legal education.

6.8 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is built upon the intersection of constructivist learning theories and sociocultural perspectives on professional development. Constructivism, particularly as articulated by Diana Laurillard's Conversational Framework, ¹⁰¹provides a lens for understanding the design and implementation of learning activities that foster deep engagement and skill acquisition. Laurillard's framework emphasises the iterative dialogue between teachers and learners, and among learners themselves, through various learning types (e.g., acquisition, inquiry, practice, production, discussion, collaboration). In this study, Laurillard's framework was applied to evaluate how specific pedagogical interventions, such as debates, role-plays, and simulations, were designed to facilitate these learning types, thereby fostering the development of practical legal and soft skills. This aligns with the article's focus on collaborative learning, debates, role-plays, and simulations for developing practical legal and soft skills.

Furthermore, the framework integrates sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is a social process and cultural tools and social interaction mediate the development of higher mental functions¹⁰². In the context of legal education, this highlights the importance of:

- **Technological Integration:** Digital platforms (MyJuta, LexisNexis) and AI tools (ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Grammarly) are viewed as cultural tools that mediate learning and professional practice, shaping how students acquire and apply legal knowledge and skills.
- **Soft Skills Development:** These are understood as socially constructed competencies developed through interaction and participation in authentic legal contexts, such as mock trials, client interviews, and interdisciplinary projects.
- **Industry Partnerships and Cross-Faculty Collaboration:** These initiatives create rich social learning environments where students engage with experienced practitioners and peers from diverse disciplines, facilitating the internalisation of professional norms and practices.

6.9 Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically grounded in Activity Theory, specifically Leont'ev's¹⁰³ and Engeström's¹⁰⁴ expansions, which provide a robust framework for analysing complex human activity systems. Legal education, in this context, is conceptualised as an activity system with the following key components:

- **Subject:** The law students and educators at a Private Higher Education Institution.

¹⁰¹ Laurillard, D. (2012). *Teaching as a Design Science: Building Pedagogical Patterns for Learning and Technology*. Routledge

¹⁰² Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press.

¹⁰³ Leont'ev, A. N. (1978). *Activity, Consciousness, and Personality*. Prentice-Hall.

¹⁰⁴ Engeström, Y. (1987). *Learning by Expanding: An Activity-Theoretical Approach to Developmental Research*. Orienta-Konsultit.

- **Object:** The goal of preparing students for the demands of modern legal practice, encompassing legal knowledge, technological proficiency, and professional soft skills.
- **Tools:** The mediating artefacts used in the activity, including traditional legal texts, digital platforms (MyJuta, LexisNexis, Canvas), AI tools (ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Grammarly), virtual breakout rooms, and practical exercises (debates, role-plays, simulations).
- **Community:** The broader academic institution, legal profession, industry partners (Juta), and collaborating faculties (Commerce, IT, Humanities).
- **Rules:** The pedagogical guidelines, curriculum requirements, ethical standards (e.g., responsible AI use), and professional regulations governing legal practice.
- **Division of Labour:** The roles and responsibilities of educators, students, and external partners in the educational process.

By applying Activity Theory, the research can systematically analyse the contradictions and tensions within the legal education system (e.g., between traditional teaching methods and demands of modern practice, or between theoretical knowledge and practical skills). It allows examination of how new tools (technology, AI) and new forms of collaboration (industry partnerships, cross-faculty projects) are introduced into the activity system and how they transform the object of activity and overall learning outcomes. This framework is particularly useful for understanding the dynamic interplay between the various elements and how they collectively contribute to the evolution of legal education.

6.10 Data Collection and Analysis

Given the conceptual and theoretical nature of this methodology, data collection primarily involves a desk-based review of:

- **Academic Literature:** Scholarly articles, books, and reports on legal education, technology in education, soft skills development, and interdisciplinary learning.
- **Policy Documents:** Relevant guidelines and notices from legal professional bodies (e.g., Legal Practice Council of South Africa) concerning legal education and practice.
- **Curriculum Documents:** Internal curriculum descriptions and pedagogical materials from the Institution related to the Legal Skills module.
- **Experiential Data:** The collective observations and reflections of the authors regarding the implementation and outcomes of the curriculum enhancements.

The analysis will involve thematic analysis of the collected textual data, identifying recurring themes, patterns, and relationships related to the integration of technology, soft skills, and partnerships within legal education. This will be interpreted through the lens of the proposed conceptual and theoretical frameworks to explain how these innovations address the identified problem statement and research objectives. The analysis will also seek to identify areas of synergy and potential challenges within the activity system of legal education.

6.11 Limitations

This study's primary limitation is its non-empirical nature, relying on a conceptual and theoretical analysis rather than primary empirical data from students or practitioners. While it provides a robust framework for understanding, it does not present quantitative or qualitative evidence of the interventions' direct impact on student learning outcomes or employability. Furthermore, the authors' direct involvement in the curriculum development and implementation at the Private Higher Education Institution introduces a potential for observational bias, as their reflections might inherently lean towards positive interpretations of the interventions' effectiveness. Future research could address this limitation by conducting empirical studies using surveys, interviews, or longitudinal tracking of graduates.

6.12 Results and Findings

The desktop research conducted outlines significant shifts in legal education to adapt to the evolving needs of the legal profession. Key findings highlight the importance of blending technology, soft skills, and industry partnerships to create a curriculum that prepares students for the complexities of modern legal practice.

6.12.1 Technological Integration:

The use of digital platforms such as MyJuta and LexisNexis has been central in providing students with easy access to vast legal resources, allowing them to engage with up-to-date legal content. AI tools such as ChatGPT, DeepSeek, and Grammarly were integrated into assessments to foster critical thinking and reflection on AI-generated content, ensuring students can navigate and critically engage with emerging technologies in legal practice. However, the initial implementation faced challenges in ensuring equitable access to these tools for all students and in mitigating the risk of over-reliance on AI without sufficient critical human oversight. Additionally, virtual learning environments, including breakout rooms, were utilised to encourage collaborative learning, making education more flexible and accessible. This integration of technology prepares students for a future where digital literacy is integral to legal practice.

6.12.2 Soft Skills Development:

The curriculum was adapted to emphasise the development of soft skills, which are increasingly valued in the legal profession. Soft skills such as effective communication, critical thinking, ethical decision-making, teamwork, and emotional intelligence were fostered through practical exercises like role-plays, debates, and workplace simulations. For instance, role-plays for client interviewing were designed with specific rubrics assessing active listening and empathetic responses, while debates required students to articulate arguments persuasively and respond constructively to opposing viewpoints. Workplace simulations, such as drafting client correspondence and managing invoicing, were assessed on clarity, accuracy, and adherence to professional standards.

By integrating these soft skills with legal knowledge, the curriculum aimed to produce well-rounded, practice-ready graduates who can navigate both technical legal tasks and complex interpersonal dynamics in professional settings.

6.12.3 Industry and Cross-Faculty Collaboration:

Strong partnerships with industry stakeholders, such as Juta, facilitated guest lectures and interactions with legal professionals, providing students with real-world insights and enhancing their understanding of current legal practices and challenges.

The research also highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, particularly with faculties like Commerce, IT, and Humanities. These collaborations are designed to provide students with broader perspectives on areas such as data protection, budgeting, and emotional intelligence, thus equipping them with the skills needed for a diverse range of legal roles. Industry partnerships and cross-faculty initiatives offer students opportunities for practical exposure and networking, bridging the gap between academia and the professional world.

6.13 Conclusions and Future Research

The findings of this study decisively underscore the critical need for legal education to evolve, incorporating a judicious balance of traditional legal knowledge, emerging technological competencies, and essential soft skills. The successful integration of AI and digital platforms, coupled with a deliberate emphasis on practical, real-world skills and interdisciplinary collaboration, has proven effective in equipping students to meet the multifaceted challenges of the modern legal profession. By adopting a holistic approach to legal education, law schools can better prepare graduates who are not only proficient in legal theory but also adaptable, ethical, and able to thrive in a rapidly changing, technology-driven legal landscape. This approach fosters a new generation of legal professionals who are not only technically competent but also possess the interpersonal acumen and ethical grounding necessary for impactful practice, ultimately enhancing their employability and contribution to justice.

6.13.1 Future Research

While the research highlights significant changes in legal education, it also raises several unanswered questions and potential avenues for future research:

Ethical Use of AI: While AI tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly have been integrated into legal education, how can educators ensure that students learn to use them ethically? Future research should focus on developing and evaluating specific pedagogical frameworks and assessment methods that cultivate critical AI literacy and ethical decision-making, perhaps through comparative studies of different intervention strategies. Further research is needed on best

practices for incorporating AI into the curriculum while teaching students to critically evaluate AI-generated content and avoid over-reliance on technology.

Long-Term Impact of Soft Skills Development: While this study emphasises the importance of soft skills in legal education, more research is needed to assess the long-term impact of soft skills training on graduates' success in the legal profession. Specifically, longitudinal studies could track graduates' career trajectories, job satisfaction, and perceived professional effectiveness, and correlate these outcomes with the intensity and nature of the soft skills training they received during their legal education. How do soft skills influence career progression and overall job satisfaction in the legal field?

Measuring the Effectiveness of Cross-Faculty Collaboration: While interdisciplinary collaboration is recognised as beneficial, more research is needed on how to assess its impact on student outcomes. This could involve developing robust quantitative and qualitative metrics to assess the impact of such collaborations on students' interdisciplinary understanding, problem-solving abilities, and networking opportunities, potentially through pre- and post-intervention evaluations.

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Section C: Sustainable Societies: Education as a Catalyst for Change

This section explores the transformative role of education in advancing social, economic, and environmental sustainability. The chapters examine how institutions can cultivate ethical leadership, civic responsibility, innovation, and inclusive development through curriculum design, research engagement, and community partnerships. Emphasising resilience, justice, and long-term thinking, the contributions position education not merely as a site of knowledge transmission, but as a powerful catalyst for building equitable and sustainable societies.

Chapter 7: Translanguaging for Social Justice: A Self-Study in Pre-Service Teacher Education

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Purpose: This chapter presents a qualitative self-study examining how multilingualism and translanguaging can advance social justice within South African teacher education. Situated in linguistically diverse and historically unequal educational contexts, the study explores how integrating translanguaging into pre-service teacher development can affirm students' linguistic identities, challenge monolingual ideologies, and promote equitable pedagogical practices. The purpose is to critically reflect on the role of teacher educators in modelling multilingual pedagogies and to investigate how translanguaging strategies can contribute to more inclusive and socially just classrooms.

Study design/methodology/approach: The study adopts a qualitative self-study methodology grounded in sociocultural theory and translanguaging scholarship. Data were generated through reflective journaling and lesson observation notes collected over a semester in Bachelor of Education classes. A thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was conducted to identify recurring patterns in pedagogical practice, student engagement, and evolving professional insights. The analysis was interpretive, linking empirical reflections to theoretical constructs of translanguaging, linguistic capital, and critical language pedagogy.

Findings: Five interrelated themes emerged: (1) progressive integration of translanguaging strategies; (2) shifts in pre-service teachers' linguistic awareness and attitudes; (3) affirmation of students' linguistic identities; (4) systemic and ideological challenges to multilingual pedagogy; and (5) professional growth through reflexive practice. The findings demonstrate that translanguaging enhances epistemic access, increases student participation, and disrupts dominant English-centric hierarchies. However, institutional norms, curriculum constraints, and entrenched monolingual ideologies remain significant barriers. Structured professional development and supportive policy alignment are therefore essential for sustainable pedagogical transformation.

Originality/value: This chapter contributes practitioner-centred insight into translanguaging as a socially just pedagogical approach within higher education teacher preparation. By foregrounding reflexive teacher educator practice, it highlights translanguaging not merely as a classroom strategy but as a transformative framework for dismantling linguistic inequities. The study offers practical pathways for embedding multilingual pedagogy in teacher development programmes aligned with national language policy and social justice imperatives.

Keywords: Teacher development; multilingualism; translanguaging; social justice; teacher education; linguistic diversity

7.1 Introduction

In an increasingly globalised and multicultural world, educational settings are marked by growing linguistic diversity that fundamentally reshapes teaching and learning dynamics. This means that teacher education programs must adapt to prepare pre-service educators to navigate and effectively embrace this multilingual reality (García & Wei, 2014; García & Kleifgen, 2020; Mavhiza, 2025b). Many schools of thought argue that multilingualism is no longer just a demographic feature but a valuable resource that, when effectively integrated within pedagogy, can promote inclusivity and social justice (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Creese & Blackledge, 2022). Central to this shift is translanguaging, a pedagogical practice that encourages learners to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire fluidly, thereby challenging traditional monolingual instructional paradigms and validating multilingual identities (da Silva & Makalela, 2025; Mavhiza, 2025b; Wei & García, 2022). This transformation is especially significant in diverse and historically complex contexts like South Africa, where linguistic plurality intersects with systemic educational inequities rooted in race and class (Heugh, 2019; Mabena, 2025).

7.2 Background

South Africa's educational system is characterised by profound linguistic heterogeneity, with nine Indigenous languages, including isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sesotho, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, Sepedi, Setswana, Siswati, and isiNdebele, alongside English and Afrikaans, which are spoken by learners. Despite official policies recognising multilingualism as a national priority, practical implementation remains limited, often privileging English and Afrikaans, thereby marginalising indigenous languages and perpetuating inequities (Mbirimi-Hungwe & Matariro-Mutanha, 2024; Probyn, 2021; Mavhiza, 2025b). Many learners transition from mother-tongue instruction in the early grades. According to the South African Language in Education Policy (LiEP) of 1997, this transition occurs in Grade 4, when learners are introduced to English as both a subject (English First Additional Language, EFAL) and a Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). Mavhiza (2025a) highlights this early transition as a significant challenge, noting that learners are introduced to English as a medium of instruction without adequate linguistic support. This lack of support hampers their comprehension and academic performance. Furthermore, these problems often persist beyond the early grades, extending into higher education. Such systematic errors tend to become entrenched, underscoring the need for transformation within the educational system. Unfortunately, teacher preparation programs frequently fall short of equipping pre-service teachers with the necessary multilingual pedagogical skills. Many educators tend to replicate monolingual approaches they experienced themselves, which undermines efforts to create equitable and inclusive classrooms (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019; García & Kleifgen, 2020; Mavhiza, 2023). Additionally, professional development initiatives often lack a focus on translanguaging practices that could validate and leverage learners' diverse language identities (Fang et al., 2022). Recent policy efforts, such as the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act (2025) and initiatives for mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTbBE), aim to address systemic inequities by

promoting multilingual education from early grades. However, significant gaps persist between policy, classroom realities, and teacher-training frameworks (McKinney & Guzula, 2024).

7.3 Problem Statement

Despite policy frameworks for both basic and public higher education advocating multilingual education and growing scholarly advocacy for translanguaging as a tool for social justice, a disconnect persists between policy and practice in teacher education in South African education. For example, the Language Policy for Public Higher Education Institutions (2020) mandates that higher education institutions embrace multilingualism, noting that many learners come from basic education with significant gaps in English language development, a language that is primarily used as the medium of instruction. However, the implementation of this policy is not even among several institutions of higher learning. To that effect, McKinney and Guzula (2024) note that many pre-service teachers continue to receive inadequate training to effectively implement multilingual and translanguaging pedagogies, resulting in classrooms that marginalise non-dominant languages and learners' identities. This gap contributes to the replication of linguistic hierarchies and social inequities within education, where learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds struggle to access knowledge and fully participate (Heugh, 2019; Makalela, 2022; Mbirimi-Hungwe & Matariro-Mutanha, 2024). Furthermore, there is limited critical reflection among teacher educators on their own linguistic ideologies and instructional practices that shape teacher candidates' readiness to embrace linguistic diversity. Addressing these challenges requires a deeper inquiry into how translanguaging and multilingual approaches can be integrated into teacher development to effectively support social justice objectives.

7.4 Research Objectives

In increasingly diverse educational contexts, understanding and effectively integrating multilingualism and translanguaging into teaching practices is vital for fostering inclusive and socially just learning environments. This self-study critically examines my pedagogical approaches, focusing on how translanguaging strategies are embedded and on their impact on both pre-service teachers and learners. By exploring these dimensions, the research aims to uncover the potential of translanguaging to enhance linguistic awareness, support learner identities, and promote equity within South African teacher education programs. Through this inquiry, I hope to identify practical pathways for strengthening professional development initiatives that align with broader social justice goals and language policies. To achieve the objectives stated here, the study was guided by the research questions in the following section.

7.5 Research Questions

To guide this inquiry, the following research questions were posed:

- How do my teaching practices as a lecturer of Academic Literacy, English First Additional Language and English methodology modules reflect an understanding of multilingualism and translanguaging?
- How can translanguaging promote recognition of students' linguistic identities and advance social justice?
- What challenges and opportunities arise when integrating translanguaging strategies in teacher education?
- How can South African teacher education programs better align with language policies and social justice through multilingual and translanguaging practices?

This investigation highlights the importance of integrating translanguaging into teacher education to cultivate inclusive practices that recognise and celebrate linguistic diversity. I hypothesise that by supporting greater awareness and skill in translanguaging, South African teacher education programs can better prepare future teachers to support diverse learners, uphold social justice, and create equitable educational spaces that affirm students' linguistic identities. The following section analyses the literature on multilingualism, translanguaging and social justice.

7.6 Literature Review

The scholarly literature reviewed here relates to multilingualism, translanguaging, and their intersection with social justice in education, with a specific focus on teacher development in the South African context. It examines how existing research highlights the pedagogical and social benefits of embracing linguistic diversity and identifies the challenges and opportunities for integrating these practices into pre-service teacher education.

The prevailing monolingual paradigm in education is increasingly recognised as a significant barrier to equity and inclusion, particularly in linguistically diverse societies like South Africa. The dominance of a single colonial language - English, in educational settings marginalises students whose home languages differ from the language of instruction (Heugh, 2019; Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021; Mavhiza, 2025). This linguistic marginalisation frequently intersects with other forms of social inequality, such as race and class, thereby perpetuating systemic disadvantages (Herrera-Rocha, 2017; Heugh, 2019; Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021). The reliance on English in South African higher education disempowers a significant portion of students and reproduces a "monolingual norm and anglo-normativity," a social justice issue. In their book review, Herrera-Rocha (2017, p.1) comments on the introduction of the concept of Anglo-normative by McKenney (2017) as the imposition of a single language where "Students who do not meet the expectation of being proficient in the standardised forms of communication, characterised as 'White' English, are

considered deficient and deviant.” Thus, in South African higher education, this concept is linked to power, giving privilege to English as a hegemonic language and to a perceived, acceptable form of discourse in school contexts.

From a social justice perspective, education must ensure the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, while affirming diverse identities, including linguistic identities (Mavhiza, 2025b; Herrera-Rocha, 2017; Bell, 2007). Monolingual practices in higher education implicitly devalue students' home languages and cultures, leading to what Bourdieu (1991) termed ‘linguistic capital depreciation’. Conversely, pedagogical approaches that embrace multilingualism and translanguaging serve as powerful tools for advancing social justice by affirming linguistic identities, enhancing access to the curriculum, challenging linguistic hierarchies, and promoting critical consciousness (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021; Wei & García, 2022; Mavhiza, 2025). Therefore, translanguaging, in particular, is considered a step towards social justice pedagogy that promotes linguistic activism and Klaasen (2020) adds that socially just pedagogies in higher education can support agency for social justice by reconfiguring traditional power dynamics, embracing student diversity, and promoting participatory, reflective, and inclusive learning environments.

South Africa presents a compelling context for examining multilingualism and translanguaging in education, given its profound linguistic heterogeneity and history. Despite its constitution enshrining linguistic diversity and educational policies advocating for multilingualism, the legacy of apartheid continues to privilege English and to some extent Afrikaans, marginalising Indigenous African languages (Department of Education, 1997; Department of Basic Education, 2009; Heugh, 2019; Probyn, 2021; Mavhiza, 2025). Key issues include the persistent use of English as the primary LoLT from Grade 4 onward, which creates significant learning barriers, and a widespread lack of teacher preparedness in multilingual pedagogy. There is a significant gap between progressive multilingual education policies and their actual implementation, often due to inadequate resources, insufficient teacher training, and persistent colonial language ideologies. However, scholars like Ndhlovu and Makalela (2021); Mbirimi-Hungwe (2023); Mbirimi-Hungwe and Matariro-Mutamba (2024); McKinney and Guzula (2024); Mavhiza (2025), among others, advocate for translanguaging as a critical pedagogical approach to bridge linguistic inequities, with studies showing potential in enhancing student engagement and comprehension in South African classrooms. In particular, Mbirimi-Hungwe (2023, p. 9) notes, “In South Africa, a translingual approach to teaching has been used at primary and secondary school level as well as at university.” To support this assertion, Madiba (2024) reports the successful use of translanguaging in their study, noting that “translanguaging emerges as a promising alternative for shaping institutional language policies and practices towards the development of a genuinely multilingual university.”

The successful integration of multilingual and translanguaging pedagogies critically depends on the preparedness of both pre-service and in-service teachers (García & Kleifgen, 2020; McKinney & Guzula, 2024). Although Garcia and Kleifgen (2020) do not explicitly focus on pre-service

teachers, their conceptualisation supports integrating translanguaging into teacher training to prepare future educators to use students' full linguistic repertoires for learning and identity affirmation. Historically, teacher education programs have perpetuated monolingual ideologies, leaving a significant gap between the linguistic realities of diverse classrooms and educators' pedagogical skills (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019). However, there is a significant change, as scholars like McKinney & Guzula (2024) have conducted empirical research centred on pre-service teacher contexts in South Africa, showing how student teachers use translanguaging to support epistemic access and resist language marginalisation. Their work captures pre-service teachers' dispositions towards translanguaging, highlighting that these teachers employ it consciously to connect home languages with subject content. This practice is shown to improve learners' understanding and affirm linguistic diversity as a resource rather than an obstacle in education. Thus, effective teacher preparation requires developing a strong theoretical understanding of multilingualism and translanguaging; cultivating positive attitudes and challenging monolingual biases; providing practical pedagogical strategies for implementation; supporting reflective practices; and addressing policy-practice gaps to advocate for and implement inclusive language practices (García & Wei, 2014; García & Kleifgen, 2020; Probyn, 2021). Ultimately, this emphasises the value of approaches such as self-study for professional growth in this critical domain.

7.7 Theoretical Framework

This self-study is grounded in a contemporary understanding of language that moves beyond traditional "monolingual ideologies" which view languages as discrete, separate systems (García & Wei, 2014; García & Lin, 2016; Makalela, 2016). Instead, it adopts a more dynamic view of multilingualism, recognising that multilingual individuals draw from a unified, integrated linguistic repertoire to make meaning and communicate, rather than possessing isolated language systems (Zhu & Li, 2025). Building on this, translanguaging serves as the central theoretical and pedagogical concept. Coined by Cen Williams (1994) and later significantly developed by several scholars, including García, Wei, Lin (2016), and, in South Africa, Makalela (2016), translanguaging describes the natural practice of multilingual individuals fluidly employing their entire linguistic repertoire, including different languages, dialects, and registers as a single, interconnected resource for meaning-making, communication, and learning (García & Wei, 2014; Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015). This concept fundamentally challenges the notion of language as a bounded system, framing an individual's linguistic resources as a "holistic repertoire" (García Wei, 2014). From a pedagogical standpoint, translanguaging is not mere code-switching; it is a purposeful, strategic approach to leveraging all available linguistic resources to facilitate deeper understanding, enhance cognitive processes, and affirm linguistic identities (Otheguy et al., 2015). Its theoretical underpinnings are deeply rooted in sociocultural theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasise the social and cultural mediation of cognitive development, thereby providing multiple pathways to knowledge construction, lowering affective filters, and supporting deeper engagement (Creese & Blackledge, 2022). Furthermore, translanguaging aligns with

critical language pedagogy, seeking to challenge inherent power imbalances in language use and promote linguistic justice (Lewis et al., 2012; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Klaasen, 2020).

7.8 Methodology

This paper is grounded in qualitative self-study research, a methodology increasingly recognised in teacher education for its reflective and practitioner-focused approach. This approach involves systematically examining one's own teaching practices to deepen understanding and foster professional growth. The core methodological features include self-reflexivity, transparency, and iterative reflection to improve pedagogical practice within the specific context of teacher education (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2014). As a lecturer in Academic Literacy, English Teaching Methodology, and English First Additional Language modules at a South African private institution of higher learning, continuous pedagogical reflection is critical to ensure that students comprehend the content and are better prepared for their future classrooms. My reflections were mainly from the Bachelor of Education, first- and second-year classes that I teach. The student-teachers in my class come from diverse backgrounds, and English is an additional language for the majority. While high-level ethical clearance was not necessary for this self-study, ethical considerations were adhered to. In my self-study, I was both researcher and participant, which required rigorous ethical reflexivity. This includes maintaining honesty in self-representation, safeguarding anonymity for my reflections on class observations, and critically reflecting on the implications of my positionality and biases throughout the research process (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2014).

Data was collected through reflective journaling and lesson observation notes. The raw data is stored in a locked safe and is accessible on request. The primary data source consists of detailed reflective journals kept throughout the semester. These reflections document my experiences, challenges, decisions, and evolving understanding of multilingualism and translanguaging pedagogies. Reflective journaling enables critical self-examination of how translanguaging strategies are integrated and their interactions with pre-service teachers' responses. Lesson observation notes from my teaching sessions captured the real-time enactment of translanguaging strategies and multilingual pedagogies. Observation data provided rich evidence of language use dynamics, student engagement, and pedagogical adjustments in practice. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in the reflective journals and observation notes following the steps by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved iterative cycles of reading, coding, and synthesising data to reveal insights into how translanguaging is practised and perceived, and into its impact on advancing social justice in multilingual teacher education settings. The analysis is interpretive, drawing linkages between empirical data and theoretical constructs from translanguaging, sociocultural learning theory, and critical language pedagogy.

7.9 Results and Findings

This self-study critically examined my teaching practices related to multilingualism and translanguaging, alongside their impact on pre-service teachers' observed awareness, attitudes,

and readiness to promote social justice in linguistically diverse classrooms. Data collected from reflective journaling and lesson observation notes over a semester, from March to June 2025, yielded five core themes, which are analysed below. The findings are discussed in relation to existing literature, emphasising pedagogical implications and broader socio-educational contexts.

7.9.1 Integration of translinguaging strategies in teacher education

The analysis reveals a progressive incorporation of translinguaging within my teaching practice. Initially, my instruction was predominantly English-focused, reflecting my monolingual educational background and the prevailing norms of English-medium education. However, through reflective engagement with translinguaging theory and the realities of linguistically diverse learners, I deliberately facilitated multilingual interactions by encouraging pre-service teachers to draw on their home languages alongside English during discussions and group activities. I modelled this by fluidly switching between isiZulu and English, and I asked students to explain complex concepts in the language they understood best to their peers. In most cases, I would hear students exclaim, ‘Oh, I see, now I understand.’ This implies that lecturers should not hesitate to incorporate translinguaging in their classrooms, even if they do not speak all the languages students use. Students themselves serve as valuable resources that can aid in facilitating understanding of complex ideas, thereby ensuring that all students can comprehend the material. This deliberate pedagogical shift aligns with García and Li Wei’s (2014) characterisation of translinguaging as the strategic utilisation of an integrated linguistic repertoire. It also responded to calls by Ndhlovu and Makalela (2021) and Creese and Blackledge (2022) advocating for multilingual classrooms that recognise students’ full linguistic capacities. Such integration not only afforded cognitive access but also created more inclusive learning environments that visibly and authentically embraced linguistic diversity.

7.9.2 Impact on pre-service teachers’ linguistic awareness and attitudes

A significant outcome was the observable positive shift in pre-service teachers’ perceptions towards multilingualism and translinguaging. Initially, concerns were raised about the practical challenges of managing multiple languages and the potential for classroom disruption. However, reflective discussions and experiential learning deepened appreciation of translinguaging’s pedagogical value and its role in promoting equity. Many pre-service teachers demonstrated increased confidence in challenging embedded monolingual ideologies, thereby affirming their enthusiasm for incorporating translinguaging in their future classrooms to affirm learners’ linguistic identities and enhance equity. These attitudinal changes echo findings from García and Kleifgen (2020), Probyn (2021), Mackney and Guzula (2024), and Mavhiza (2025), who call for teacher development programs that explicitly address linguistic biases and support asset-based views of multilingualism. Moreover, the observed progression supports Klaasen’s (2020) assertion that authentic engagement with translinguaging nurtures teacher agency and a social justice orientation.

7.9.3 Affirmation of students' linguistic identities

A prominent finding centres on the role of translanguaging in validating students' linguistic and cultural identities. The intentional use of students' home languages alongside English visibly enhanced student participation and self-expression, leading to richer classroom dialogue and collaborative learning. Observations confirmed that such affirmation raised a stronger sense of belonging and psychological safety, critical components of equitable education. This finding substantiates Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital by demonstrating how translanguaging disrupts dominant language hierarchies and reframes home languages as assets rather than deficits. It also resonates with Makalela's (2016) concept of "ubuntu", which views translanguaging as a tool that empowers students and teachers to critically engage with sociolinguistic power dynamics, contributing to transformative educational practices.

7.9.4 Challenges in implementing translanguaging pedagogies

Despite the clear benefits, several systemic and practical challenges impede the full integration of translanguaging pedagogy. Curriculum time constraints limited opportunities for in-depth exploration and practice, while prevailing institutional norms heavily favoured English-medium instruction, creating ambiguity and tension regarding permissible language practices. Some pre-service teachers found it difficult to let go of their deeply ingrained monolingual mindsets. This discomfort was evident in their body language, such as avoiding eye contact or looking down, suggesting they felt that using their home languages in an English class was somehow improper or hidden. This highlights the need for more structured pedagogical support to help them become comfortable with multilingual practices. These challenges are consistent with literature documenting the persistent policy-practice gap in South African multilingual education (Heugh & Stroud, 2020; Probyn, 2019) and the entrenched colonial language ideologies noted by Mackney and Guzula (2024). The necessity for dedicated resources, explicit training, and supportive policies becomes evident to overcome these hurdles.

7.9.5 Professional growth and recommendations for development

Reflecting on my own professional growth, this self-study revealed the ongoing need for critical self-reflection on my linguistic ideologies, for more deliberate integration of translanguaging opportunities, and for advocacy to align institutional policies with inclusive language practices. Furthermore, the findings underscore the potential benefits of fostering collaborative professional learning communities where pre-service teachers and educators can share translanguaging experiences, strategies, and co-construct inclusive pedagogies. However, establishing such collaborative communities would require a different research approach, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) or Collaborative Participatory Action Research (CPAR), along with the necessary ethical approvals. These reflections resonate with calls from García and Kleifgen (2020), Probyn (2021), and McKinney and Guzula (2024) for ongoing professional development that

integrates theory, practice, and reflective processes to build teacher agency in multilingual and translanguaging pedagogy.

7.10 Implications for pedagogical practice

The study highlights the urgent need for South African teacher education programs to embed translanguaging strategies purposefully at the heart of multilingual pedagogy. Such integration deepens pre-service teachers' linguistic consciousness. It nurtures affirmative attitudes towards language diversity while simultaneously validating students' linguistic identities, ultimately supporting equitable and inclusive classrooms grounded in social justice. Nonetheless, overcoming persistent barriers such as dominant monolingual mindsets, restricted curriculum time, and institutional limitations demands targeted professional development, enabling policies, and collaborative professional learning networks. Positioning translanguaging as a deliberate pedagogical practice challenges conventional monolingual norms and empowers educators and learners to collaboratively construct knowledge in linguistically diverse contexts. Therefore, teacher preparation must extend beyond theoretical understanding to encompass practical guidance and reflective opportunities, equipping educators to deconstruct linguistic hierarchies and promote multilingualism as an asset within frameworks of educational equity. This transformative pedagogical reorientation is essential for fulfilling policy imperatives and promoting social justice across South Africa's diverse educational landscapes.

7.11 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

This self-study affirms the transformative potential of multilingualism and translanguaging as pedagogical tools that advance social justice in South African teacher education, from the perspective of a Higher Education lecturer. By consciously integrating translanguaging strategies, teacher educators can create inclusive learning environments that affirm and leverage students' complete linguistic repertoires, promote identity validation, and reduce barriers to cognitive access. The observed positive shifts in pre-service teachers' attitudes and readiness highlight the importance of embedding translanguaging deeply within teacher development programs to challenge prevailing monolingual ideologies and empower educators as equity advocates.

Despite tangible benefits, systemic obstacles, including curriculum constraints, institutional dominance of English, and teacher reticence, highlight persistent challenges. Addressing these will require robust professional development, resource allocation, and policy advocacy that support sustainable pedagogical transformation. Importantly, supporting critical reflexivity among educators regarding language ideologies and power relations is central to this social justice agenda.

Future research should expand to include students' perspectives and to examine, through participatory action research, the impact of translanguaging in diverse classroom contexts, providing richer triangulation and practical insights.

Ultimately, this research contributes to growing evidence that embracing linguistic diversity through translanguaging is not only pedagogically effective but essential for dismantling educational inequities in multilingual societies like South Africa. It calls for sustained commitment from educators, institutions, and policymakers to prioritise and operationalise multilingualism and translanguaging as foundational elements of socially just education.

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Chapter 8: Courageous Servant Teacher Leadership in Private Schools: Practices and Perspectives

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Abstract

Purpose: This chapter investigates how courageous servant teacher leadership is understood and enacted within selected South African private schools. While servant leadership has gained traction as a relational, values-driven leadership paradigm, concerns persist about its practicality in high-accountability educational environments. The study focuses specifically on the construct of courage within servant teacher leadership, exploring how morally grounded, relationally authentic, and professionally resilient actions influence teaching and learning environments. The purpose is to deepen dialogue on how courage, embedded within a service-oriented ethos, contributes to positive school climates and learner success.

Study design/methodology/approach: A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured focus group interviews conducted across three private school settings in Gauteng and the Western Cape. A purposive convenience sample included secondary school teachers, primary school teachers, and school principals. Data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. A semantic, essentialist analytical approach guided the identification of recurring constructs associated with courageous servant teacher leadership. An audit trail and iterative data review enhanced trustworthiness.

Findings: Eight interrelated constructs emerged: moral integrity, critical pedagogical courage, learner-centred advocacy, relational authenticity, resilient professionalism, collegial support, boundary setting, and sustained hopefulness. Participants described courageous servant teachers as those who challenge injustice, advocate for marginalised learners, engage honestly in difficult conversations, model vulnerability, maintain professional boundaries, and sustain hope in demanding contexts. Courage was not framed as positional authority, but as daily ethical action rooted in compassion, accountability, and relational trust. Contrary to critiques suggesting servant leadership undermines decisiveness, findings indicate that courage strengthens accountability, conflict navigation, and professional agency within schools.

Originality/value: This chapter contributes an empirically grounded, teacher-centred articulation of courageous servant leadership in private school contexts. By foregrounding the moral and emotional labour of educators, it extends servant leadership scholarship beyond principalship and formal authority, offering a nuanced framework for cultivating ethical, resilient, and relational leadership in contemporary education.

Keywords: Servant Leadership; Courage; Teacher Leadership; School Climate; Moral Integrity; Educational Leadership

8.1 Introduction

8.1.1 Background

Educational institutions aim to teach learners academic, emotional, and social skills to achieve adulthood and financial independence, and to contribute to society (Doraiswamy, 2013). The achievement of these objectives is rooted in the institutions' vision and mission statements, and leadership drives alignment with the envisioned quality teaching and learning strategies (Wolhuter et al., 2016). Given the diverse challenges schools face, ongoing critical dialogue is necessary to address the obstacles to achieving these goals. Insights from these conversations may lead to innovative educational approaches that meet learners' evolving needs (Karlsson, 2001). The servant leadership paradigm's focus on service as a higher calling, on considering others' needs, and on empowering people to become their optimal selves (Greenleaf, 1970) offers a perspective that could enhance teaching and learning environments in institutions (Swart, Pottas, & Maree, 2022). While acknowledging that servant leadership is not a one-size-fits-all solution to global educational challenges, its influence can be crucial in supporting leaders and teachers in driving change within an ever-evolving, demanding educational landscape.

8.1.2 Research objectives

This study examined how the concept of servant teacher leadership is understood and applied in South African Private schools. It was decided to focus on the private school sector, as it is more accessible and because the concept of courage is believed to be a universal trait, with the microcosm representing the voice of the macrocosm. It aimed to contribute to the global discussion on service-oriented approaches to schools. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted to clarify the relevance, application, and impact of servant leadership on schools' teaching and learning environments. The study explored two research questions: whether teachers understand the servant leadership paradigm and what constitutes courageous acts by servant-oriented teachers. It is also intended to assist higher education institutions in empowering students to achieve their full potential.

8.2 Literature Review

8.2.1 The role of schools

Schools are society's hope project and play an essential role in fostering the holistic development of learners emotionally, academically, and socially (Chang et al., 2016). The overarching objective is to cultivate economically empowered, creative individuals who contribute to personal growth, economic prosperity, social problem-solving, and global poverty reduction (Chang et al., 2016; Wolhuter et al., 2016). Schools' educational strategies operate within the framework of national educational systems to fulfil transformative goals (Yilmaz & Ergun, 2012). Beyond personal development, the education system is vital for preparing the next generation of leaders to carry out

this hope project (Rani & Rani, 2014). The collaborative efforts of school leadership and teachers are crucial in shaping the quality of the envisioned educational goals (Cerit, 2016). As gatekeepers of holistic character development, teachers face the challenge of meeting diverse learners' needs, learning styles, goals, and personalities, while managing demanding parents. They are responsible for giving equal attention to all learners (Wolhuter et al., 2016). Effective school leadership is crucial for supporting teachers' well-being, acknowledging their contributions, offering emotional and resource support, and motivating them to positively impact society (Ghaviker & Pillay, 2016; Rani & Rani, 2016). School leadership ultimately creates the conditions necessary to achieve educational goals, enhance teaching effectiveness, and improve the school environment and climate (Swart, Pottas, & Maree, 2022). Given the human-centred nature of schools, discussions on implementing a global, human-service-oriented, courageous approach are becoming increasingly important (Greenfield, 2004).

8.2.2 The Servant Leadership Paradigm

Implementing the servant leadership approach in a school setting has shown potential to foster hope and drive positive change (Block, 1998; Swart, Pottas, & Maree, 2022). Teaching professionals responded favourably to servant leadership, feeling fulfilled in their jobs when they sensed a high level of servant-oriented practices within educational institutions (Lambert, 2012). Servant leadership is described as an other-focused approach that emphasises prioritising individual needs and interests and shifting concern from oneself to others within the organisation and the wider community (Eva et al., 2018). This leadership style, grounded in a service mindset, humaneness, and respect for others, influences and motivates followers (Botha, 2014). According to Greenleaf (1977), the servant leadership approach enriches individuals' lives, promotes a service-oriented mentality, and nurtures future leaders. Known for a sincere concern for followers' hopes and needs, servant leadership stands out as a unique leadership style. Its strength lies in merging leadership with servanthood as a model of integrity and trust (Kgatle, 2018). Empowerment, team development, and participative decision-making are key features of servant leadership, which encourages service to others and supports a holistic approach to work, fostering a sense of community and equitable power distribution (Shekari & Nikooparvar, 2011). Several researchers have utilised the survey by Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) to examine the implementation of the Servant Leadership approach in schools. Results showed that service-oriented leaders and teachers exhibited eight traits: empowerment, accountability, stepping back, humility, forgiveness, courage, stewardship, and authenticity (Swart, Pottas, & Maree, 2022). Servant leaders influence individuals across all sectors of society, guiding them from uncertainty toward a more hopeful future (Greasley & Bocarnea, 2014).

8.2.3 The application of this service-oriented approach in schools.

Research in Florida and Canada found that implementing the servant-leadership approach in schools improves student achievement. Black's 2010 study emphasised its suitability for the

educational environment (Laub, 2010). Although the focus is mainly on North America, the global effectiveness of servant leadership is evident across organisational levels, including schools, where a spillover effect encourages service-oriented behaviours (Ling, Lin, & Wu, 2016). A 2017 case study at Hilton College in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, found that students displayed ongoing servant leadership behaviours even years after graduation, which was linked to their early exposure to the paradigm and opportunities to serve others (Taylor, 2017). Swart's 2018 study on the servant leadership of principals in historically advantaged public schools reported that successful implementation supports effective teaching and results in outstanding academic performance. Swart et al. (2021) confirmed this, demonstrating that servant leadership plays a crucial role in fostering a positive organisational environment in private schools, thereby contributing to their success. Adopting servant leadership can potentially transform the teaching and learning environment in schools, thereby boosting students' academic, emotional, and social development.

8.2.4 Critique of this paradigm

Concerns have been raised about the implementation of servant leadership in schools. Van Dierendonck (2011) argues that this approach may undermine strong decision-making and institutional authority. It is also argued that servant leadership may be impractical in schools that must adhere to policy mandates and accountability structures. The emphasis on serving others, teachers, learners, and parents, can lead to role ambiguity and burnout, particularly when school leaders overextend themselves in trying to meet competing demands (Eva et al., 2019). There is also concern that servant leadership may lack the assertiveness sometimes required in high-stakes situations, such as managing conflict, addressing misconduct, or implementing unpopular reforms. In these contexts, leaders must be able to take firm, directive action that may not align comfortably with a servant-leadership style focused on consensus and humility (Crippen, 2005). Additionally, the moral undertones of servant leadership may lead to unrealistic expectations of self-sacrifice, fostering a culture in which personal boundaries are blurred and saying “no” to excessive demands is perceived as a failure of character rather than a necessary act of self-care or professionalism (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). In highly pressured school environments, especially under neoliberal education reforms that prioritise performance metrics and standardised outcomes, servant leadership may be seen as out of step with prevailing managerial demands. Critics argue that it may even serve to pacify resistance to unjust systems by encouraging accommodation over activism (McKenzie & Locke, 2014).

8.3 Research Methodology

8.3.1 Research goal

This research employed a qualitative approach to explore participants' understanding of servant leadership and the application of the characteristic of courage, as observed in focus group interviews. The characteristic of courage was prioritised for investigation to determine whether it contributes to a successful school environment and to effective teaching and learning.

8.3.2 The procedure followed for focus group interviews:

8.3.2.1 *Setting of focus group interviews*

The focus group interviews occurred in a private school setting. It was decided as such, as the researcher has access to the private school environment. All three sessions took place in schools located in the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces. The interviews were conducted in non-judgmental, safe, and welcoming environments that were familiar to the participants (Krueger & Casey, 2019). The semi-structured group discussions encouraged participants to share their perceptions, viewpoints, and experiences without requiring a vote or consensus (Greeff, 2014).

8.3.2.2 *Participants*

A purposive convenience sampling method was used to select participants for the three focus group interviews. Six participants from secondary schools took part in the first group interview. The second group interview included five principals from both primary and secondary schools. Six participants from primary schools participated in the third group interview. Teacher participants needed to be qualified, proficient in English, and representative of the population's gender distribution. Participants (principals) were required to have experience as a principal in either a private or public school setting and meet the same criteria as the other participants.

8.3.2.3 *Discussion guide*

A discussion guide was used to consistently guide the focus group interviews and to deepen understanding of the topic under study (De Vos et al., 2014). The research questions and their corresponding reasons are outlined in Table 8-1.

Table 8-1: Specific research questions and justification for the questions.

Question	Justification
What do you understand when you hear the term “servant leadership”?	Critical appraisal of the construct.
What do you understand as “courageous servant leadership” in the school and teaching and learning environment?	Critical appraisal of the presence of this characteristic in the school and teaching and learning environment.

8.3.3 The procedure followed regarding analysis:

8.3.3.1 *Data collection*

Data was gathered from participants in the private school sector. All participants provided written consent before the interviews began. Each focus interview lasted 90 minutes. During all three focus group interviews, detailed field notes and tape recordings were taken. A verbatim record of all spoken communication, descriptions, and interpretations of nonverbal cues was documented, and

a professional typist with academic experience transcribed these accounts. Since the data was transcribed by someone other than the researcher, the transcripts were cross-checked against the original recordings for accuracy. The transcripts accurately reflected the content of all three focus group interviews. Repeated active reading of the data set was performed to identify meanings and themes that emerged from the data.

8.3.4 Data analysis

Each transcript was analysed and organised to reflect words, phrases, themes, patterns, suggestions, and the frequency of reappearing comments within a specific focus group interview and across all three group interviews (Struwig & Stead, 2017; De Vos et al., 2014). The coding was done manually and highlighted with an electronic highlighter pen to indicate potential patterns that emerged from the dataset (Greeff, 2014). Themes were organised in a list of codes, and potential data extracts were collected for each identified theme. The themes were refined, and during this process, the dataset was re-read. The themes were linked to sub-themes. A detailed analysis was conducted for each identified theme, and the themes were connected to the study's research questions. An audit trail was maintained, serving as the foundation for trustworthy interpretations and valid conclusions (Struwig & Stead, 2017). The data collected through focus group interviews are distinct from other forms of qualitative data, and the interactive nature of the discussions was considered throughout the analysis (Struwig & Stead, 2017).

8.3.5 Analytical approach

A thematic, semantic, and essentialist analytical approach served as the foundation for this study. Researchers use thematic analysis to identify, analyse, and report themes and subthemes that emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher had a theoretical or analytic interest in the study area; therefore, the analysis was conducted more explicitly. This type of analysis focused less on providing a comprehensive description of the data as a whole. Instead, it concentrated on data related to a specific topic (Glisson, 2007, as cited in Swart, Pottas, & Maree, 2021). The analytical process involves moving from description, where the data has been organised and summarised to highlight themes in semantic content, to interpretation. The interpretation seeks to theorise the significance of these themes, their broader meanings, and their implications (Patton, 1990), often in relation to previous literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

8.4 Discussion of findings and implications of this study

Overall, participants were found to be familiar with the term 'servant leadership'. This paper specifically focused on the findings of the second research question. The findings and subsequent discussion in this study follow the thematic analysis approach used by the research. The themes are organised around eight primary constructs (Figure 8-1) derived from this exploration of courageous servant leadership in teaching.



Figure 8-1: Courageous Servant Teacher Leadership Constructs

Figure 8-1 depicts the study's thematic findings on courageous servant leadership in teaching, highlighting recurring and important constructs as participants perceived them. These constructs are interconnected and play a crucial role in helping teachers lead courageously with conviction, humility, and a focus on transformation.

8.4.1 Moral Integrity

The study revealed that ethical behaviour, justice, and fairness are central to the moral courage of servant-leader teachers. These educators consistently prioritise learners' well-being and equity, acting with integrity even when their choices are difficult or unpopular. Rooted in ethical and transformational leadership, their actions embody a commitment to fairness, justice, and systemic change. Ethical behaviour was highlighted by participants' willingness to make principled decisions for the benefit of others, even under pressure. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) describe ethical leadership as navigating dilemmas with integrity and justice, while Greenleaf (1977) emphasises putting others' needs first. For teachers, this meant confronting biased content and ensuring inclusive education. As one participant explained, "I knew the curriculum did not fully represent all voices, so I added supplemental readings to ensure every student is represented and involved." Participants also shared that servant teachers advocate for justice and do not remain silent in the face of inequality. Courage was framed as standing up against unfair policies and

institutional inertia. These teachers often face resistance when challenging the status quo (Kozol, 1991; Shields, 2010), yet they act with resolve. One teacher noted, “I was the only one who spoke up in that meeting, but I had to. The new policy would hurt some of our most vulnerable students. Silence was not an option.” Servant teacher leaders were also praised for practising culturally responsive teaching and actively dismantling structural barriers (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018). “I could not stay silent anymore,” said one teacher. “The way our school was handling learners was not fair. I brought it up, not to stir the pot, but to fight for every student’s right to thrive.” Freire (1970) affirms this as the role of the socially engaged educator. Maintaining hope despite systemic limitations was described as a courageous act in itself. “It is easy to be cynical in this job,” one teacher said. “But I still believe school can be a place of transformation, and that belief fuels how I teach daily.” Finally, fairness was linked to consistency and impartiality. Teachers shared that true justice involves applying standards equally, even when it is hard. “Although one student is one of my favourites, I still held him accountable,” a participant noted. “Fairness is not only about treating everyone equally but also being consistent towards all students.”

8.4.2 Critical Pedagogical Courage

The study revealed that the subthemes Challenging Norms, Systems, and Teaching Controversial Content highlight the vital pedagogical courage of servant teacher leaders. These educators, rooted in critical pedagogy and ethical leadership, prioritise student empowerment, equity, and honest engagement, even when it challenges tradition or causes discomfort. Courage was demonstrated by questioning outdated systems and practices that no longer served students' best interests. Freire (1970) emphasises the importance of critical consciousness in confronting oppressive educational structures, while Fullan (2001) advocates for innovative approaches to meaningful reform. Servant teachers act with conviction to break inertia and foster student-centred learning. As one teacher said, “Just because we have always done it this way does not mean it is right. I restructured my classroom this year, not because it was easy, but because it better fits how kids learn today.” Participants also showed courage in challenging colleagues and institutional norms when advocating for equity and relevance. Darder (2016) argues that transformative teaching challenges dominant narratives within the educational arena, and Gay (2018) supported the idea of culturally responsive pedagogy to address diversity and equity in education, building on Ladson-Billings's foundational work. One teacher explained, “I know I get eye rolls for bringing up equity in department meetings, but I will not stop. Our students deserve a curriculum that reflects their world now, not the one we knew and grew up with.” A second aspect of this courage involved teaching controversial or difficult truths. Participants shared moments when they addressed uncomfortable content honestly, recognising that transformative teaching often involves discomfort (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Darder (2016) and Freire (1970) contend that genuine engagement with reality is essential for student growth. One teacher recalled, “Some of my students had never heard certain parts of our history before. It was difficult to teach, but they deserved the truth, not just the

comfortable version.” These servant teachers showed that courage means teaching with honesty, equity, and a willingness to challenge the familiar in the service of student transformation.

8.4.3 Learner Centred Advocacy

The themes of Representing and Engaging Students highlighted participants' views on the courage of servant teacher leaders to commit to learner-centred advocacy, thereby uplifting marginalised voices, promoting cultural relevance, and sharing power in the classroom. Rooted in care, equity, and critical pedagogy, these educators advocate for all students, encourage participation, foster leadership, and create environments where learners feel seen, heard, and empowered to think deeply and critically. Teacher-servant leaders promote those whose voices are often least heard. They become deeply involved in assisting students with diverse learning abilities, marginalised groups, or those facing personal struggles. This aligns with Noddings (2005) and FitzGerald, MacCormack & Sider (2023), who emphasised the moral imperative of care in educational relationships. Servant teachers advocate for culturally responsive pedagogy to meet the diverse needs of all students (Gay, 2018). In the school context, courage means speaking out for the voiceless, even when it feels uncomfortable (Nieto, 2013). Greenleaf (1977) encouraged leaders to uplift those who are often overlooked. "I noticed that one student was always skipped during group work, a quiet but brilliant student. I arranged for her to join a group, although the other learners were unhappy about this. It made all the difference as she flourished and contributed positively to the group." This study found that courage and deliberate effort are crucial to creating a classroom community that values and embraces students' diverse cultural identities. Gay (2018) urges teachers to reevaluate their curriculum and teaching practices, with a focus on equity and cultural relevance. "When I gave texts that reflected my students' cultures, they lit up. One student said, 'I did not know we could learn about ourselves.' That moment made everything worth it." As part of the servant-teacher ethos, courage also involves stepping back to develop student voices through participation, even when those voices challenge our own. The servant teacher uses classrooms as democratic spaces for dialogue and champions critical pedagogy that encourages students to analyse the world (Freire, 1970; Hooks, 1994). Students who speak freely and without fear grow into confident, critical thinkers (Lambert, 2003). "I used to lead every discussion. Nowadays, I step back and ask, 'What do you think?'" "When students realise their opinions matter, everything changes." A crucial aspect of this is that educators are brave enough to listen to student feedback and remain open to constructive critique (Dweck, 2006). "After a specific topic, I asked the class for feedback. The answers startled me, but I listened. If I wanted them to grow from feedback, I must model how to receive and act on it. Real growth happens when learning goes both ways." Greenleaf (1977) called on leaders to foster environments that promote growth in others. Lambert (2003) supported shared leadership in classrooms, and Dweck (2006) promoted student group work with a growth mindset. "I handed over the reins for our class project, and the students ran with it. I was nervous at first, but they surprised me. Sometimes, courage means stepping back and letting them lead." Prioritising critical thinking over memorisation takes courage. "I stopped focusing on test prep and started asking big, question-like things that made them think, connect,

and reflect. That is where real learning begins." "When I added texts that reflected my students' cultures, they lit up. One student said, 'I did not know we could learn about ourselves.' That moment made everything worth it." "We must inform our students about all perspectives on a topic. Otherwise, we act like politicians."

8.4.4 Relational Authenticity

The themes of Vulnerability, Relationships, and Trust highlighted the participants' belief that servant teacher leaders must have the courage to practice relational authenticity by admitting their limitations, engaging in difficult conversations, and prioritising connection over control. Based on care, honesty, and trust-building, these educators model humility, encourage growth, and create safe, relational spaces where learning and transformation can occur. Intellectual courage is about admitting what you do not know, demonstrating honesty and openness to growth. It takes bravery to recognise when something is not working and to change course. This vulnerability is central to courageous teaching, authentic connections, and building trust (Brown, 2012). Acknowledging one's limitations shows strength, humility, and bravery. Vulnerability encourages team cohesion and psychological safety (Lencioni, 2002). For teachers, admitting they do not know something and asking for help can teach students that learning is a continuous and ongoing process. Vulnerability is not a weakness but a vital foundation for meaningful teaching (Brown, 2012). "I told my students I messed up the grading of their last quiz a few days ago. I owned it, fixed it, and you know what? They respected me more for being honest. We are all human, and they must see that in us too." "One of my lessons crashed and burned. I told my students the next day, 'Let us try to do that again, my way did not work.' And then we made it work together." "A student asked me a question I could not answer. I replied, 'I really do not know, but let us find the answer together.' That honesty sparked curiosity for both of us." Courageous servant leadership in teaching was defined as the ability to face brutal truths, whether with students, parents, or colleagues. However, uncomfortable and confrontational conversations conducted with honesty, empathy, and clarity are essential for meaningful change (Patterson et al., 2012). "I had to call a parent for the student's sake. It was strenuous and not easy. I was nervous. However, when we had the difficult conversation, we became partners; it brought us onto the same page." "The parent came in angry. I stayed calm, listened, and did not take it personally. By the end of the meeting, we were working as a team to benefit their child." It was found that servant teachers choose compassion over rigid control. Rules can maintain order, but relationships build trust and foster transformation (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Caring is fundamental to effective teaching, and connection is the trustworthy source of classroom influence (Noddings, 2005; Tomlinson, 2003). "Sure, I could write up every behaviour. However, I would rather ask, 'What is going on?' Building trust takes more time, but it changes everything."

8.4.5 Resilient Professionalism

The respondents highlighted Resilience, Patience, and Optimism as qualities that teachers demonstrate through quiet courage and respectful professionalism when enduring tough days, supporting slow progress, and holding onto hope. Grounded in perseverance and care, servant educators remain committed, patient with learners' growth, and optimistic despite setbacks, offering strength, stability, and inspiration to those they serve. Teaching is filled with emotional, mental, and systemic challenges par excellence. Duckworth (2016) defined resilience as a critical aspect of perseverance, while Claro & Gargallo (2020) affirmed that a teacher's inner life and love for their work sustain this resilience. Servant teacher leaders show compassion and strength, even during the most challenging days. "Some days are heavy, emotionally, mentally. However, I keep showing up. Not because it is easy, but because every kid deserves someone who will not give up on them." Courage in teaching is often quiet and persistent, most visible in the patience shown toward learners who are still growing (Palmer, 1998). Scholars advocated differentiated instruction, believing that all learners can learn independently through the value of perseverance demonstrated by their teachers (Duckworth, 2016; Tomlinson, 2003). "One learner in my class is not there yet, but I see the progress. It is slow but real. And I am going to keep showing up for him, even when others say he is 'too far behind.'" The participants also agreed that working with learners who have behavioural challenges is difficult and decided that courage, patience, and love are essential. Noddings (2005) encourages teachers to offer unconditional care, while Lamarche (2022) emphasises that connection is the foundation of transformation. "The kid who challenges me the most is the one I try to greet first every morning. He does not need more punishment; he needs someone who will not give up on him." This commitment is a radical act of faith in a child's potential. Addressing the elephant in the room, it was agreed that a courageous act in education is choosing and practising hope during tough days in the arena. Displaying hope and optimism leads to meaningful education and prepares learners to understand that life will throw curveballs and that they must stand tall in the face of adversity (Duckworth, 2016; Fullan, 2011). "Even on the hardest days, I look into my learners' eyes and remember why I am here. This work is sacred, even when it is exhausting."

8.4.6 Collegial support

The participants revealed that Collegial Support and setting Professional Boundaries are acts of courage rooted in service. Supporting struggling colleagues, safeguarding one's well-being, and advocating for the value of education demonstrate the deep responsibility of servant leaders toward others, themselves, and the profession. The bravery of servant teachers was demonstrated through their investment of time and effort in others, despite heavy workloads. Greenleaf (1977) emphasised that servant leaders empower others through stewardship, while Kennedy & Smith (2020) highlighted mentorship as vital for building capacity across school communities. "A new teacher down the hall was overwhelmed. I remember that feeling, so I checked in, offered resources, and just listened. We rise by lifting each other." One teacher mentioned, "The senior

gave ample time to me by just listening, not giving advice, but guiding me to new insights.” These quiet acts of service speak loudly about leadership rooted in empathy.

8.4.7 Boundary setting

Some participants noted that servant leadership involves the courage to care for oneself so one can continue serving others. Greenleaf (1977) reminded us that we cannot give what we do not have, and Brown (2012) described boundary-setting as both a compassionate and brave act, not selfish, and essential for further acts of service. “I love my learners, but I have learned that rest is part of serving them well. Saying 'no' sometimes allows me to say 'yes' wholeheartedly when it matters.” Another added, “We need to take time off because this game, with its challenges, can easily steal our joy.” Courage was also defined as protecting the dignity of teaching. Parents or learners can sometimes diminish and undermine education, and servant teachers will push back against harmful narratives and policies (Kozol, 1991; Shields, 2010). Greenleaf (1977) maintained that servant leaders speak up for learners, their colleagues, and their profession. “When someone called teachers 'glorified babysitters,' I spoke up. We are professionals shaping the future, and I am not afraid to say it out loud.”

8.4.8 Sustained Hopefulness

The study emphasised that courage, authenticity, and compassion are essential qualities of servant-leadership among teachers. This is evident in moments of resistance and advocacy, as well as in the quiet, consistent, and caring presence in the classroom. Teacher-servant leadership manifests through daily interactions, high expectations combined with empathy, and the emotional effort involved in teaching. Servant teachers lead with authenticity, flexibility, and compassion, demonstrating resilience in the face of stress, policy shifts, and complex relationships. The study found that servant teacher leaders are willing to uphold high standards when adequate support is available. Tomlinson (2003) describes how good teaching balances challenge with support, while Noddings (2005) promotes a pedagogy of care in which intellectual rigour is grounded in relational trust. A teacher shared: “I told her, 'I am pushing you because I believe in you.' It is not that I am strict; it is motivating students not to settle for less than they are capable of.” Participants agreed that humour and joy are vital to teaching, making learning more enjoyable. Even small moments of shared joy can strengthen classroom bonds and renew purpose. Servant teacher educators choose to practice the servant leadership model constructively, even during stressful times. As one teacher reflected, “We danced to a grammar song today. The kids laughed; I laughed. Joy and humour are teaching strategies, too.” Courage was also described as staying focused on learner growth despite changing policies and external directives. “The district's new initiative was confusing, but I kept my focus: Are my students learning? Are they growing? That is what guides me when everything else is shifting.” “Clarity of purpose is an act of resilience in times of turbulence.” Emotional courage involves rebuilding trust with learners after conflicts and being willing to restore relationships. Conscious listening and putting oneself in the other person's shoes

are essential for healing fractured relationships (Palmer, 1998; Patterson et al., 2012). One teacher recounted: "After that conflict, I sat down with the learner and said, 'Can we start over?' It did not erase everything, but opened the door to rebuilding our relationship." Participants emphasised that courageous educators tend to address learners' academic, social, emotional, and moral needs. Noddings (2005) and Tomlinson (2003) call for educating the whole child rather than just delivering content. As one teacher stated, "I checked in with her mental health before I checked her homework. Some days, math is not the most important thing, we teach people, not just content." Servant teacher leaders see beyond the task to the learner behind it. They dare to adapt to changing learner needs, ultimately benefiting their students. To do so, educators must be attentive and flexible, adjusting their approach and avoiding rigid adherence to the syllabus (Dweck, 2006; Gay, 2018; Tomlinson, 2003). "I planned a specific lesson, but realised my learners were not in the right mindset. So, I pivoted the class. It was not perfect, but it spoke to them." All respondents stressed that courageous teachers teach from both the head and the heart. Meaningful teaching occurs when educators bring their whole selves, mind, heart, and spirit into the classroom (Palmer, 1998). "I bring my whole self into the classroom, my knowledge, stories, passions, and care. The content matters, but the connection truly changes lives. This kind of teaching builds bridges not just of knowledge, but of trust and transformation." Therefore, authenticity is central to the identity of the servant leader teacher. They teach with courage rooted in compassion and adapt not for convenience but to genuinely serve their learners' growth (Robertson & Durston, 2022).

8.5 Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

This research examined how courageous servant teacher leadership is practised in South African private schools. The findings revealed that such leadership is rooted in ethical behaviour, emotional resilience, and a strong commitment to student well-being. Servant teachers dare to serve as trailblazers, removing barriers to successful school environments (Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2013). They boldly challenge injustices, advocate for marginalised learners, set professional boundaries, and show vulnerability, often without formal authority or recognition. These actions exemplify decisive, relational leadership that redefines traditional ideas of who leads and how they lead. In challenging contexts, these educators demonstrated that courage and care are interconnected and essential to effective leadership. The findings contradict the concerns raised and instead highlight the importance of this approach for the entire school community. The results suggest that servant leadership is more effective than counterproductive in schools, as courageous servant teacher leaders, among other qualities, promote accountability, handle conflicts constructively, possess the vision and motivation to improve conditions, understand the importance of self-care and professionalism, and have the bravery to stand against injustice and discrimination. By amplifying teachers' voices, this study calls for educational policies and leadership frameworks that recognise and support the moral and emotional labour of servant teacher leaders in classrooms. However, quiet and often unseen, courageous servant-leader teaching is a transformative force that warrants recognition and support in our schools.

The limitation of this study is that the generalizability of the results should be approached cautiously, as the findings were based on only a small number of participants from schools. It is recommended that school leadership mentors and guides teachers to take ownership of the servant leadership paradigm, thereby enhancing the teaching and learning environment. Additionally, it is recommended that research be conducted on the servant-teacher leadership paradigm and its potential or actual impact on education. Universities and higher education institutions should consider introducing servant-leader teacher leadership to future teachers and leaders, helping them understand these vital concepts before they begin their educational careers.

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Section D: The Path Forward: Transforming teaching and learning with Innovation, Inclusion, and Lifelong Learning

This section looks ahead to the future of education, examining how innovation, inclusive practice, and lifelong learning can reshape teaching and learning in rapidly changing contexts. The chapters explore digital transformation, adaptive pedagogies, flexible learning pathways, and the integration of emerging technologies to enhance accessibility and relevance. Emphasising equity, responsiveness, and continuous development, the contributions highlight forward-looking strategies that prepare learners and institutions to thrive in an evolving global landscape.

Chapter 9: South African State of Play: Microcredentialing in Higher Education: A Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Perspective.

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Abstract

Purpose: This chapter critically examines the readiness of South Africa's higher education regulatory environment to implement microcredentialing and digital badging, viewed through a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) perspective. While microcredentials are gaining international traction as flexible instruments for lifelong learning, reskilling, and employability, their integration into formal qualifications frameworks remains contested. The study investigates whether the existing legislative and regulatory architecture, specifically the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), and the Council on Higher Education (CHE), can accommodate microcredentialing, and how RPL assessment practices could conceptually and practically validate microcredentials and badging.

Study design/methodology/approach: The study adopts a qualitative desktop research design informed by radical structuralism and supported by theoretical thematic analysis. Legislative texts, regulatory policies, discussion documents, and scholarly literature were systematically analysed to identify patterns, gaps, and contradictions within the regulatory system. Engeström's Activity Theory provides a conceptual lens for reconceptualising implementation, particularly in relation to boundary-crossing between formal, informal, and non-formal learning spaces. RPL assessment methodologies, specifically competency conversation and heuristic assessment, are examined as potential mechanisms for validating microcredentials.

Findings: The analysis indicates that South Africa's regulatory bodies are positioned in a "possible but not yet ready" phase regarding formal implementation. While exploratory discussions and research initiatives signal openness to microcredentialing, no coherent implementation framework currently exists. The role of RPL in validating microcredentials remains underdeveloped at the systemic level, despite policy provisions that support the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. Activity Theory reveals structural tensions between traditional qualification integrity and disruptive microcredential innovation, but also demonstrates the potential for expansive transformation through credible RPL assessment processes.

Originality/value: The chapter contributes a conceptual implementation model linking microcredentialing, RPL assessment, and Activity Theory within the South African regulatory context. It advances the discourse beyond definitional debates toward a structured framework for integrating microcredentials into the National Qualifications Framework while safeguarding academic standards and enabling lifelong learning pathways.

Keywords: Microcredentialing; Recognition of Prior Learning; National Qualifications Framework; Activity Theory; Regulatory Readiness; Digital Badging

9.1 Introduction and background

Since the development of the regulatory environment in South Africa, micro-credentials have gained increasing attention worldwide in the context of lifelong learning, flexible learning

pathways, and the need for reskilling and upskilling to meet workplace demands. There is a growing call for shorter, focused, in-time learning for employment purposes (UNESCO, 2023).

Internationally, the notion of microcredentialing (MC) and badging is well researched. Ahsan, Akbar, and Abdulrahman (2023) reported that since 2015, countries, especially Australia, have been researching and conceptualising MC and Digital Badging (BD). Some research was conducted by UNESCO and the European Union (European Commission, 2020), and by the development of local frameworks and guides, such as in New Zealand (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, n.d.) and Australia (Desmarchelier & Cary, 2020). The authors noted that the development of MC implementation in Australia lacks a supporting national framework and a national system to record credentials and incorporate recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credits, which do not enable students and industries to take this learning opportunity seriously.

A study conducted in East Africa by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) indicated the need for a transition from post-secondary education to the world of work and the role microcredentials could play (Maina, Ortiz, Mancini, & Melo, 2022).

Another study by Alasmari and Alzahrani (2024) was performed in Middle Eastern and North African universities. The study investigated areas such as standards, policies, adoption rates, integration into the curriculum, credentialing engines, and professional development. The findings indicate that microcredentialing is still in its early stages in the region, with most universities initiating microcredentialing within the past four years. However, the lack of a favourable policy ecosystem and standards for learning design, content, delivery, assessment, sizing, and certification were identified as significant hindrances to the adoption of micro-credentials.

In the United States, Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) providers offer 13,014 certificates for complete courses, micro-credentials, and online degrees from foreign universities. On the other hand, non-academic providers have 656,505 credentials, including badges, course completion certificates, licenses, certifications, and apprenticeships.

In Europe, the Council of the European Union (EU) endorsed a 2022 proposal for an EU strategy to promote lifelong learning and employability through micro-credentials. The goal of this proposal is to stimulate the expansion, adoption, and recognition of micro-credentials across institutions, businesses, industries, and countries in Europe (European Commission, 2022; cited in Alasmari & Alzahrani, 2024).

The international state of play signals that the consideration and implementation of MCs and BDs are developed, although not to their fullest extent. Some refinements and conceptual frameworks still need to be done in the policy ecosystem. It should be noted that only Australia acknowledges that RPL has a role to play in the MC processes, although it is not defined in the documents consulted.

Considering the international state of play, the question is: How does South Africa compare to the rest of the world?

9.2 Research questions

9.2.1 Main Research question:

Do the Higher Education (HE) regulatory system and RPL processes support the implementation of microcredentialing and badging?

9.2.1.1 Sub-questions

- To what extent is the HE regulatory system ready to accommodate and recognise microcredentials within the education system?
- How could RPL assessments conceptually and practically support the validity of microcredentialing and badging?

9.2.2 Main Research Objective:

To find out whether the regulatory system and RPL processes could support the implementation of microcredentialing and badging.

9.2.2.1 Sub-objectives:

- To determine the extent to which the regulatory system is ready to accommodate and recognise microcredentialing within the educational system.
- To determine conceptually and practically the role of RPL assessments to support the validity of microcredentialing and badging.

9.3 Research Design and Methodology

This article is based on a desktop study. In line with Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2023), desktop research focuses on secondary sources, analysing existing data and literature to answer research questions. This type of research relies on information derived from previously written and compiled sources by other researchers to provide relevant information for this article.

Desktop research is supported by radical structuralism. Radical structuralism is concerned with structural patterns within work organisations, such as hierarchies and reporting relationships and the extent to which these may produce dysfunctionalities (Saunders et al., 2023). Radical structuralism aims to achieve fundamental change based on an analysis of and patterns of conflict (Gunbayi & Sorm, 2018). In this article, a critical approach was taken to evaluate information from secondary sources. The critical engagement aims to pave the way for change at the regulatory level of the higher education system and in workplace practices regarding RPL and microcredentialing.

Document analysis was the main technique used in the study to generate data. Secondary sources such as legislation, policy documents and research articles were consulted and compared. By using this approach, the researcher may find patterns, inconsistencies, and gaps in the evidence while also extracting and synthesising relevant supporting ideas.

9.3.1 Identification and Selection of Sources

To answer the research questions, secondary data included policy documents from higher education regulatory bodies, international organisations, research institutions, and academic articles. These were sourced from the websites of the Department of Higher Education, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Joint Education Trust (JET), and research articles published in academic journals.

9.3.2 Analysing data

The study uses a theoretical thematic analysis, supported by a qualitative research approach. Theoretical thematic analysis is a flexible method that enables the researcher to identify, examine, and summarise themes or patterns in the data, detailing the analysis of some aspect of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Information from legislation, policies, academic articles, and other sources is carefully investigated to ensure that relevant themes are selected, compared, and synthesised as required to create a coherent body of knowledge that can be critically analysed.

9.3.3 Trustworthiness of information

To ensure that the information is correct and trustworthy, the researcher sourced it from official documents, such as legislation, Department of Higher Education policies, SAQA, CHE, JET, and refereed research articles published in academic journals. In addition, the researcher ensured that the latest versions of these documents were consulted, including any amendments made to the originals.

9.3.4 Methods of data collection

Data collection is the process of gathering data to gain insights into the research topic (Taherdoost, 2021). Data in a desktop study are secondary, such as policy documents, academic analyses, and case studies. The process of data collection involved reviewing, organising, coding, and interpreting the information. The collected data aligned with the main research question and the sub-questions.

9.3.5 Ethical considerations

Research ethics is a set of moral principles that researchers must consider (De Vos et al., 2011). The researcher ensures that research practices do not cause harm and that they show respect to those implicated by the information. These criteria apply to empirical qualitative research

involving actual participants. In desktop research, ethical considerations need to be adjusted to ensure that information is accurately presented and that respect for organisations is demonstrated. Ethical considerations also include the fair and impartial evaluation of sources, as well as maintaining originality, honesty, and academic integrity.

9.4 Literature review

The literature review presents key themes that could help answer the research questions. An attempt is made to provide information that captures regulatory and other related factors that impact RPL and microcredentialing. First, the state of play is described, including the regulatory level of academic governance, followed by the analysis and academic discourse.

9.4.1 The legislative framework

9.4.1.1 *The Department of Higher Education (DHET)*

The DHET is inter alia responsible for the higher education system, including the legal parameters for the NQF and the development of related policies.

The NQF Act (RSA, 2008) defined the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) as the classification, registration, publication and articulation of quality-assured qualifications. The purpose of the NQF is stated as creating a single, integrated national framework that facilitates access, mobility, and pathways for further development. It is also described as a social construct to provide education to all its citizens on an equal basis. As such, it is also viewed as a pedagogical device that emphasises the NQF's communicative role in informing the broader public about lifelong learning opportunities (Bolton & Keevy, 2012).

Apart from the NQF Act of 2008 (RSA, 2008), the DHET (2022) recognised in a discussion document the need to recognise that learning is taking place through formal qualifications, non-formally and informally in the world of work, in professional fields, self-directed learning by way of own reading and online through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC). However, the DHET warns against the commodification of academic offerings, which may undermine the coherence of qualifications.

In terms of RPL, the White Paper for Post -School Education and Training (DHET, 2013, p. 73) states that "Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) remains a key approach to redressing past injustices and recognising competence gained through practical workplace learning and experience". In line with this, DHET (2016) published an RPL coordination policy in 2016. The purpose of this Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Coordination Policy is to provide an enabling policy environment for the further development and implementation of RPL across the post-school education and training system and at all levels of the NQF. The mechanism to coordinate RPL

implementation is indicated as the establishment of a coordinated mechanism and funding for RPL practices (DHET, 2022).

The above legislation sets clear parameters for the educational system regarding qualifications and access to qualifications, with enabling mechanisms for RPL practices. It should be noted that the enabling mechanisms outlined in the DHET (2016) RPL Coordination Policy have yet to be implemented, although it signals a positive approach to RPL practices. The philosophical basis of the NQF allows RPL practices to enhance accessibility, progress, and lifelong learning opportunities.

9.4.1.2 The regulatory level

At the regulatory level, SAQA and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) policies and other documents provide important information. The NQF Act (RSA, 2008) instructs (the wording is ‘must’) to advance the objectives of the NQF; oversee further development and implementation of the NQF; and coordinate the sub-frameworks (Quality Councils). The NQF Act (RSA, 2018) also requires registration of qualifications and part-qualifications. The NQF Act of 2008 (RSA, 2008) defines a qualification as “a registered national qualification,” which, in SAQA terms, means consisting of at least 120 credits or one year in duration; and a part-qualification as “an assessed unit of learning that is registered as part of a qualification.”(RSA, 2008, p. 44). The NQF Amendment Act (RSA, 2018) defines learner achievement as meaning a qualification or part-qualification (less than 120 credits). SAQA’s (2022) policy on the registration of qualifications and part-qualifications (2022) requires that qualifications and part-qualifications are relevant to the world of work. This is an important indication that qualifications and part-qualification should prepare students for the world of work— theory should be applied in the work situation. An important aspect that this article will elaborate on is the conceptual framework for implementing microcredentialing.

Apart from registering qualifications and part-qualifications, SAQA developed the national RPL policy following extensive research and consultation (DHET, 2016b). The RPL policy enables RPL policies of Quality Councils, which, in turn, enable RPL practices at the operational (provider) level. The SAQA (2022) National RPL Policy defines RPL as the “principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated and assessed for alternative access and admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development” (SAQA, 2022, p. 33). The policy unpacks this definition by indicating that RPL practices should focus on what has been learned rather than the status of the source of learning; knowledge and skills acquired through experience are recognised through assessment practices and mediated for recognition and certification across different contexts (DHET, 2022). Furthermore, it states that qualifications and part-qualifications registered on the NQF may be awarded, in whole or in part, through RPL. This policy statement applies to Training and

Vocational Education (TVET), but not higher education qualifications as stipulated by the CHE (DHET, 2016).

9.4.2 The Council on Higher Education (CHE)

In the higher education sector, the CHE implemented a qualifications sub-framework that prescribes the types of qualifications associated with NQF levels 5–10 (from higher certificate to doctorate), each with its own purpose and characteristics (CHE, 2016a). The RPL policy of the CHE allows for the evaluation of non-formal and/or informal learning to be mediated and recognised across different contexts (CHE, 2016a); RPL processes should differentiate between experiential and academic knowledge (CHE, 2016a); and assessment criteria for RPL should seek to accommodate the knowledge and skills gained in practices outside the higher education institution in terms of their value for the envisaged course of study (CHE, 2016b).

It can be concluded that the CHE, through its criteria for qualification design and its RPL policy, supports the view that both disciplinary knowledge and knowledge gained through work experience (informal and non-formal) are distinct but valid forms of knowledge. However, there are clear limitations to implementing RPL processes.

- RPL candidates are limited to 10% of the intake of a learning programme.
- RPL recognition of informal and non-formal learning will not be credited towards a qualification.
- Full qualifications on the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) cannot be awarded solely on the basis of RPL (CHE, 2016a, p. 2, 8 and 9).

Although not explicitly stated, these limitations seem to protect the standards and the integrity of qualifications. If so, the question is whether these are valid protection measures? Should standards and the integrity of a qualification not be protected by fair and valid assessments? It seems that the CHE supports this view when stating in its Assessment policy: “Standards of qualifications must be maintained by ensuring that assessment is appropriate to the particular modules and exit level outcomes of the programme in question.” (CHE, 2016b, p. 2, 14).

9.4.3 Microcredentialing and badging

UNESCO describes microcredentialing as:

- A record of focused learning achievement verifying what the learner knows, understands or can do.
- Including assessment based on clearly defined standards, and is awarded by a trusted provider.
- Having standalone value and may also contribute to or complement other micro-credentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning.

- Meeting the standards required by relevant quality assurance arrangements. (UNESCO 2022, p. 6)

The above description indicates a flexible approach to microcredentials: they can be standalone or part of qualifications through RPL, and they should meet standards.

According to Styles (1999) and Corcoran (2021), microcredentialing is the process of verifying that an individual has met specific standards set for this purpose. Individuals seeking credentialing need evidence of their ability to meet formally established standards.

The European Commission (2020) defines a micro-credential as a “certified document issued by an institution or organisation of learning outcomes achieved through a learning experience, following quality assurance standards, and containing additional information regarding the holder’s name, the applied assessment methods, and, where applicable, the qualifications framework level and the credits gained. They are owned by the recipient who can share them, combine them with others, or showcase them in different digital contexts (Maina et al, 2022).

Furthermore, Milligan and Kennedy (2017, p. 32) defined microcredentials as part of “a digital credentialing ecosystem, made possible by digital communications technologies establishing networks of interest through which people can share information about what a learner knows and can do”. This definition was also supported by Maina et al. (2022) and Ali et al. (2024).

Badging is described as “merely a visual representation of a learner’s achievement, skill, or disposition” (Ellis, Nunn & Avella, 2016, p. 4). Because traditional badging, such as a certificate or acknowledgement of work done, is visually limited, digital badging makes competencies obtained online visible locally and globally. This online open badging system offers institutions of learning and organisations worldwide the opportunity to evaluate a potential employee based on identified and assessed competencies (Ellis et al., 2016).

Gibson (2015), as referenced by Maina et al. (2022:4), defines digital badges as “a representation of an accomplishment, interest or affiliation that is visual, available online, and contains metadata that helps explain the context, meaning, process and result of an activity”. This is an important definition in light of the critique of the MC system in Australia. Shapiro (2020), referenced by Desmarchelier and Cary (2022, p. 34), argued that the current “lack of a supporting national framework and a national system to record credentials and incorporate recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit, makes it almost impossible for potential students and aligned industries to take this learning opportunity seriously.” The importance of Gibson's definition is that it emphasises the need for metadata that should be communicated to indicate official recognition.

The different definitions highlight the challenge of accurately defining microcredentials and determining how they should provide benefits to learners, institutions, and industries. This challenge is important as all stakeholders can benefit from microcredentialing.

9.4.4 The need for microcredentials

Paterson and McDonald wrote a country report for the organisation: Potential of Microcredentials in Southern Africa (Pomisa) on the state of play of micro-credentials in South Africa (Keevy, aterson & McDonald, 2024), which indicates that South Africa is characterised by high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality, which signals the potential for an educational solution. It was noted that education is one pathway to achieving a positive outcome, especially through credentialing and the awarding of digital badges. They indicate the potential benefit to South Africa of promoting small learning packages (microcredentials) that can be quickly developed and implemented in response to changing workplace skills needs. Microcredentials enable agile updates and the introduction of new skills to meet emerging industry demands (Paterson & McDonald, 2024).

Considering the definitions of microcredentialing and the need for substantive official evidence, a key consideration is the responsiveness of qualifications frameworks to recognise microcredentials within their existing structures (Paterson & McDonald, 2024).

9.4.5 Contestation

The introduction of microcredentialing and digital badging is what Ellis, Nunn and Avella (2016) called disruptive innovation, meaning it disrupts the traditional notion of knowledge generation. The argument is that acknowledging microcredentialing and badging could weaken the traditional coding of disciplinary knowledge.

In the Australian debate on microcredentialing, the one opposing view is that microcredentialing is reductionist, meaning it reduces higher education to deliver on hard skills and technical competencies, which commercialise competencies to the benefit of employers (neo-liberalism); and contributes to the decline of the educational value of traditional degrees (Desmarchelier & Cary, 2022).

The impact of this disruption is the realisation that not only disciplinary knowledge counts, but also informal and non-formal knowledge as part of the lifelong learning philosophy (Naude, 2011).

These deliberations on microcredentialing and the value of degrees are good examples of the disruptive effect microcredentials (and RPL) have. This raises the question: To what extent has South Africa moved toward introducing microcredentials and badging? There are some positives in this regard.

9.4.6 Discussion initiatives

SAQA developed a research report on microcredentialing to engage the broader stakeholder community in discussions about implementing microcredentialing and badging. The research report (nd) discusses the notion of microcredentialing and badging within the national

qualifications framework (NQF). It refers to the historic implementation of unit standards, which were rejected by the university sector, and to the current part-qualifications as examples of micro-credentials. The report provides information on the state of play in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, as already discussed.

Reading the research report made it clear that the role RPL could play in assessing microcredentialing and facilitating knowledge transfer was not addressed. However, the European Higher Education Area's view included the role of RPL, and Australia noted the absence of RPL in its microcredentialing processes.

The Council on Higher Education issues a Communique (CHE, 2023) to the university sector, stating that, together with partners, it embarked on a project to explore microcredentialing and associated processes. The CHE advised universities that have engaged with microcredentialing to ensure these offerings are assessed and quality-assured. The advice also included the role RPL assessment could play (CHE, 2023).

9.4.7 Analysis: Readiness to implement microcredentialing

The state of play of legislation and regulations in the academic landscape in South Africa is important to determine whether academic structures, policies, and plans can accommodate new developments such as microcredentialing and badging. By using thematic analysis, the information discussed in the literature review is displayed using a quadrant indicating the level of readiness for the introduction of microcredentials:

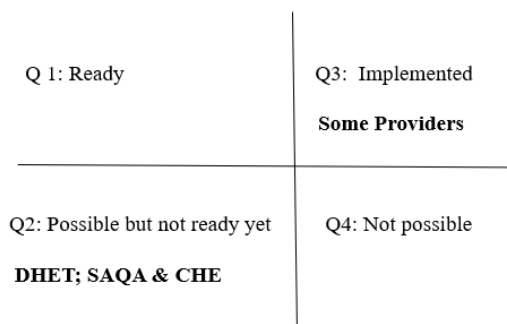


Figure 9-1: Readiness for the introduction of Microcredentials

Based on the literature review, it seems that no organisation in South Africa is unwilling to accommodate microcredentials, as indicated in Q4 (Figure 9-1). This is a positive signal that microcredentialing could be considered and implemented in future. A few higher education providers have already offered microcredentials and issued badges, paving the way for implementation, albeit not as part of the qualifications framework but as an institutional activity.

The PoMISA Country Report indicates that in 2024, 18 universities offered microcredentials as institutional activities (Paterson & McDonald, 2024).

All the systemic and regulatory organisations (DHET, SAQA and the CHE) fall under Q2. In a discussion document, the DHET (2022) discussed the need to recognise that learning is taking place through formal qualifications, non-formal and informal learning in the world of work, in professional fields, and through self-directed learning by way of one's own reading and online through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). However, the DHET (2022) warns against the commodification of academic offerings, which may undermine the coherence of qualifications.

Although the DHET (2016) developed an RPL coordinating policy that aims to serve as an enabling mechanism for implementing and coordinating RPL nationwide, the policy has yet to be implemented after almost 10 years. However, it signals a positive approach to RPL practices and lifelong learning opportunities.

SAQA researched microcredentialing and badging and issued a report on this. It indicates that SAQA decided to consider implementing microcredentialing. The parameters indicated are within the NQF – microcredentialing as an extension of qualification and part-qualification registration. Reading the research report made it clear that the role RPL could play in assessing microcredentialing and facilitating the transfer of knowledge credibly was not addressed.

The CHE explored microcredentialing and associated processes. It advised universities that have already offered microcredentials to ensure that these offerings are assessed and quality assured. It signals potential acceptance of microcredentials as an undefined role within the higher education sub-framework.

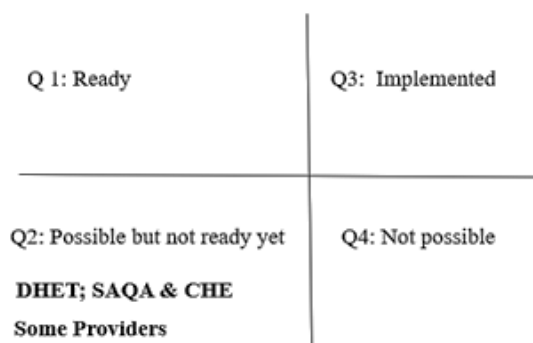


Figure 9-2: RPL assessments for microcredentialing

9.4.8 Clarification

The readiness to apply RPL assessments to validate microcredentials and badging is mixed. Although the DHET may consider these as part of its RPL coordination policy, this has not yet been communicated. The SAQA discussion document considers the implementation of microcredentials, but remains silent on the role RPL assessment could play. One could assume that

such a role will be discussed in one way or another. The CHE is the only organisation that included the role RPL assessment could play in their advice to higher education providers.

9.5 Conceptual framework and discussion

While SAQA's conceptualisation of microcredential implementation focuses on incorporating microcredentials into existing qualifications and qualifications frameworks, this article examines the role RPL could play in assessing microcredentials to enable recognition. From the literature consulted, only UNESCO, the CHE, the EHEA, and Australia mention the role that RPL assessment could play. However, these acknowledgements are not supported by a conceptual framework which guides the implementation processes.

To conceptualise the implementation of microcredentialing and the role RPL assessment could play in validating microcredentials, activity theory is discussed. Engeström (2001) describes activity theory as an interdisciplinary philosophical framework for studying both individual and social aspects of human activities. The most important aspect of activity theory is the understanding that the individual and collective aspects of human practices are culturally and historically situated (Engeström, 2001).

This article discusses the state of play of the regulatory system across the three phases of activity theory, applied to regulatory frameworks, RPL, and microcredentialing and badging. The five principles of activity theory are discussed as foundational to further deliberations around the state of play in South Africa.

9.5.1 The five principles of activity theory

Activity theory is based on five principles (Engeström, 2001):

- An activity system is collective, artefact-mediated, and object-oriented, manifested in network relations with other activity systems. This first principle relates to the expanded activity system and, to a lesser extent, to the initial design of an activity system (Figure 9-3).
- The second principle is the multi-voicedness of activity systems. It includes the community with multiple points of view, traditions, and interests, and the division of labour and rules reflect different positions. This is evident in Figures 9-4 and 9-5.
- The third principle is historicity. Activity systems take shape and transform over long periods of time. Examples of this general principle are the historical development of a qualifications framework and views on formal, informal and non-formal knowledge.
- The fourth principle is the central role of contradictions as sources of change and development. According to Engeström, contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems. A good example is the tension

between the recognition of formal knowledge and that of informal and non-formal knowledge.

- The fifth principle proclaims the possibility of expansive transformations in activity systems. As contradictions within an activity system are highlighted through questioning and deviation from established norms, a process of transformation takes place. Transformation occurs when the activity is reconceptualised to include a wider range of possibilities than in the previous mode. This is a collective process which Engeström refers to as the “zone of proximal development of the activity”. (Engeström, 2001). It describes the distance between the historical activity and the socially constructed new activity (Engeström, 2001).

The initial conceptualisation of activity theory is illustrated as a single triangle in Figure 9-3:

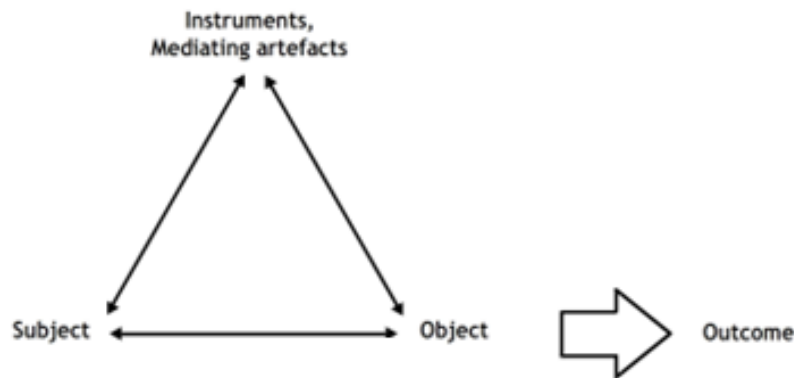


Figure 9-3: Activity theory

An activity was viewed as comprising a subject working towards achieving a goal or objective. Vygotsky, the original theorist of activity theory, added another role-player in an activity: artefacts or tools as a mediating factor that changes the relationship between subject and object. The subject utilises mediating tools to achieve the object.

Apart from the mediating factor, this first-generation activity theory was viewed as emphasising that the individual and society cannot be understood without the contribution of the individual, although the individual cannot be understood without its cultural background (Engeström, 2001). This aspect is important because it may relate to learners' individual learning experiences. To achieve success in learning (object), mediating artefacts such as qualifications, learning programmes, books, academics, RPL assessment and microcredentials play an important role in the learning process.

As the first phase of activity theory focuses on the individual, the question is: To what extent does the individual learner have the right to own microcredentials and use them for their own benefit? Does activity theory support this individual's right? This first phase of the theory seems to support this right.

Engeström expanded this second-generation triangular model in 1987, presenting group and individual actions as rooted in a collective activity system (Engeström, 2001) as illustrated in Figure 9-4:

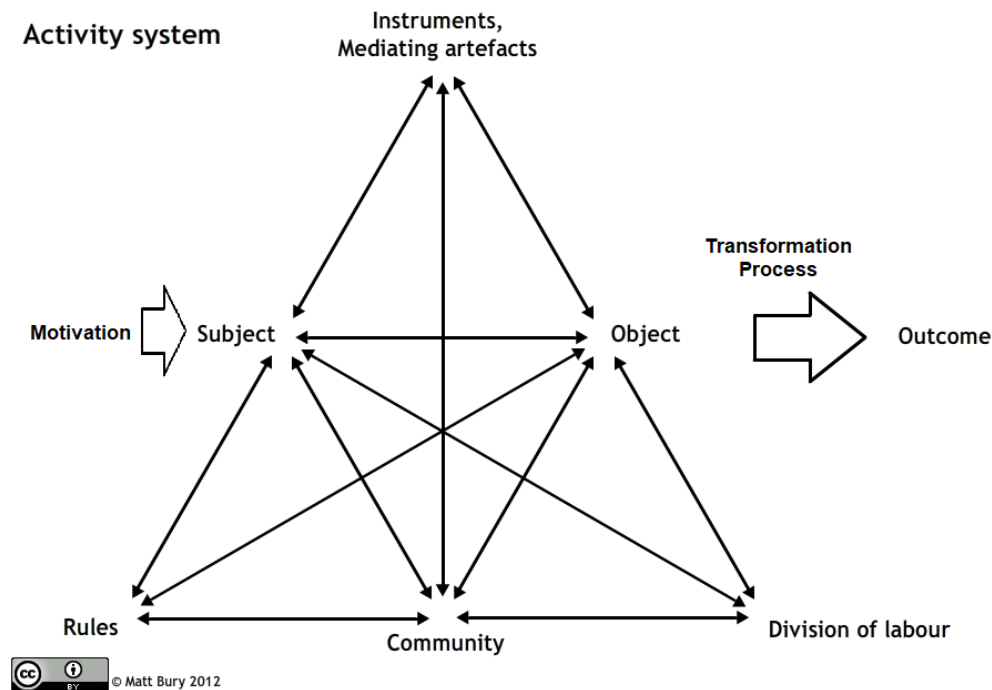


Figure 9-4: Second-Generation Triangular Model

Figure 9-4 illustrates that activities are performed within the framework of the community, rules and division of labour, which refer to other people (community), social or other rules (rules), and the division of labour between the subject and others. The regulatory system, for example, provides rules; RPL assessments follow a specific methodology, such as panel discussions (community); and microcredentialing involves spaces and/or places of learning, which could be institutions, workplaces, and/or self-learning through MOOCs (division of labour).

This second phase of activity theory could support the notion that competencies are achieved in places and/or spaces. Competencies achieved through informal and non-formal means are recognised as activities that could be offered at institutions of learning or through informal learning, such as workplaces and self-directed learning (spaces), to achieve an objective or outcome. The informal and non-formal nature of competencies creates the space for RPL intervention and assessment to validate microcredentialing and badging, using RPL panels (social relationships) to assist with assessments.

The third phase of development, the expanded phase of activity theory, provides a model for incorporating microcredentials into qualifications. The expanded activity theory promotes the idea of a network of interactions among other activity systems (Olvitt, quoted by Bolton and Keevy,

2012), thereby creating the potential to link one activity, such as formal learning, with another, such as microcredentials. This is illustrated in Figure 9-5:

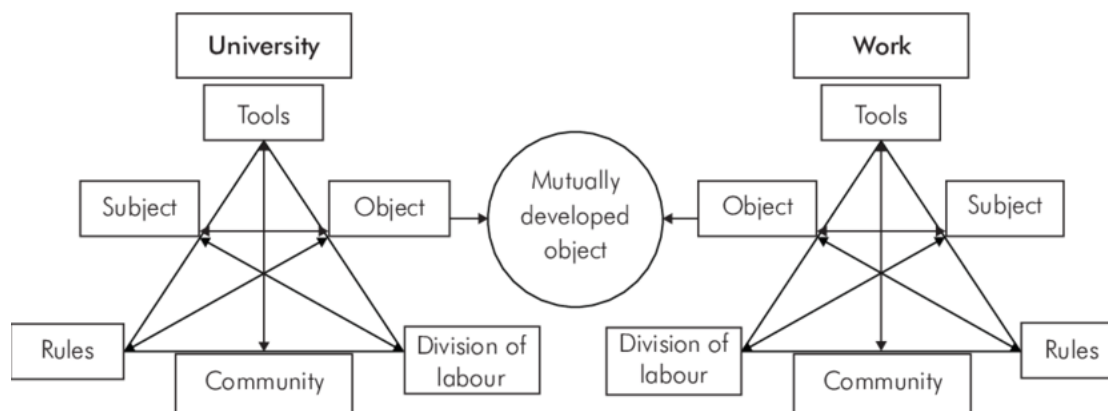


Figure 9-5: Expanded Phase of Activity Theory

Figure 9-5 illustrates the relationship between two activity systems with emphasis on boundary-crossing activities. Boundary crossing refers to the integration of two activities previously deemed separate. Figure 9-5 shows the university as a single activity, with its academic offerings focused on discipline. The other activity is indicated as the workplace where informal and non-formal competencies are generated. Figure 9-5 also indicates that these two distinct activities share the same objective: the development of learners' competencies. This shared objective could be described as the 'third space' (mutually developed object) as coined by Gutierrez (Engeström, 2001) and applied to RPL assessments (Naude, 2013). The basic idea is that linking two different activities around the same object can be understood as a transdisciplinary activity, in which the disciplinary boundaries can be turned into an integrated code curriculum that needs recontextualization. (Bernstein, 2000). The expanded activity theory is disruptive in the sense that disciplines protected by insulated coding are now challenged to listen to other forms of knowledge and insights, and informal and non-formal competencies are challenged to relate to theory. This opens the possibility that informal and non-formal knowledge could be integrated into a qualification and be formally recognised. To achieve this integration, a credible RPL process could be used, which assesses both ways – mediating theory to practice and from practice to theory using heuristic assessment as described next, recontextualising knowledge achieved.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) assessments

The focus here is limited to the assessment practices used in RPL processes to facilitate recognition of microcredentials for personal use and access to a qualification. The RPL definition refers to the processes through which a person's prior knowledge and skills are made visible, mediated, and assessed. Knowledge must be made visible. To achieve this, two assessment methods used in higher education are discussed: Competency conversation and heuristic assessment.

Competency assessment was developed by Fenwick (2010). In this model, the RPL assessor is positioned as a boundary-less worker, able to move between workplace and academic knowledge through the assessment process. It allows the RPL assessor to become familiar with the context of the candidate's experiences and to understand the language and concepts used in the workplace. The assessment technique used enables the RPL candidate to demonstrate knowledge and skills through open-ended questioning. The competency conversation is semi-structured and is followed by a formal written report upon completion.

Similarly, heuristic assessment requires an approach that can proceed in both directions – from theory to application and from the workplace to theory- and includes an element of teaching and learning. The term “heuristic” is derived from the Greek word *εὐρίσκω* (heuriskow), which means “find or intellectual discovery based on reflection, observation, examination or investigation” (Arndt & Gingrich, 1952, p. 56).

Kleining and Witt (2000) identified four basic rules of heuristic research which could be applied to RPL assessment practices as a form of research:

- An openness to new concepts and language used within a specific context. Discoveries often contradict hard-to-give-up general scientific beliefs. There should be an openness to the validity of workplace or practical knowledge.
- The research topic is preliminary and may change during the research process. It is only fully known after it has been successfully explored. The breadth and depth of knowledge can only be determined by a variety of assessment questions.
- Data should be collected within the paradigm of maximal structural variation in perspectives. Variation in questions avoids a single answer.
- The analysis is directed toward identifying similarities. It tries to overcome differences. In assessment, it mediates between practical and theoretical knowledge.

As applied by the researcher's own RPL practices, the NQF level descriptors (SAQA, 2012) for RPL access into postgraduate qualifications serve as a guide for heuristic assessment, which focuses primarily on the following competencies of the RPL candidate:

- Disciplinary knowledge gained through previous formal studies.
- Competencies gained through extensive work experience.
- The ability to do research and communicate academically.
- Skills such as problem-solving, critical analysis, synthesis, and knowledge presentation.
- The ability to source and manage information.
- Time management and accountability are required for successful further academic study.

Both assessment methods emphasise upholding academic standards and the integrity of qualifications. It should be noted that heuristic assessment requires assessment by more than one

assessor – an RPL panel- to ensure triangulation of information and the validity and credibility of the assessment findings. This method resonates with the second and third phases of activity theory.

9.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis indicated that the regulatory environment is not yet ready to implement microcredentialing and badging within the educational system. Some initial steps were taken to discuss implementing microcredentials within the education system, but no clear progress has been made. The discussion on microcredentialing takes place at a technical level, including defining the term and exploring the international landscape to understand it. The discussion is not yet on the level of conceptualising implementation models. This was the purpose of this article.

9.6.1 Recommendations

A differentiated approach towards the validation of microcredentials and badging should be adopted:

- The individual's right to engage in the process of microcredentialing and badging for their own purposes should be protected, without the limitations of NQF registration. Individuals should be allowed to use microcredentialing as a personal marketing tool.
- Microcredentialing and badging could be integrated into the NQF. If so, it should be an enabling mechanism that facilitates the rapid evolution of competencies in the workplace.
- Valid assessments, such as heuristic assessments, should validate competencies expressed through microcredentials and badges.
- The role of RPL assessment for both individual purposes and integration into the NQF must be acknowledged and prioritised.
- Research should be conducted at the empirical level to investigate microcredential and badging practices, as well as the use of RPL assessments by higher education institutions. Such studies could unpack best practices.

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Chapter 10: Enhancing Performance in the Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies: Curriculum Reform and Student Support Strategies

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Abstract

Purpose: *This chapter investigates the persistent academic underperformance of the Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies (HCPLS) within South African higher education. As the lowest-performing Higher Certificate programme at the institution under study, the HCPLS presents systemic concerns regarding assessment alignment, language proficiency, student readiness, and access to learning materials. The study aims to identify the root causes of underperformance and propose curriculum and pedagogical interventions to improve pass rates and graduate employability.*

Study design/methodology/approach: *A qualitative case study design was employed, supplemented by elements of action research. Data were drawn from institutional programme review reports (2021–2024), pass rate analyses of identified high-risk modules, assessment moderation feedback, and internal academic performance reports. The study focused particularly on modules classified as “Red” and “Fire,” given sustained pass rates below 60%. Thematic analysis was used to interpret patterns related to assessment practices, student support structures, and material affordability.*

Findings: *Underperformance is multifactorial. Key contributing factors include misalignment between assessment design and NQF Level 5 cognitive demands, language proficiency challenges, inadequate engagement with prescribed materials due to textbook affordability, and uneven student readiness for higher education. Importantly, revised assessment strategies, incorporating structured knowledge recall, scaffolded application questions, and clearer marking memoranda, resulted in measurable improvements, including a 97% pass rate in a revised module. The Centre for Academic Success (C4AS) initiatives and structured bridging programmes were identified as critical support mechanisms.*

Originality/value: *This chapter presents an evidence-based curriculum intervention model to improve performance in foundational legal qualifications. By linking assessment reform, language support, student success frameworks, and material accessibility, it contributes a practical blueprint for strengthening Higher Certificate programmes within access-oriented higher education institutions.*

Keywords: *Higher Certificate; Paralegal Studies; Legal Education; Assessment Alignment; Student Support; NQF Level 5*

10.1 Introduction

10.1.1 Background

The Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies (HCPLS) is a foundational qualification that prepares individuals for careers in legal support roles across various legal sectors. It provides students with

a comprehensive understanding of South African law, legal systems, and basic legal procedures, positioning them to effectively support legal practices in law firms, corporate legal departments, and public sector institutions.

This programme is structured to offer flexibility, allowing students to choose elective modules that align with specific paralegal functions and the diverse contexts in which legal support is required. The qualification, comprising 120 credits and typically spanning one academic year (12 months), culminates at NQF Level 5. This flexibility ensures that learning outcomes are responsive to the evolving needs of the legal profession.

10.1.2 Admission Requirements

To be eligible for admission to the HCPLS, prospective students must meet one of the following criteria:

- A Senior Certificate (SC), or
- A National Senior Certificate (NSC) with:
 - A minimum of 40% in three subjects, including a Home Language, and
 - A minimum of 30% in three additional subjects; or
- A National Certificate (Vocational) [NC(V)] at NQF Level 4, with:
 - A minimum of 40% in English (either Home Language or First Additional Language).

This structured entry ensures that students possess the basic academic foundation required to engage with the programme's content. However, the challenges of underperformance remain a significant concern, necessitating further exploration.

10.1.3 Programme Structure and Delivery

The HCPLS programme is delivered through two modes: Distance Learning and Blended Contact Learning. This dual delivery model accommodates diverse learning preferences and provides students with flexibility, which is essential in a rapidly evolving educational landscape. The compulsory modules focus on core legal skills and practice management, including:

- End-User Computing (EUC152) – 10 credits
- Introduction to Business Law (BLA152) – 20 credits
- Introduction to Law (ITL152) – 15 credits
- Legal Practice Management (LPM152) – 20 credits
- Legal Skills (LSK152) – 15 credits

Elective modules, such as Introduction to Labour Law and Debt Recovery, allow students to specialise according to their interests and career goals. This structure is designed to equip students with the essential skills for entry-level legal support roles while accommodating a range of career paths within the legal sector.

10.1.4 Relevance to the Study

Despite its design to equip students with the necessary skills for the legal profession, the HCPLS programme has faced challenges related to academic underperformance, raising concerns about student success and employability. This study investigates how various factors, including admission policies, course content, teaching methods, and student support systems, affect the academic performance of HCPLS students. By analysing these factors, the study aims to identify solutions to enhance student outcomes, improve pass rates, and ultimately increase graduates' employability.

10.1.5 Problem Statement

The Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies is currently STADIO's lowest-performing programme among all the Higher Certificate offerings. As lecturers, module coordinators, programme coordinators, and the Centre for Academic Success, we have a vested interest in investigating the root causes of students' struggles with academic performance and programme completion. Despite the programme's designed structure and flexibility, students continue to experience challenges that hinder their success. This study aims to identify the key factors contributing to these academic difficulties, including admission policies, course content, teaching methods, student motivation, and support systems, and propose effective solutions to improve both pass rates and employability outcomes for HCPLS students.

10.1.6 Research objectives

- To evaluate whether the difficulty of assessments contributes to the underperformance of HCPLS students.
- To assess the effectiveness of key module assessments and student support in improving academic outcomes.
- To explore the impact of language proficiency and bridging programmes on student performance.
- To examine the need for changes in teaching and learning methods, both in the classroom and online.

10.1.7 Outline

In the following sections, this paper will first provide a literature review, examining existing research on student support services, assessment practices, and textbook affordability, with a focus on their impact on student success in higher education. Next, the research methodology section will outline the qualitative approach used in this study, including the case study design and data collection methods. The results and findings section will present an analysis of the high-risk modules, pass rates, and assessment strategies, followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings for the existing literature. Finally, the paper will conclude with recommendations

for improving the programme, a discussion of the study's limitations, and suggestions for future research to further explore the issues identified.

10.2 Literature Review

Student support services play a pivotal role in ensuring academic success and well-being within higher education. Numerous universities provide counselling services, accessibility and accommodation support, intervention initiatives, and awareness campaigns to promote the mental health and wellbeing of their students (Martin, 2010). The Centre for Academic Success (C4AS) provides a range of academic initiatives to foster student success and has metric systems in place to evaluate academic success. If a student is identified as needing extra academic assistance, the C4AS offers remedial activities designed to enhance their performance. Students may also request additional help from their lecturers or directly contact the C4AS for support if they face challenges that hinder their academic progress (STADIO Student Support and Success Handbook, 2025).

The C4AS aims to ensure that all support initiatives align with the academic goals, effectively support students, and provide insights into areas requiring improvement. Student success at STADIO is built on three key pillars (STADIO Student Support and Success Handbook, 2025):

10.2.1 STADIO's Three Key Pillars

10.2.1.1 C4AS Pillar 1: Transition into Higher Education

STADIO recognises that transitioning from school to higher education can be difficult for some students. To help with this adjustment, the C4AS offers programmes such as the orientation programme, the extended orientation programme, SmarterMeasure, Bridge the Gap, and students with Special Learning Needs (SLN), which aim to make this transition as smooth as possible.

The first-year orientation programme is structured to facilitate a smooth entry for the newly registered students into their academic journey. The extended orientation programme is a collaborative effort between the Academic Managers and the C4AS team. This programme offers continuous support and guidance throughout the first year, ensuring students are well-equipped to handle academic challenges. This programme is designed to help first-year students establish academic success strategies early and to offer personal support throughout their first year.

SmarterMeasure (SM) is a diagnostic tool designed to assess student readiness for the higher education environment (Smarterservices.com, 2025). SmarterMeasure serves as an early warning system, identifying students who may be struggling based on various academic readiness criteria. The C4AS monitors the progress of students who receive red ratings, which indicate that they failed the section tested. The students will then receive the necessary intervention and support by discussing resources which will support their areas of improvement. Follow-up sessions are also scheduled to monitor the student's progress.

Students with Special Learning Needs (SLN) are appropriately supported through their academic journey. This process involves collaboration between the Academic Department and the C4AS. Students in this category receive tailored support tailored to their special needs.

The Bridge the Gap (BTG) programme is specifically focused on Higher Certificate students to support their transition into the HE environment, throughout their academic journey, and from HE into the workplace. The BTG programme consists of topics tailored to students' needs and the areas they failed in on the SM assessment. These sessions include academic-focused topics such as time management, study skills, completing assessments, STADIO communication structures, understanding different types of assessment questions, examination preparation, and stress management, to name a few. On the other hand, the sessions also include soft skills such as communication, values, understanding a class culture, resilience, self-respect, quality of life, and respect and admiration.

10.2.1.2 C4AS Pillar 2: Transition through Higher Education

STADIO is committed to the principle of access with success. The C4AS provides ongoing support to enhance learning and teaching, aiding students throughout their academic journey through at-risk management, the Bridge the Gap programme, SmarterMeasure feedback sessions, Academic workshops, and continuous academic and counselling support. Attending regular C4AS sessions can help students better navigate their studies.

At-risk management, which includes alternative access. The focus will be on academic support for students at risk, repeat students, and newly registered students in the Special Learning Needs (SLN) category. The C4AS works closely with the academic department to track students who are academically at risk and to provide academic or emotional support and intervention when needed.

10.2.1.3 C4AS Pillar 3: Transition from Higher Education to the Workforce

The C4AS offers programs to prepare students for the job market. These include diagnostics and development opportunities that help students identify areas for improvement. Students can also register for the STADIO Stripes program to enhance their professional portfolio. Each campus has a dedicated C4AS, with the C4AS Manager and Student Success Coordinators providing support both on-site and remotely to satellite campuses. The C4AS has both a reactive function, addressing students' immediate needs, and a proactive role, implementing activities to foster academic success, personal development, and workplace skills, as well as promoting social engagement and general academic support (STADIO Student Support and Success Handbook, 2025).

Academic and workplace readiness workshops are held weekly and designed to equip students with the skills and insights needed to enter the workforce, offering guidance on resumes, interviews, and workplace behaviour. These sessions also serve as a networking platform and an opportunity to connect with industry professionals.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) in South Africa has outlined the importance of student support and its critical role in fostering success in Higher Education. Whilst the CHE emphasises providing opportunities for students to enter the higher education sector, it outlines several key frameworks for student support that emphasise inclusivity and an environment conducive not only to academic but also to personal growth. Another factor the CHE outlines is support for diverse learners; the emphasis is on identifying and addressing disparities in students' readiness for higher education and on providing interventions. In addition, monitoring and continuous improvement contribute to student support (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2016).

10.3 Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative case-study approach to examine the research problem in depth. A case study allows the researcher to explore a real-life issue in its context, gathering detailed and in-depth data from a range of sources (Saunders et al., 2012). This method helps uncover the underlying reasons behind student underperformance, providing a more nuanced understanding of the challenges.

In addition, action research was used as part of the approach. Action research is an iterative process focused on solving real-world problems by actively involving participants. It encourages ongoing feedback and reflection, which helps the researcher adjust and improve strategies based on what is learned throughout the process. By engaging both academic staff and students, this approach ensures the findings are grounded in practical experience, offering valuable insights for improving the programme and its outcomes beyond the scope of the research itself.

10.4 Results and Findings

10.4.1 Understanding High-Risk Modules

In the academic quality assurance framework, modules are categorised based on how well students perform in them. A 'Red Module' is one where the pass rate falls below 60% in a given academic cycle. A 'Fire Module' is a red module that consistently performs poorly, with pass rates below 60% for three to five semesters in a row. These modules are considered high-risk and flagged for further academic review and improvement.

This study focuses on three such high-risk modules, Introduction to Labour Law (LLA152), Introduction to Business Law (BLA152), and Legal Practice Management (LPM152), to uncover the challenges students face and to suggest practical, evidence-based solutions for improvement.

10.4.2 Pass Rates for High-Risk Modules (2021–2024)

The table below summarises the historical pass rates for the selected high-risk modules over the past four years across both Distance Learning (DL) and Contact Learning (CL) modes of delivery. The data highlights persistent performance challenges across several academic cycles and delivery

modes, justifying the classification of these modules as high-risk and necessitating targeted academic interventions. This aligns with findings from previous studies (Martin, 2010) that suggest consistent underperformance in specific subjects can indicate deeper systemic issues that require a comprehensive response. In particular, students' struggles with core legal modules can stem from a range of factors, including inadequate assessment methods, insufficient academic support, and limited engagement with course content, as discussed in the literature (Wittkower, 2020).

Table 10-1: Historical Pass Rates for High-Risk Modules in the Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies (2021–2024)

Module	Mode of Delivery	2024	2023	2022	2021
Introduction to Business Law	DL	64.07%	53.60%	65.33%	56.46%
Introduction to Business Law	CL	68.81%	50.00%	48.48%	Not offered
Legal Practice Management	DL	61.23%	49.14%	74.29%	86.17%
Legal Practice Management	CL	57.76%	45.71%	85.71%	Not offered
Introduction to Labour Law	DL	64.69%	70.07%	54.15%	82.18%
Introduction to Labour Law	CL	52.00%	36.92%	71.43%	Not offered
Introduction to Family Law	DL	57.62%	62.89%	61,76%	83,67%
Introduction to Family Law	CL	62.50%	50.00%	53,66%	Not offered

Source: STADIO. (2023). Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies Programme Review. STADIO Higher Education. STADIO. (2024). *Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies Pass Rate Report*. STADIO Higher Education.

10.4.3 Alignment of Assessment Practices with NQF Level 5 Standards

The Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies is formally registered at NQF Level 5 within the National Qualifications Framework. As such, the design and implementation of assessment strategies within the programme must be aligned with the cognitive demands expected at this level. Specifically, assessments should demonstrate a balanced integration of:

- Knowledge recall
- Comprehension
- Application and analysis

The 2023 Programme Review raised concerns about the alignment of assessment practices with the cognitive demands of NQF Level 5. In response, adjustments were made to the examination strategies for certain modules in 2025, including Introduction to Family Law (LFL152), to better align with the cognitive requirements of this level. As part of these revisions, approximately 40–50% of the assessments now focus on knowledge recall and comprehension, which are better suited to this level of study. Additionally, the structure of application-based questions has been modified: whereas previous assessments included extended questions worth 20–30 marks, the revised assessments now feature shorter application questions, each worth 2–4 marks.

These changes have resulted in significant improvements in student outcomes, with the pass rate for LFL152 increasing to 97%. It is also noteworthy that all Higher Certificate modules serve as exit-level qualifications and are externally moderated to ensure compliance with NQF Level 5 standards. Furthermore, the increased emphasis on terminology across the modules has improved students' understanding of key legal concepts and vocabulary, thereby enhancing their academic success.

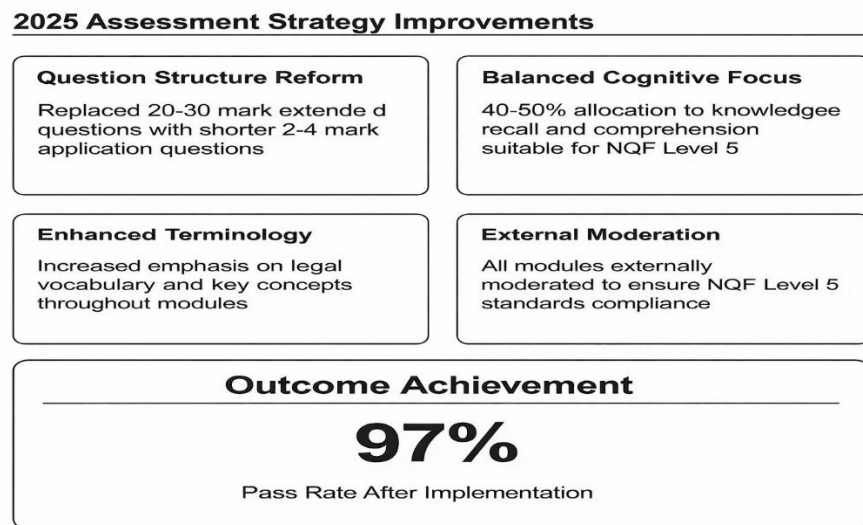


Figure 10-1: 2025 Assessment Strategy Improvements

Source: Dias, A., 2025. Internal report on student performance in Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies. Unpublished report, STADIO Higher Education.

10.5 Study Material and Textbook Affordability

The affordability of textbooks has been a recurring issue, highlighted in the 2023 Programme Review conducted by the School of Law. In response to these concerns, the review recommends a gradual reassessment of prescribed textbooks to determine whether they can be fully replaced with comprehensive study guides.

Among the seven modules offered in the Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies programme, five currently combine prescribed textbooks with institutional study guides. The breakdown of these modules is as follows:

10.5.1 Compulsory Modules:

- End-User Computing (EUC152) – 10 credits (Presented by the School of Information Technology; no textbook prescribed)
- Introduction to Business Law (BLA152) – 20 credits (Includes both a study guide and a prescribed textbook)

- Introduction to Law (ITL152) – 15 credits (Includes a study guide and a prescribed textbook)
- Legal Practice Management (LPM152) – 20 credits (Supported by a comprehensive study guide; no textbook prescribed)
- Legal Skills (LSK152) – 15 credits (Replaced Legal Research and Communication (LCU100) in 2023; includes both a study guide and a prescribed textbook)

10.5.2 Elective Modules (Students select two):

- Introduction to Labour Law (LLA152) – 20 credits (Includes a study guide and a prescribed textbook)
- Introduction to Family Law (LFL152) – 20 credits (Includes a study guide and a prescribed textbook; the same textbook is also used for LFL162)
- Debt Recovery (LDC152) – 20 credits (Includes a full study guide; no textbook prescribed)

The 2023 Programme Review also pointed out that a significant portion of students, more than a third, opt out of purchasing required study materials. This decision often leads to lower academic performance. Many students attempt to reduce costs by renting or sharing textbooks, yet few fully utilise library resources or the campus bookstore. This issue is especially prominent in courses like Health Sciences, where students are generally more willing to invest in textbooks (Wittkower, 2020, p.123).

This study investigates how various factors, such as student demographics, work commitments, and field of study, shape perceptions of textbook costs and their impact on academic outcomes. For instance, students with demanding work schedules, especially those transferring from institutions that offer free materials, tend to feel the financial strain of textbook costs more acutely. Business students, in particular, report the highest textbook costs and are more likely to drop courses due to these expenses (Wittkower, 2020, p.124).

The study advocates for enhanced institutional support, improved communication, and stronger collaboration among faculty, libraries, and the administration to address the financial barriers posed by textbooks. Collecting and acting on student feedback is essential to creating informed and effective solutions (Wittkower, 2020, p.125).

Moreover, this issue of textbook affordability ties into broader equity concerns. The study highlights the use of Open Educational Resources (OER), particularly in addressing the needs of historically underserved student groups. A recent study conducted at a Hispanic-serving institution in Southern California found that the high cost of textbooks disproportionately affects minority, low-income, and first-generation students, framing textbook affordability as a significant social justice issue (Jenkins, 2020, p. 2). Initiatives like Tidewater Community College’s “Z-degree” and CSU Channel Islands’ “Z-majors” illustrate how eliminating textbook costs can enhance access

and equity in higher education (Jenkins, 2020, p.9). The study calls for further research on the wider justice impacts of OER and urges institutions to tackle textbook and other non-tuition costs as part of a more holistic approach to reducing barriers to education.

By reducing the cost of study materials, the institution's mission to expand access to higher education will be furthered, particularly for students who the high price of textbooks might otherwise deter. Starting in 2026, all Higher Certificate modules will be supported exclusively by full study guides, addressing issues of affordability and simplifying study materials. This change is expected to make study materials more accessible and manageable for students, potentially improving pass rates.

10.6 Recommendations and Implications

Based on the findings and analysis, the following practical recommendations are proposed to enhance student success, academic performance, and the overall effectiveness of the Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies programme. These suggestions focus on refining assessment strategies, supporting students more effectively, and addressing challenges like the affordability of study materials. Here's a breakdown:

10.6.1 Improving Assessment Practices

- Recommendation: It's important to continue refining assessments to better align with the cognitive skills required at NQF Level 5. This includes incorporating more application and analysis questions, so that students are challenged to think critically and solve real-world legal problems.
- Implication: This will help students not only recall information but also apply it effectively, which is essential in legal practice. As assessments become more aligned with real-world scenarios, students will be better prepared for professional life.

10.6.2 Providing Teaching Resources to Moderators

- Recommendation: All external moderators should be given the necessary study guides and clearly defined learning outcomes to ensure assessments meet academic standards. This practice is already in place and should continue.
- Implication: Providing moderators with the right tools helps ensure assessments are fair and consistent, thereby improving the overall quality of the programme and making the grading process clearer for everyone involved.

10.6.3 Clarifying Assessment Memoranda

- Recommendation: The memoranda or model answers for assessments should clearly explain how marks are allocated and provide a structured outline for what is expected in student responses.

- Implication: This will give students a clearer understanding of how to approach assessments, reduce confusion, and improve their answers, leading to better academic results.

10.6.4 Supporting Language Development

- Recommendation: A bridging course or language development module should be offered to students with weak language skills, particularly those with low English proficiency upon registration.
- Implication: Improving students' language skills will make it easier for them to engage with legal content and perform better in assessments. Students in law programmes must have a strong grasp of language, and this support will help them thrive academically.

10.6.5 Enhancing Application-Based Assessments

- Recommendation: To further develop students' critical thinking, assessments should include more application and problem-solving questions. This shift will be implemented in collaboration with module coordinators in the second semester, and in-class tutorials will also focus on practical legal issues.
- Implication: This change will push students to engage more deeply with the material, strengthening their ability to think on their feet and apply legal concepts effectively, which are essential skills for any paralegal.

10.6.6 Addressing Textbook Affordability

- Recommendation: Moving forward, textbook reviews should be a priority to replace expensive textbooks with more affordable, accessible study guides. Exploring Open Educational Resources (OER) will also help reduce costs.
- Implication: Reducing the financial burden of textbooks will help students focus on their studies rather than worry about the cost of materials. By adopting more affordable resources, the programme will become more accessible, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds.

10.6.7 Strengthening Student Support

- Recommendation: Continuing to build on the Centre for Academic Success (C4AS) initiatives will help support students in need. Specific focus should be placed on the Bridge the Gap programme and providing tailored interventions for students who struggle with specific modules.
- Implication: Personalised academic support is crucial for students, particularly those who are adjusting to higher education. Offering targeted interventions will help students stay on track and increase their chances of success.

10.6.8 Ongoing Monitoring and Evaluation

- Recommendation: Regularly evaluate both the assessment methods and student support services to ensure they are effective. Gathering feedback from students and faculty will allow quick adjustments and ensure the programme remains relevant to student needs.
- Implication: Continuous monitoring will help STADIO stay responsive to emerging challenges and adapt the programme to improve student outcomes, ensuring long-term success for the students and the institution alike.

10.7 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

10.7.1 Conclusions

This study has examined the key challenges affecting student performance in the Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies programme at STADIO, focusing on high-risk modules and assessment practices aligned with NQF Level 5 standards. The research highlighted the impact of assessment design, student support services, and the affordability of study materials on student success. Through a comprehensive analysis, several critical issues were identified, including the need to adjust assessment strategies, improve language support, and expand access to affordable learning materials.

The findings suggest that revised assessment strategies, which now emphasise knowledge recall and comprehension and include shorter application-based questions, have led to significant improvements in student outcomes, as demonstrated by the 97% pass rate in LFL152. Additionally, the Centre for Academic Success (C4AS) has been instrumental in supporting students, particularly through programmes such as Bridge the Gap and SmarterMeasure, which help identify at-risk students and provide the necessary interventions.

The affordability of textbooks emerged as a significant barrier to student success, with many students opting not to purchase the required materials, which ultimately affected their academic performance. Recommendations for addressing these challenges, including replacing textbooks with study guides and exploring Open Educational Resources (OER), aim to reduce costs and improve accessibility.

10.7.2 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors affecting student performance in the Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- Scope of Data: The study primarily relies on data from the 2023 Programme Review and pass rate reports for 2021–2024, which may not fully represent the broader student experience or capture long-term trends beyond this period.

- Student Feedback: Although student feedback was considered, the sample size and diversity of student experiences may have been limited. Additional qualitative data, such as interviews or focus groups, could have provided a more nuanced understanding of the challenges students face.
- External Moderation: The study assumes that the external moderation process effectively ensures academic standards. However, the extent to which external moderators influence changes in assessment design was not fully explored.

10.7.3 Future Research

Given the findings and limitations of this study, several areas for future research can be identified:

- Longitudinal Study on Assessment Changes: Future research could track the long-term impact of the changes to assessment strategies on student performance. This would provide insights into whether improvements in pass rates are sustained over time and if the revised assessments continue to align effectively with NQF Level 5 cognitive demands.
- Evaluation of Language Support Programs: Future research could investigate the effectiveness of language development interventions, such as English bridging courses, in improving student performance. This would provide valuable data on the impact of targeted language support in legal education.
- Open Educational Resources (OER): As the affordability of textbooks is a critical issue, research into the adoption and impact of OER in the Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies programme would be beneficial. Future studies could explore how OER can reduce costs and improve access to high-quality learning materials for all students.
- Interventions for At-Risk Students: Further research could examine the effectiveness of C4AS's support services, particularly for at-risk students. Investigating the specific interventions with the greatest impact on student success could lead to more targeted, effective support programs.

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Chapter 11: From Distraction to Adoption: Understanding Student-Centric Barriers in Mobile Learning Environments in South Africa

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates student-centric barriers influencing the adoption of mobile learning (m-learning) in South African higher education. While students demonstrate high levels of digital confidence and frequent engagement with mobile platforms, adoption remains inconsistent. The research specifically examines how behavioural factors (digital distraction) and psychological concerns (privacy anxiety) interact with institutional trust to shape students' willingness to engage with m-learning technologies.

Study design/methodology/approach: Adopting a positivist philosophical stance, the study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected from 83 Information Technology students at STADIO Higher Education using a structured questionnaire informed by validated constructs related to privacy, trust, confidence, and distraction. Descriptive statistics and inferential analysis were conducted to assess patterns of engagement, avoidance behaviour, and perceived barriers. The study was theoretically grounded in the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) and the Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) framework.

Findings: Results indicate that although 90% of respondents reported moderate to high confidence in using mobile learning platforms, significant behavioural and psychological barriers persist. Approximately 65.1% admitted to experiencing digital distraction during learning, 50.6% expressed moderate-to-high privacy concerns, and 28.9% reported limited trust in institutional data management practices. While these concerns do not entirely prevent adoption, they contribute to avoidance behaviours and inconsistent academic engagement. The findings highlight a gap between digital competence and sustained, focused participation in m-learning environments.

Originality/value: This study contributes empirical evidence from a South African higher education context, foregrounding psychological and behavioural dimensions often overlooked in m-learning research. By shifting focus from infrastructure and digital literacy toward student trust, distraction, and emotional engagement, the study offers actionable insights for designing transparent, student-centred mobile learning policies and platforms.

Keywords: *Mobile Learning; Digital Distraction; Privacy and Trust; Higher Education; Student Adoption; Technology Acceptance*

11.1 Introduction

11.1.1 Background

The integration of mobile learning (m-learning) technologies into higher education has revolutionised teaching and learning worldwide. In South Africa, high mobile device use contrasts with ongoing inequalities in access to infrastructure and digital literacy (Makoe, 2020). M-learning

has the potential to make education more accessible, but adoption remains inconsistent. Platforms such as Moodle, WhatsApp tutoring, and institution-specific apps have been implemented, yet challenges such as digital distraction, data privacy concerns, and limited institutional support persist (Ismail & Mutanga, 2023; Lamola, 2024).

11.1.2 Problem Statement

Although m-learning is widely adopted, its effectiveness is constrained by students' concerns. Privacy, distractions, and trust issues with institutions limit consistent use. Ambiguous policies also increase mistrust. If these problems are not addressed, they could prevent mobile technologies from enhancing educational outcomes, especially for disadvantaged students.

11.1.3 Research Objectives

- To investigate barriers to m-learning adoption from students' perspectives.
- To examine how privacy and trust concerns affect willingness to use mobile platforms.
- To assess the impact of digital distractions on academic engagement.
- To provide recommendations to improve policies and design for student-centred m-learning environments.

11.2 Literature Review

11.2.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a detailed review of both global and South African literature on mobile learning adoption, examining how various technological, behavioural, and institutional challenges affect student engagement and implementation results. It covers key factors such as device access, app usability, data privacy issues, social media distractions, institutional trust, and the readiness of higher education systems to incorporate mobile learning into mainstream academic programs. By combining insights from international and local studies, the chapter aims to provide context for the unique student-centred barriers encountered in South African higher education environments.

11.2.2 Mobile Learning in Higher Education

Mobile learning (m-learning) greatly improves access to education by enabling students to engage with learning materials anytime, anywhere, overcoming traditional classroom constraints. It enables learners to take more control of their educational paths, supporting flexible, personalised, and on-demand learning experiences. Ally and Prieto-Blázquez (2014) highlight that m-learning plays a vital role in promoting lifelong learning by enabling ongoing skill development through different life stages and situations. The urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated the adoption of digital learning tools worldwide. In South Africa, many universities responded by adopting Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Moodle, Microsoft Teams, and Blackboard to maintain academic continuity (Afolabi & Ajani, 2023). These platforms offered

essential infrastructure for remote learning during lockdowns. However, despite the quick adoption of m-learning technologies, challenges remain, especially in rural and under-resourced communities. Differences in digital infrastructure, access to affordable internet, and varying levels of digital literacy among students continue to worsen educational inequalities, limiting the full potential of mobile learning in South African higher education.

11.2.3 Barriers to Adoption

Alrasheedi et al. (2022) identified several recurring barriers that hinder the effective adoption of mobile learning technologies. These include usability challenges, such as complex interfaces and inconsistent user experiences, that often discourage sustained engagement; insufficient institutional support, including technical training, helpdesk services, and clear digital learning policies; and growing concerns about data privacy and security, especially when students are required to use third-party platforms. In the South African context, these barriers are compounded by socio-technical factors unique to the local higher education environment. Notably, trust deficits, where students are uncertain about how universities manage their personal data, emerge as a critical obstacle to mobile learning adoption (Chaka & Govender, 2022). Additionally, digital distractions, especially through pervasive use of social media and entertainment apps on mobile devices, significantly undermine academic focus and performance (Ismail & Mutanga, 2023). These behavioural and institutional barriers demonstrate the complex interplay of factors that must be addressed to support the implementation of sustainable m-learning in South African universities.

11.2.4 Digital Distraction

While mobile devices offer great educational opportunities, they also pose significant challenges for keeping students focused. A key issue is their tendency to distract learners with non-academic activities such as social media, instant messaging, gaming, and video streaming. These distractions are not just occasional, they frequently happen during study sessions or online classes, disrupting concentration and lowering academic productivity. Ismail and Mutanga (2023) conducted a study that showed a strong negative association between time spent on entertainment apps and students' academic performance. Their results indicate that as non-academic mobile use increases, students' ability to remember information and complete school tasks effectively decreases. This highlights the urgent need to control digital distractions in mobile learning environments. Creating strategies such as app blockers, focus timers, digital literacy training, and awareness campaigns can help students develop self-control and stay engaged while using mobile devices for learning. Schools should also think about designing mobile learning platforms that reduce interruptions and improve academic focus.

11.2.5 Privacy, Trust, and Security

Trust in mobile learning environments heavily depends on students' perceptions of how responsible and transparent institutions are in managing their personal data. When learners are asked to use digital platforms, especially those that require logins, data submissions, or interaction tracking, their willingness to participate often depends on whether they believe their information is handled ethically and securely. Marimuthu et al. (2021) found that many students fear surveillance and data leaks, especially when they are not clearly informed about what data is collected, how it is used, and who can access it. These fears are often heightened in mobile contexts where third-party apps may be involved. Lamola (2024) further states that this lack of institutional transparency especially impacts students from marginalised backgrounds, who may already face systemic exclusion or stigmatisation. For these students, the absence of clear communication about digital policies and protections not only deepens mistrust but also discourages their active participation in mobile learning. Therefore, establishing transparent, student-focused data management practices is crucial for building trust and encouraging fair engagement in m-learning settings.

11.2.6 Theoretical Frameworks

The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) and the Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) model provide robust frameworks for understanding factors influencing technology adoption, particularly in mobile learning. UTAUT, developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003), combines elements from eight well-known models of technology acceptance and identifies four main factors that shape user behaviour: performance expectancy (perceived usefulness), effort expectancy (ease of use), social influence, and facilitating conditions. According to this model, users are more likely to adopt a technology if they believe it will improve their academic performance, is easy to use, is endorsed by peers or authority figures, and is supported by sufficient institutional infrastructure. Complementing UTAUT, Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovation theory highlights how innovations spread through a social system over time, driven by five key attributes: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Both models emphasise the importance of user perception in the adoption process. In the South African higher education context, studies by Ajani and Afolabi (2023) have confirmed these theoretical ideas, showing that trust in the platform and performance expectancy are especially strong predictors of mobile learning adoption. These findings suggest that for m-learning initiatives to succeed, they must not only meet technical and pedagogical standards but also build trust and demonstrate real academic value to students.

While much of the existing research on mobile learning (m-learning) tends to focus on technological infrastructure, pedagogical strategies, and platform usability, it often overlooks the equally important psychological and behavioural aspects that influence student engagement and adoption. Factors such as fear of surveillance, anxiety about data misuse, habitual distraction, lack

of self-regulation, and feelings of digital fatigue are frequently underexplored in empirical studies. This narrow focus can lead to an incomplete understanding of why students may resist or inconsistently engage with mobile learning tools, even if they are digitally literate or have access to the necessary devices. Recognising this gap, the present study intentionally shifts the focus to students' lived experiences in the South African higher education context. By highlighting student voices and exploring their behavioural responses, trust perceptions, and emotional interactions with mobile technologies, this research provides a more comprehensive view of mobile learning adoption. It also emphasises the importance of creating interventions that are not only technologically effective but also psychologically and behaviourally tailored to students' diverse needs.

11.3 Research Methodology

11.3.1 Introduction

This study used the Research Onion framework (Saunders et al, 2012) to develop a thorough and organised research methodology. At the philosophical level, the study adopted a positivist perspective, which supports objective measurement of observable phenomena and prioritises empirical data collection over subjective interpretation. Methodologically, a quantitative approach was chosen to facilitate systematic analysis of student responses using statistical tools, yielding generalizable insights into barriers to adopting mobile learning. The research design was cross-sectional, collecting data at a single point in time to evaluate students' current perceptions, behaviours, and concerns regarding mobile learning.

Data were collected through a structured self-administered survey distributed to a targeted group of 83 Information Technology students enrolled at STADIO Higher Education. The inclusion criteria required that participants be actively registered students with demonstrable access to mobile learning platforms such as Moodle, WhatsApp, or Microsoft Teams. Participants who did not meet these conditions or who submitted incomplete responses were excluded from the final analysis. To ensure alignment between the research objectives and the respondent group, a purposive sampling strategy was used, focusing on students with direct exposure to mobile learning environments.

Instrument reliability was strengthened by using validated constructs from established literature, such as perceived confidence, privacy concern, and distraction. Questions were piloted and revised to improve clarity and coherence. Ethical standards were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. To protect confidentiality, data were anonymised and participants' identities replaced with pseudonyms, preventing individual responses from being traced back to any student. The study's ethical clearance was obtained in accordance with institutional guidelines, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and data integrity.

11.3.1.1 Research Questions

- How do privacy and trust concerns influence students' willingness to use mobile learning apps?
- How do distractions impact academic engagement?
- What barriers prevent adoption?

11.3.2 Selection Criteria

The participants are students enrolled in the School of Information Technology at STADIO Higher Education. This group is chosen for their frequent use of mobile learning tools and experience with blended and remote learning modalities.

11.3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this study required participants to be currently enrolled undergraduate or postgraduate students in the School of Information Technology and to have access to mobile learning platforms such as Moodle, WhatsApp, Google Classroom, or Canvas. Conversely, students from other faculties or departments who were not directly involved with mobile learning systems, as well as those lacking reliable access to a mobile device for academic purposes, were excluded from participation.

11.3.4 Selection and Data Extraction

Primary data will be collected using a structured electronic questionnaire distributed through institutional communication channels. Responses will be exported to Microsoft Excel and analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means) and inferential statistics (Pearson correlation, regression). The questionnaire is designed based on validated constructs from the literature on mobile learning barriers, including privacy, trust, and distraction (Ismail & Mutanga, 2023; Chaka & Govender, 2022).

11.3.5 Hypothesis

Hypotheses tested: (H1) Privacy concerns decrease adoption; (H2) Distraction decreases engagement; (H3) Trust mediates adoption.

11.4 Results and Findings

This section presents the results of the quantitative analysis based on survey responses from 83 students enrolled at STADIO Higher Education's School of Information Technology. The analysis addresses the main and sub-research questions, focusing on confidence in using mobile learning, privacy and trust concerns, digital distractions, and behavioural avoidance. Descriptive summaries and visualisations accompany each section.

11.4.1 Gender Distribution of Respondents

The gender distribution shows a fairly even split among participants, helping to ensure diverse student experiences and perceptions are represented. Gender: 59% Male, 39.8% Female, 1.2% Prefer not to say. Learning mode: 81.9% in-person, 18.1% remote.

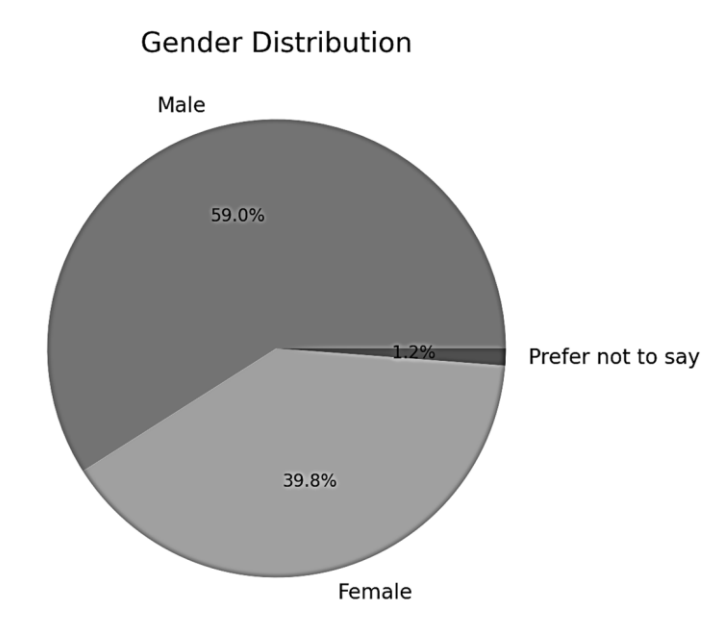


Figure 11-1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

11.4.2 Confidence in Using Mobile Learning Platforms

More than 50% of students reported confidence levels of 3-5 on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating familiarity with mobile learning platforms such as Moodle, Microsoft Teams, Canvas, and WhatsApp. This aligns with the literature indicating that digital skills are increasing among South African higher education students (Chaka & Govender, 2022). 52.4% were very confident (5/5), 38.1% confident (4/5), and 9.5% moderately confident (3/5).

11.4.3 Privacy Concerns and Trust in Institutions



Figure 11-2: Confidence in Using Mobile Learning Platforms

More than half of the students expressed moderate to high concern about privacy on mobile learning platforms, with many rating their concern between 3 and 5. Despite this, most still trust their institution to safeguard their data. This highlights a potential trust gap that could be addressed through clearer institutional data policies (Marimuthu et al., 2021). 50.6% indicated moderate-to-high privacy concern (ratings 4–5). Trust: 71.1% trust their institution; 28.9% do not.

11.4.4 Social Media Distraction and Student Engagement in Learning

The results demonstrate that 65.1% admitted to being distracted by social media during learning. This echoes concerns raised by Ismail and Mutanga (2023), who note that unregulated access to non-academic mobile applications significantly hampers student engagement and academic performance.

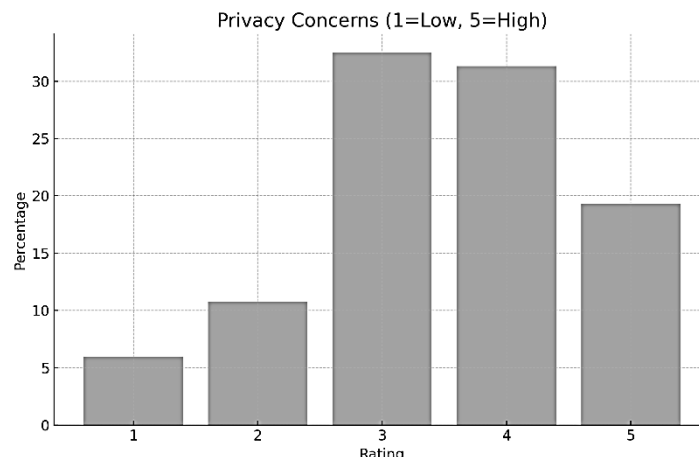


Figure 11-3: Privacy Concern Ratings

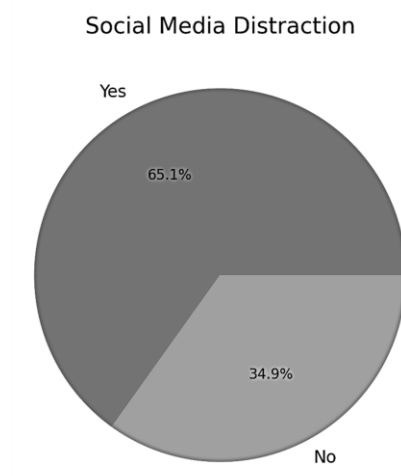


Figure 11-4: Social Media Distraction During Mobile Learning

11.4.5 Avoidance of Mobile Learning Due to Barriers

When asked how often they avoid mobile learning due to privacy or distraction concerns, students answered 'Sometimes' or 'Rarely'. Additionally, 54.2% sometimes avoided m-learning due to distractions or privacy concerns; 20.5% rarely did so; 16.9% never did so; and 8.4% often did so. This indicates that while these obstacles are recognised, they do not completely prevent adoption. Future efforts should focus on addressing these behavioural barriers to improve adoption outcomes (Lamola, 2024).

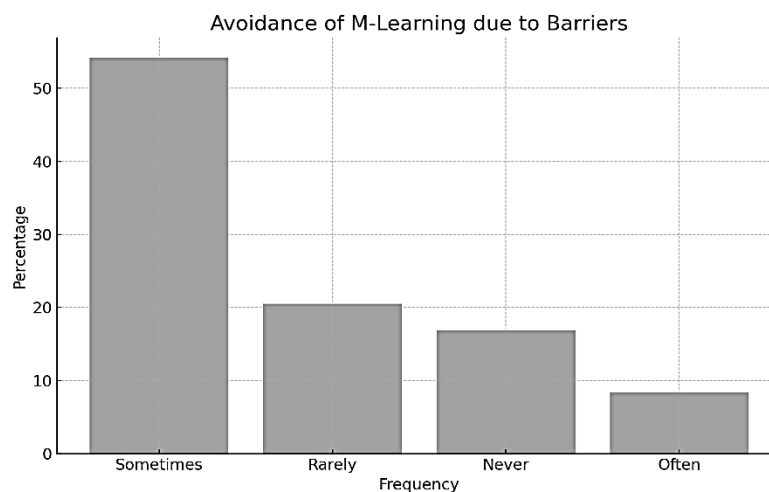


Figure 11-5: Frequency of Avoidance of Mobile Learning

Students are digitally competent but encounter behavioural obstacles: distraction, privacy issues, and varying levels of trust. Although trust in institutions appears relatively high, privacy concerns still persist, highlighting the need for stronger policies. Digital distractions and occasional

avoidance indicate that mobile learning design should incorporate features that help students stay focused.

11.5 Discussion and Recommendations

This section presents the main findings of the study regarding the key research questions. The goal was to understand the student-centred barriers that influence the adoption of mobile learning in South African higher education, especially at STADIO Higher Education's School of IT. The results show that while digital literacy is not a major challenge, behavioural, psychological, and institutional factors are crucial in affecting adoption. The study confirms that, although students generally have sufficient digital skills and access to devices, barriers such as privacy concerns, digital distractions, and occasional avoidance significantly affect their willingness to adopt and consistently use mobile learning tools. Data revealed that students are confident, but this did not lead to smooth adoption. Instead, concerns about data privacy, trust in institutions, and mobile distractions were significant obstacles, aligning with earlier findings by Chaka and Govender (2022) and Alrasheedi et al. (2022).

11.6 Key Findings

The survey data showed that students generally felt confident using mobile learning platforms, with most reporting moderate-to-high skill levels. The gender distribution was slightly skewed toward males, but overall, the participant group was well-balanced. Although important questions about privacy, distraction, and trust were not fully answered, the results indicate a basic level of digital readiness.

The observed high levels of confidence support Chaka and Govender's (2022) claim that South African students are increasingly adapting to mobile environments. This foundational skill is important, but it does not address barriers such as distractions or institutional trust, both of which remain unassessed due to missing data. However, the lack of fear or hesitation when using digital tools suggests that any resistance is more likely to be behavioural or structural than technical.

11.7 Discussion of Research Questions

11.7.1 Research Question 1:

How do privacy and trust concerns affect students' willingness to use mobile learning apps?

Quantitative data clearly show that privacy concerns are clustered in the mid-to-high range (3–5 on a Likert scale), with students expressing caution about how their data is stored and shared. This reflects significant concerns about data governance practices on digital platforms. At the same time, most students reported trusting their institution's ability to protect this data. Despite this, avoidance behaviour indicates that worries about data misuse or over-surveillance still cause students to disengage from mobile learning at times. This demonstrates a complex situation: trust

in institutions may be widespread, but it is fragile, especially when transparency is lacking. These findings emphasise the importance of institutional accountability and data governance in promoting the adoption of mobile learning (Lamola, 2024; Marimuthu et al., 2021).

11.7.1.1 Research Question 2:

To what extent do mobile-related distractions impact students' academic engagement and outcomes?

The results strongly support the notion that digital distractions pose a significant barrier to effective learning. Most respondents reported frequently receiving non-academic notifications while studying. Additionally, many students admitted that social media distracts them while using mobile learning platforms.

This finding aligns with Ismail and Mutanga (2023), who discovered a negative correlation between screen time on entertainment apps and academic performance. The frequency of avoiding distractions also shows that some students are beginning to self-regulate by intentionally stepping back from mobile learning when it becomes unproductive. Therefore, institutions need to implement measures that promote digital discipline and focus-enhancing strategies, such as app timers, do-not-disturb modes, and minimalist learning interfaces.

11.7.1.2 Research Question 3:

What specific barriers prevent students from adopting mobile learning technologies?

In addition to privacy concerns and distractions, the data points to behavioural avoidance, driven by fear of distraction and mistrust, as a subtle yet powerful barrier to adoption. The data shows that many students occasionally avoid mobile learning platforms, even when they are confident in their use. This suggests that adoption is not only about technical access or digital skills but also influenced by emotional and psychological resistance linked to past negative experiences or perceived risks.

Moreover, non-technical barriers, such as notification fatigue, lack of focus, and unclear institutional communication regarding data privacy, contribute to decreased platform engagement. These findings align with Alrasheedi et al. (2022), who identified usability issues, poor institutional support, and psychological discomfort as common obstacles to mobile learning adoption. Therefore, overcoming these barriers requires both technical enhancements and behavioural interventions tailored to student needs.

11.8 Recommendations

Drawing from the data collected and the analysis of results presented in Section 11.4, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed to address the key student-centred barriers, privacy

and trust concerns, digital distraction, and behavioural avoidance that hinder the adoption of mobile learning in South African higher education:

11.8.1.1 Improve Institutional Data Transparency and Governance

Although students generally reported trust in their institutions, the data also revealed significant concerns about privacy. Institutions should adopt and clearly communicate comprehensive data protection policies that explicitly detail how student information is collected, used, and safeguarded across mobile platforms. Regular updates, opt-in consent mechanisms, and transparent data-sharing protocols are critical to reinforcing student trust and ensuring compliance with POPIA and international standards (Marimuthu et al., 2021; Lamola, 2024).

11.8.1.2 Incorporate Focus-Promoting Features in Learning Platforms

Given the high occurrence of social media and non-academic distractions reported, mobile learning platforms should incorporate features that support focused academic engagement. These might include distraction-reducing tools such as study timers, do-not-disturb modes, and app-based notification blockers. This aligns with Ismail and Mutanga's (2023) recommendation to promote digital discipline and lessen cognitive overload during study sessions.

11.8.1.3 Design Behaviourally Responsive Interfaces

Behavioural avoidance emerged as a subtle yet influential barrier, with many students admitting to occasionally avoiding mobile learning due to fear of distraction or perceived risks. Institutions and edtech developers should prioritise user-centred interface designs that reduce friction, enhance perceived usefulness, and align with students' academic routines. Incorporating gamification, progress tracking, and personalisation features may boost emotional engagement and motivation. Offer targeted digital literacy and self-regulation workshops.

Although confidence levels were generally high, the presence of avoidance behaviour and distraction suggests a need for targeted support for students. Training workshops should go beyond basic digital skills and include modules on managing screen time, evaluating privacy settings, and applying self-regulation strategies during mobile learning. These can be integrated into academic onboarding or supplemental learning programs.

11.8.1.4 Institutional Collaboration and Feedback Loops

Universities and institutions of Higher Education should co-design mobile learning strategies with student input. Ongoing feedback loops, through surveys, pilot testing, or student advisory panels, will ensure that platform design and policy interventions remain responsive to changing student needs. Such participatory approaches enhance buy-in, reduce resistance, and promote sustained adoption.

11.8.1.5 Expand Future Studies to Include Qualitative Perspectives

Building on these findings, future research should include qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to examine the emotional, psychological, and social factors behind mobile learning behaviours. Gaining a deeper understanding of students' lived experiences will help improve how institutions design and implement mobile learning strategies.

This chapter examined the survey results within the context of existing research and the research questions posed. While confidence levels indicate readiness for mobile learning, unresolved issues around distraction and trust reveal important gaps. Robust data collection and user-centred system designs are essential to move from digital distraction toward successful mobile learning adoption.

11.8.2 Conclusion and Future Research

This chapter summarises the main insights from the investigation into student-centric barriers to mobile learning adoption at STADIO Higher Education. It discusses how the findings answer the research questions and provides suggestions for future research.

- ***Overall Conclusion***

The study found that although students are confident in mobile learning technologies, adoption remains hindered by behavioural, psychological, and trust issues. While digital skills are not a problem, distractions from social media and concerns about data privacy significantly hinder consistent academic engagement. This emphasises the need to address students' needs through transparency within institutions, better interface design, and effective policy frameworks.

- ***Contribution to Knowledge***

This study contributes to the growing field of mobile learning by providing empirical data from South African higher education, with a specific focus on students. It offers valuable insights into the behavioural and psychological factors involved in adopting mobile learning, areas often overlooked in favour of technical and teaching strategies.

- ***Limitations of the Study***

While this study makes meaningful contributions to understanding student-centric barriers in mobile learning environments in South Africa, several limitations should be acknowledged to guide interpretation and contextualise the findings.

- ***Limited Institutional Scope***

The research focused solely on Information Technology students at STADIO Higher Education. Although this group was appropriate for examining m-learning behaviours, the results may not fully reflect students' experiences in other faculties, institutions, or regions. Therefore, generalizability across the wider South African higher education sector is limited.

- ***Cross-sectional Nature of the Study***

As a cross-sectional survey, data were collected at a single point in time. This method captures student perceptions and behaviours in a snapshot but does not consider changes, trends, or the development of trust, distraction, and platform use over time. A longitudinal design could have offered a better understanding of how adoption patterns change throughout a student's academic journey.

- ***Reliance on Self-Reported Data***

The study relied on participants' self-assessments through survey responses, which could be affected by bias, such as social desirability bias or inaccurate memory. Although anonymity was maintained to encourage honesty, there is still a risk of underreporting behaviours like distraction or overreporting digital confidence and trust.

- ***Quantitative Exclusivity***

The exclusive use of quantitative methods, while allowing for measurable analysis, limited the depth of insight into the psychological and emotional factors influencing student adoption. Important themes such as anxiety about surveillance, emotional fatigue, or motivational challenges were not fully explored due to the lack of qualitative data.

- ***Instrument Constraints***

Although validated constructs were used, the questionnaire's structure may not have captured all nuanced aspects of trust, privacy, or behavioural avoidance. Some constructs may have been interpreted differently by respondents, especially given the variability in digital literacy and contextual familiarity with mobile learning terms.

- ***Sampling Bias Potential***

The use of purposive sampling targeted students who already had access to mobile learning platforms and were digitally active. This may have unintentionally overlooked the voices of students who are digitally marginalised or less confident in m-learning environments, groups that could provide critical insights into adoption challenges.

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Chapter 12: Breaking the mould: Innovative pedagogies for doctoral supervision

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the limitations of the traditional apprenticeship model of doctoral supervision and explores innovative pedagogical approaches that can enhance doctoral education in response to contemporary challenges. Increasing student diversity, technological advancements, artificial intelligence, interdisciplinarity, and rising enrolments have placed pressure on conventional one-to-one supervision models. The purpose of this study is to identify and synthesise innovative supervisory practices globally and propose a hybrid framework that supplements and enriches the apprenticeship model while preserving its relational strengths.

Study design/methodology/approach: A systematic literature review methodology was employed to analyse doctoral supervision models across selected international universities. Data were drawn from university websites and peer-reviewed scholarly publications using predefined inclusion criteria. The study adopted an exploratory and descriptive design. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring pedagogical innovations, structural features, and support mechanisms that extend beyond the traditional supervisor–student dyad. Trustworthiness was ensured through transparent sampling procedures and clear documentation of data collection and analysis processes.

Findings: The findings reveal a clear global shift toward hybrid supervision models that combine individual mentorship with cohort-based learning, team supervision, peer-support mechanisms, structured coursework, industry integration, and technology-enhanced engagement. Recurring themes include structured doctoral phases with flexible progression, community-building initiatives, supervisory panels, seminar-based learning, work-integrated doctoral pathways, and skills development workshops. While the apprenticeship model remains foundational, it is increasingly complemented by collaborative, horizontalized, and democratised pedagogical approaches that mitigate isolation and enhance scalability.

Originality/value: This study contributes a synthesised hybrid supervision framework that integrates best practices from diverse international contexts. It advances the debate on doctoral pedagogy by offering a structured, yet flexible model suited to the digital era, supporting scalability, inclusivity, and doctoral candidate success while maintaining the central role of scholarly mentorship.

Keywords: Doctoral Education; Supervision Models; Doctorateness; Hybrid Pedagogy; Cohort Supervision; Higher Education

12.1 Introduction

Multiple factors influencing contemporary doctoral studies, such as the acceptable and general use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), various forms of technology, globalisation and the mobility of students across the world, accessibility to knowledge and information across the globe, as well as access to specialist and knowledgeable people worldwide via LinkedIn and university webpages.

These and more have spurred the debate regarding the traditional doctoral pedagogy known as the apprenticeship model of one supervisor and one student (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011). This debate concerning doctoral supervision and support persists in higher education institutions, especially regarding the best way of mediating doctoral learning (De Lange et al., 2011; McKenna & Van Schalkwyk, 2023). This article proposes innovative ways to improve the current supervision model and contributes to the debate on doctoral pedagogy. The objective is to review the nature of doctoral supervision and support to establish what universities are doing so that these practices can be distilled into a framework for supporting doctoral students.

The individualised, traditional apprenticeship approach, inherited from the Oxbridge tradition, remains the most favoured mode of supervision, not only in South Africa and other developing countries but also at highly ranked universities across the globe (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011). The Oxbridge tradition of doctoral supervision, encompassing both Oxford and Cambridge universities, is renowned for its personalised, intensive approach (McGabe, 2024). At Oxford, this is known as the tutorial system; at Cambridge, it is called supervision (Zhurkina & Kolyada, 2021). In this system, students typically meet with supervisors on a one-on-one basis. The highly interactive sessions involve detailed discussions about the student's work. The method encourages deep engagement with the subject matter and fosters critical thinking and independent learning. However, this apprenticeship model is increasingly seen as inappropriate for meeting the pedagogical needs of supervising students in the digitised era (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011), not only because of the growing numbers of students and the pressure on supervisors, but also because of the broader transformation of education.

There is growing support within supervision pedagogy for moving away from highly individualised, traditional models toward more open, flexible, and peer-supported approaches (Wisker et al., 2007). Lee (2010) advocates the development of supervisory communities through a decentralised version of the apprenticeship model, one that complements rather than replaces traditional modes. The conventional approach is often criticised for being isolated and intense, fostering dependency between the supervisor and the student (De Lange et al., 2011). This challenge is compounded by the increasing number of postgraduate students, which has significantly added to supervisors' workloads (Laiskos, 2023).

Manathunga et al. (2006) describe traditional supervision as a private pedagogical space grounded in a transmissive model of education, in which the supervisor acts as the guru and the student merely draws on the supervisor's superior expertise. Similarly, Pearson and Kayrooz (2004) refer to this as the Atlas complex, in which the supervisor bears the entire weight of responsibility, while Mackinnon (2004) critiques it as a paternalistic style that reinforces student dependence. More recently, Wilson et al. (2023) have underscored the limitations of the apprenticeship model, noting its failure to acknowledge the value of relationships and interactions with peers, academics, and the broader doctoral community.

Given the global pressure for reform in doctoral education (Pearson et al., 2008), the key question becomes how to develop a pedagogical framework that recognises and integrates multiple forms of support to guide doctoral students on their journey toward doctorateness.

12.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in pedagogical theories that support collaborative, participatory, and student-centred learning approaches. Specifically, constructivism, social learning theory, and the concept of the horizontalization of pedagogy offer a theoretical lens through which to explore innovative models of doctoral supervision.

Constructivism, articulated by Piaget and later extended by Vygotsky, views learning as an active process where individuals construct knowledge through interaction with their environment and others. In doctoral education, this suggests that students benefit more from dialogic, exploratory, and participatory supervision models than from the unidirectional transmission of knowledge typical of the traditional apprenticeship model (Grigoryeva et al., 2021). A constructivist approach foregrounds the doctoral candidate as an active co-creator of knowledge rather than a passive recipient of the supervisor's expertise.

Social learning theory, particularly Bandura's notion of learning through observation, imitation, and modelling, underscores the importance of peer learning and broader academic communities in the doctoral process. Doctoral candidates can gain significantly by engaging with fellow researchers, participating in group supervision sessions, attending seminars, and receiving feedback from multiple academic voices (Wilmot, 2021). These communal experiences help normalise challenges, encourage reflective practice, and cultivate a sense of scholarly belonging.

The horizontalisation of pedagogy is a conceptual response to hierarchical, top-down teaching and supervision structures. Instead of a vertical model where authority and knowledge flow unilaterally from supervisor to student, a horizontalised approach values co-learning, distributed expertise, and mutual accountability. This aligns with emerging global trends in doctoral education that emphasise research communities, distributed supervision teams, and collaborative knowledge production (Hickey et al., 2021). It also resonates with Freire's (1970) emphasis on dialogical education, which positions both teacher and learner as co-investigators in the process of inquiry and transformation.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for reimagining doctoral supervision in ways that are responsive to the demands of the digital age, rising student numbers, and the call for democratised, inclusive, and sustainable supervision models.

12.3 Alternative and Innovative pedagogies for doctoral supervision

The current context of supervision is explored as a background and motivation for considering alternative and innovative approaches. The focus is on the doctoral supervisor in the context of higher education and on identifying various approaches to enrich traditional pedagogy.

12.3.1 Changing context and needs

The prevalent changing issues that motivate the need for alternative and innovative supervisory pedagogies include rapid technological development, the vast and ever-growing number of AI research tools, student mobility to different parts of the world and the language constraints coming with it, issues of diversity and power, and the rapid expansion of new knowledge (McKenna & Van Schalkwyk, 2023). Moving to sub-specialisation, cross-disciplinarity, and interdisciplinary research also poses challenges, as it involves more supervisors on a single student's project (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011). An indication that the current model needs innovation is the variety of informal support practices that exist alongside and outside academic institutions, such as peer support groups, writing groups, external tutoring groups, private co-supervisors, and language support groups (Harrison, 2010; De Lange et al., 2011).

Integrating AI technologies into academic work is among the most transformative developments in recent years. While the current study does not empirically investigate AI's impact on supervision, its emergence presents opportunities and challenges that supervisors cannot ignore. AI-powered writing assistants, idea generators, coding tools, and literature summarisation bots are increasingly used by doctoral students, sometimes independently of supervision processes. This raises urgent questions about academic integrity, authorship, critical thinking, and the erosion, or enhancement, of scholarly independence. At the same time, AI could offer valuable scaffolding for students struggling with language or academic writing conventions, particularly in diverse and multilingual settings. These developments demand reconsidering the supervisory role, potentially moving it toward more facilitative, ethical, and reflective guidance to navigate this evolving landscape responsibly.

Since the apprenticeship approach is the most used pedagogy, supervisors must be sensitised and aware of alternative approaches. They must be motivated to experiment with more innovative pedagogies. Supervisors tend to supervise how they were supervised as students; therefore, they default to one-to-one relationships and uncritically rely on the traditional apprenticeship model. For many decades, the pedagogic practices of doctoral education have largely remained unscrutinised (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011). Therefore, an investigation into innovative approaches is long overdue and urgently needed.

Many universities already use support methods, such as group and team approaches, to supplement the apprenticeship model. Groups can be the same cohort, students on the same experience level, or students researching in the same field (Parker, 2009). Depending on the group's nature and purpose, these groups can consist of only students or a mix of students and supervisors. At some universities, supervisors group to form a supervisory team because they accept that no single supervisor can be expected to provide everything needed for different students all the time, so they build a team on the strengths and experience of the supervisors (Malfroy, 2005). Adding multiple perspectives on a student's work increases their chances of completing the doctoral program. There is an increasing reliance on team supervision and co-supervisors, mainly due to the interdisciplinary nature of the topics (Partridge et al., 2016).

Some universities also try to minimise or eliminate the power relationship or inherent hierarchy of the supervisor-student relationship by incorporating seminars into the support structure. Students chair these seminars to reduce supervisor dominance and for co-constructing support activities (Samuel & Vithal, 2011). Seminar spaces provide a safe and caring environment for the public defence of all ideas at all stages of research, learning, and development. The notion of community or collective is increasingly important and is deeply embedded in the pedagogy of many doctoral cohorts and group-support models. This connects with Ubuntu's African values and philosophy (Murithi, 2009).

The horizontalisation of the pedagogy, peer learning, and support also becomes more important (Janta et al., 2014). Scholars distinguish it from vertical pedagogy, characterising the supervisor-student relationship (Boud & Lee, 2005). In peer relationships, the focus is on peer learning rather than on learning from supervisors (Tian, 2023). It is exemplified by exchanging sources, experiences, accumulated knowledge, and feedback on each other's work, building insight into the doctoral process and moral support. Elliot et al. (2020) argued that informal interactions among doctoral candidates should be regarded as mini-learning opportunities that can help create a robust doctoral community that supports its members. Examples of horizontalising the pedagogy include reading and language support groups, which are very popular, especially when students have to write their thesis in a language that is not their first language (Carter et al., 2019).

12.4 Research Methodology

A systematic review methodology was employed to research university doctoral supervision models by analysing texts (Nieuwenhuis & Jacobs, 2025) on university websites or in published scholarly articles. This was also an exploratory study, as the rationale included the need for an innovative supervision framework relevant to the twenty-first century, with technology and AI integrated into the 4IR and on its way to 5IR (Jansen, 2025). It was descriptive and delineated the phenomena of doctoral supervision in university doctoral programmes.

The unit of analysis was universities that currently offer doctoral programmes and supervise students innovatively, not only in the traditional apprenticeship model. A non-probability sample

has been used because it is impossible to access all universities' doctoral programmes and investigate their supervision models. Keywords searched were innovative pedagogies for doctoral education, postgraduate supervision pedagogies, doctoral supervision models, postgraduate supervision models, and alternative or complementary supervision models. Other criteria for inclusion were that all articles must be in English and full-text accessible.

The data were summarised below. It was then analysed to identify themes indicating innovative supervision models. The innovative aspects of existing models were presented in the Findings and Discussion section (Maree, 2025). Trustworthiness was ensured through dependability and confirmability. The fact that, if this study were repeated, its findings would be similar confirms its dependability, and the degree to which the findings of this study are the product of the inquiry rather than the researcher's bias underlines its confirmability. Trustworthiness was also established through appropriate sampling, and the research was ensured to be repeatable by specifying exactly how the data were collected. Ethical Clearance has been granted by the university where the researcher is a scholar.

12.5 Results and Findings

12.5.1 Innovative pedagogies at universities

The concepts 'models,' 'approaches,' and 'pedagogies' seem to be used interchangeably in the literature. In this section, I present the different approaches by institutions and scholars discussed in the literature related to a particular university, as well as what was available on the university's websites that indicated innovative approaches and supplemented the apprenticeship model of supervision.

12.5.2 The San Jose Gateway PhD

The San Jose Gateway PhD programme (2024) is a doctoral partnership between the School of Information at San Jose State University in the USA and the Information Systems School at Queensland University of Technology in Australia. Because of California legislation, San Jose has not been able to offer PhD degrees, so it collaborates with Queensland to offer this distance-delivered programme. It has been running since 2008.

According to Partridge et al. (2016), each student is assigned a supervisor from both universities. In addition to individual and group supervisory meetings, all students and supervisors meet monthly in a virtual meeting space. The online monthly meetings are supplemented by two residential events each year: (i) a one-week face-to-face residential in August at San Jose State University and (ii) an online residential in March.

12.5.3 Stanford University

According to Stanford University (2024), they offer a structured five-year programme for its PhD students. During the first year, students enrol in between 11 and 18 academic units relevant to their study area, and in the second and third years, between 8 and 10 units. In their fourth year, they enrol in units to complete the required credits. They also join a reading committee and complete and defend their research proposal. In their fifth year, they assist with teaching in specific programmes or a faculty research project. They also complete their research study and write their thesis.

12.5.4 University of Oxford

The University of Oxford (2024) offers structured DPhil programmes that combine coursework, seminars, and research culminating in a thesis and viva voce. Each student is allocated a supervisor, who must meet at least once a term. Students enrol in three accredited short courses: mixed-methods research in the social sciences, The Secret Life of Research Interview, and Digital Ethnography (conted.ox.ac.uk).

Apart from these three accredited short courses, training sessions open to all are offered as research support. These include sessions on preparing your doctoral research proposal, writing an abstract, improving your presentation, conducting research interviews, and learning about style and techniques.

12.5.5 University of Cambridge

The University of Cambridge offers structured PhD programs that blend coursework, seminars, and research projects. The degree runs over three or four years of full-time study, with residency in Cambridge and five years of part-time study, but not all departments offer a part-time degree. These timeframes include a year's probationary period, and only upon satisfactory progress assessment may the student be registered for the PhD. During the PhD, the focus will be on writing a thesis of up to 80,000 words under the mentorship of an allocated supervisor (University of Cambridge, 2024).

12.5.6 Humboldt Graduate School

Although there are more than 50 structured doctoral programs, most doctoral candidates at Humboldt-Universität are still in a one-to-one apprenticeship relationship with their supervisor, since, in Germany, the individual doctoral candidate is more traditional than the doctorate within a doctoral program.

In the structured doctoral program, research is conducted in a group with colleagues in your area of research, with regular group feedback interventions. The lead faculty member monitors thesis writing. Support sessions on writing and methodology are regularly presented. A student is

assigned a head supervisor and one or more additional supervisors. Students must present their work at regularly held colloquia to a broader audience of doctoral candidates and experienced scholars to receive feedback (Humboldt Graduate School, 2024).

12.5.7 Harvard University

The Harvard doctorate takes five to six years to complete and consists of prescribed coursework on which the candidate will be examined, as well as a thesis. During years one and two, doctoral candidates are required to attend weekly colloquia. It features presentations of work-in-progress and completed work by Harvard faculty and researchers from outside Harvard, as well as Harvard doctoral students. PhD students present once in the colloquia throughout their studies. Each candidate is in an apprenticeship relationship with a supervisor. The candidate is also a teaching fellow who enhances teaching skills, promotes learning consolidation and allows faculty to collaborate on pedagogical development. By the end of year two, a written examination tests the candidate's general and concentration-specific knowledge. In year three, an oral examination tests the candidate's command of the chosen field of study and the ability to design, develop, and implement an original research project. The final phase, the dissertation process, comprises the proposal, the writing process, and an oral defence in a viva voce before the dissertation committee (Harvard University, 2024).

12.5.8 University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney

At the University of Melbourne in Australia, doctoral programs are presented using the group supervision pedagogy. This model involves a dedicated supervision team comprising a principal supervisor and at least one co-supervisor, sometimes two. This team provides personalised guidance and introduces candidates to collaborative and group-based experiences, international research training groups, and internships and teaching opportunities (University of Melbourne, 2024). In addition to the supervision team, an advisory committee is established to provide additional support and monitor the candidate's research progress. The University of Sydney (2024) follows the same model.

12.5.9 Western Sydney University

Western Sydney University uses the same model as the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney, discussed in the cases. However, it is unique because it adds a work-integrated model (Western Australia University, 2024). This model integrates practical work experience with academic research, enhancing employability and practical skills. In this Industry PhD programme, candidates work on research projects in collaboration with industry partners. This helps to bridge the gap between academia and industry (O'Connor, 2023). This programme aims for participants to experience work within the curriculum to undertake co-curricular work in partnership with industry, business, or community partners. This happens through engagement in authentic, genuine

activities, including internships organised in the first 18 months of candidature. This is credit-bearing and gets assessed as part of the doctoral program.

12.5.10 Nelson Mandela University

The cohort model at Nelson Mandela University in South Africa (2024) is planned and designed to run over three years as a supportive structure for doctoral student supervision. The cohort model is a form of team supervision (De Lange et al., 2011). The model centres on supporting a cohort of doctoral students across three phases. The first phase is the refinement and finalisation of the proposal; the second phase focuses on data collection; and the third phase focuses on data analysis. Students who do not complete the thesis within three years continue under the supervisor's apprenticeship model. The program is offered over six weekends each year on the university campus, with a team of three to four supervisors per contact weekend. Each student is assigned a dedicated supervisor, but this model also provides additional support. Students who work faster are not locked into a phase but move to the following, relative to the actual work done. The model fosters a supportive learning environment in which students can collaborate and support one another.

12.5.11 University of Strathclyde

At the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland (2024), they developed a unique supervision model to address the growing number of postgraduate students and the supervisors' workload (Liaskos, 2023). Each supervisor formulates topics to be researched within their field of specialisation. Students then choose topics that relate to the supervisor's identified topics. Each supervisor is assigned a group of students. The university moved away from individual and face-to-face meetings to weekly, cohort-wide meetings per supervision. These meetings are scheduled for two hours per week. After a high-level discussion of the topic, the student can ask their individual questions. Each student receives detailed feedback on a single submitted chapter and only high-level feedback on the full draft of their thesis. The model has been in use since 2018, and according to the statistics, there have been no significant changes in student performance that suggest the new model did not scale well under these different circumstances.

12.5.12 University of KwaZulu-Natal

Since 1999, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (2024), in South Africa, has offered a seminar-based cohort model for its doctoral students. The School of Education received this model exceptionally well. It is a three-phase model addressing three stages of the doctoral journey: epistemology, methodology, and representation. It runs over three weekends and is presented twice a year. Every weekend starts with the seminar part, where a student nearing completion, a faculty member, or a visiting guest lecturer presents. The program for the rest of the weekend is characterised by students presenting their work-in-progress, identifying blockages and successes. Each of the three stages/phases meets separately but shares communal time and space during lunch and tea breaks

to exchange views. Independent one-on-one supervision with an assigned supervisor continues alongside the cohort collaborative model. After three years of engagement with the three phases of study, the student is left to, with the support of the supervisor, bring the study to examinable status (Samuel & Vithal, 2011).

12.5.12.1 University of the West of Scotland

The University of the West of Scotland (2024) follows the apprenticeship supervision model but also complements it with its Connections Project. This project horizontalised the pedagogy by introducing connection sessions. The aim is to foster a research community by giving doctoral candidates a platform to share experiences on issues related to the research process rather than more discipline-specific topics, and to provide reciprocal peer support (Wilson et al., 2023). According to them, the importance of relationships and interactions with peers, academics, and the wider doctoral community is overlooked in the apprenticeship model. The doctoral journey could be lonely because it is seen as an independent study. However, with this model, they aim to foster a sense of community, encourage honest conversations, boost motivation, and provide a forum for research students to learn from others' experiences. Volunteer doctoral students are recruited to lead the connection sessions. Between six and eight of these sessions take place per year. Typical topics discussed are time management, the struggle to write the research proposal, and the literature review. These sessions assisted the university in reconceptualising doctoral studies as a less solitary and isolating process by recognising the potential of peer-support and peer-learning pedagogies.

12.6 Discussion

The data reveal a wide range of approaches to doctoral supervision, spanning from traditional apprenticeship models to innovative cohort and group supervision frameworks. Through thematic analysis, several recurring themes and distinctive elements emerged, each contributing to a forward-thinking doctoral supervision model.

A key theme identified is the importance of structure and progression, as evidenced by practices at institutions such as Stanford University and Nelson Mandela University. These models emphasise clearly defined stages within the doctoral journey, including coursework, proposal development, participation in faculty research, and thesis writing. Phased cohort support, covering proposal refinement, data collection, and analysis, helps students remain on track and manage timelines effectively.

Another central theme concerns supervisory relationships, which vary widely across contexts. Universities such as Humboldt, Melbourne, and Sydney employ diverse supervision models, including traditional one-to-one mentorship, group supervision, and team-based approaches. These varied structures recognise that doctoral students have different needs, and they underscore the value of mentorship, collaboration, and accountability in ensuring student success.

Collaboration and community also emerged as essential components of effective doctoral supervision. Institutions such as the University of the West of Scotland and San Jose Gateway University promote peer support through initiatives including peer-led sessions, virtual meetings, and residential events. These practices reduce isolation and foster a sense of belonging, thereby enhancing motivation, productivity, and emotional well-being among candidates.

Flexibility and customisation represent another significant theme. Universities such as Cambridge and Nelson Mandela University provide adaptive timelines and program structures, including probationary or proposal-development years that allow for adjustments based on student progress. This flexibility accommodates different learning paces and ensures that all students can thrive, regardless of their individual circumstances.

The integration of skills and practical experience is another hallmark of contemporary doctoral programs. Institutions such as Western Sydney University and Harvard University embed professional development into their doctoral curricula through teaching fellowships, work placements, and industry engagement opportunities. This approach not only strengthens research skills but also equips students for diverse career trajectories within and beyond academia.

Similarly, the use of technology and virtual engagement has become increasingly prominent in doctoral supervision. Universities such as San Jose Gateway and the University of Strathclyde employ virtual meetings, online supervision sessions, and other digital platforms to facilitate collaboration and make supervision more accessible, particularly for remote or international students.

Finally, skills development and training feature strongly in many programs. Institutions like Oxford and Humboldt offer workshops and short courses, both accredited and non-accredited, to enhance research methodology, academic writing, and professional competencies. This ensures that doctoral training extends beyond thesis production to the holistic development of researchers.

Overall, the findings point to the emergence of a hybrid framework that integrates the strengths of existing models while addressing their limitations. Such an approach promotes an innovative, student-centred supervision experience that balances structure with flexibility, fosters collaboration and community, and prepares doctoral candidates for success in both academic and professional spheres.

12.7 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

The formal practices of universities worldwide reflect a variety of approaches to supervision. In all models, a candidate is allocated to an academic expert in the field of study. Sometimes a co-supervisor, a team, or a panel of supervisors is appointed. In some instances, students are supervised in groups or cohorts. In most instances, traditional one-on-one supervision is complemented by other strategies (De Lange et al., 2011). Thus, although there is much critique

about the apprenticeship model, the value of the interpersonal aspect cannot be overlooked (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011). Many scholars (Gardner, 2008; Kamler, 2008; Dysthe et al., 2006) noted the supervisor's central role as a critical mediator and mentor, representing the broader scholarly community and embodying its conventions. The supervisor plays a critical role in each phase of the process, a role that could be lost in the quest for alternative approaches or in attempts to replace the supervisor with alternative models.

It also seems that the innovation in pedagogies in doctoral programmes is deeply infused with a move towards a democratic philosophy of teaching and learning (Samuel & Vithal, 2011). This move draws on the solid democratic traditions of Scandinavian doctoral programmes, which are renowned for their emphasis on equity, inclusion, and student participation. This approach is deeply rooted in the broader Nordic model of education, which prioritises equal opportunities and social justice (Frønes et al., 2020), and it allows doctoral students a high degree of autonomy in their research, enabling them to pursue their interests and develop their projects independently. Scandinavian doctoral programmes also foster a collaborative rather than competitive atmosphere amongst peers.

12.8 Recommendations for a Framework for an Innovative Pedagogy and Supervision Model

This article contributes to the debate by proposing a framework for doctoral supervision. A forward-thinking doctoral supervision framework should integrate the best practices from the reviewed programs. The proposed framework is:

12.8.1 A Hybrid Supervision Model

This is a model for a primary supervisor, complemented by a team of co-supervisors or an advisory committee, team, or panel. It also has peer support groups to provide ongoing feedback and support.

Table 12-1: Hybrid Supervision Model

Best Practice	Core Features
Structured Phases with Flexibility	Phases for proposal development, data collection, and thesis writing. Flexible progression timelines for part-time or accelerated students.
Community Building	Regular virtual and in-person cohort meetings. Social and professional events to strengthen relationships and reduce isolation.
Industry Integration	Collaborations with industry partners for internships, co-research, or problem-solving projects. Industry involvement is integrated into the curriculum.
Comprehensive Skills Training	Workshops on methodologies, writing, presenting, and career skills. Training in leadership and interdisciplinary collaboration.
Technology-Enhanced Learning	Use of online platforms for supervision, seminars, and feedback. Virtual reality or simulations for advanced research training.
Assessment and Feedback	Regular progress reviews with individualised and group feedback. Opportunities to present work-in-progress in colloquia.

12.8.1.1 *Benefits of this Framework*

The proposed framework offers several significant benefits for both students and institutions. Firstly, it enhances the overall student experience by addressing feelings of isolation that often accompany doctoral studies. Through mentorship, peer collaboration, and community-building initiatives, students are supported both academically and emotionally, fostering a greater sense of belonging and motivation. Secondly, the framework is inherently scalable. By incorporating group supervision and leveraging technology for virtual meetings and online collaboration, it accommodates the growing number of doctoral candidates without compromising the quality of supervision. Finally, it strengthens career preparedness by integrating skills training and industry engagement into the doctoral journey. This ensures that graduates are not only capable researchers but also well-equipped for a diverse range of career paths across academia, industry, and other professional sectors. Together, these benefits make the framework both innovative and practical, aligning doctoral education with the evolving demands of the 21st-century research environment.

This framework provides a starting point for pedagogical innovation in doctoral supervision. The limitation of this article is the role of AI in supervision, and the use of AI by doctoral students was not considered. This article only explored supplementary support to innovate the existing apprenticeship model, which is still in use by almost all universities. Future research may consider the role of AI and how it can extend or challenge the proposed.

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