vitae

AN INNOVATION OF IFC International Finance Corporation WORLD BANK GROUP

2025/26 National Employability Benchmarking Report

A national overview of employability practice, institutional variation, and system-level quality enhancement priorities across South African higher education institutions

Conducted in partnership with the

Council on Higher Education

South Africa

CHE

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Acronyms

CHE	Council on Higher Education
CPL	Continuous Professional Learning
CTL	Centre for Teaching and Learning
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEPS	Higher Education Practice Standards
IAB	Industry Advisory Board
IFC	International Finance Corporation
IR	Institutional Research
PHEI	Private Higher Education Institution
QA	Quality Assurance
QAF	Quality Assurance Framework
SA	South Africa
WBG	World Bank Group
WIL	Work-Integrated Learning

Executive Summary

In South Africa, one million youth reach working age each year. Enabling youth with access to quality jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities is a critical goal, which requires meaningful alignment between education providers and labour market participants. This alignment is in turn founded on robust and actionable data, agile institutions, and effective partnership between the public and private sectors.

South Africa's Council on Higher Education (CHE) partnered with the World Bank Group to conduct a National Employability Benchmarking, gathering primary data from 50 higher education institutions enrolling over 600,000 undergraduate students. The methodology and approach follow similar studies carried out by the World Bank Group in Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia and Jordan.

The Employability Benchmarking considers the following questions:

- What are the practices that sustain graduate employability in higher education?
- How are South African higher education institutions applying these practices?
- What additional mechanisms could CHE and institutions employ to support student and graduate transition to the labour market?

This report presents the findings to these questions, founded in data and evidence received from 50 participating South African institutions. Core findings were presented to CHE and participating institutions through a series of workshops held in May 2026.

We find:

- South Africa's higher education system lacks a consistent approach to the collection, reporting and use of graduate outcomes data. This limits the value of graduate outcomes evidence for institutional improvement, benchmarking, and system-level quality assurance.

- Engagement with employers lacks formality and is infrequently used: engagement occurs during the programme approval or reaccreditation process, rather than as part of ongoing curriculum enhancement. As a result, module contents are not sufficiently informed by developing industry trends, requirements, and expectations.

- The need for in-service faculty development is not consistently recognized within the system. While the importance of transferable skills and digital literacy/competency is recognized, lecturers are not formally and sufficiently supported to embed these capabilities into module design, teaching and assessment.

- There is variation in how experiential learning is defined, evidenced and integrated within programme design. As a result, many forms of employer/industry-connected learning are underutilized, peripheral, and informal.

- Faculty-led applied research, focused on solving problems in industry and the community, is rarely utilized and is not recognized as a form of WIL. This misses numerous opportunities to connect students, employers, communities and academics in collaborative problem-solving.

- Finally, stronger practice is associated with institutions that have an employability strategy, e.g. a reflective, deliberate, and articulated approach to supporting student success in and out of the classroom, during schooling and after graduation.

Taken together, findings show that the central challenge for the sector is the application of a normative framework, over time, to embed good employability practices across institutions. While there are examples of excellent practices within individual South African institutions, raising standards consistently and sustainably across all providers will require a form of normative intervention. This report argues for a quality-enhancement approach that strengthens system-level guidance to support institutions to move from fragmented, peripheral activities towards integrated, deliberate employability strategies for the benefit of all their students and graduates.

DISCLAIMER

The findings, interpretations, and views expressed in this report arise from the study and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council on Higher Education, the International Finance Corporation, or the World Bank Group.

1. Summary of Recommended Initiatives

Category	Recommended initiatives for CHE
HEPS guidance level clarifications	*Data for decision making:* • Clarify the use of graduate outcomes evidence for quality enhancement. *Relevance:* • Clarify expectations for structured external input into curriculum review and renewal. • Strengthen guidance on faculty development and sustained Continuous Professional Learning. *Work-integrated and experiential learning:* • Clarify definitions and expectations for experiential learning and WIL. • Strengthen recognition of applied research to increase utilization to benefit students.
Implementation initiative	• Establish a Common Graduate Outcomes Study Data Protocol • Pilot a Graduate Outcomes study for all HEIs using the Protocol

Recommendation 1: Strengthen Graduate Outcomes Evidence for Quality Assurance and Improvement

Graduate employment outcomes are increasingly recognized as an important indicator of how effectively higher education supports graduates' transition into employment and further study. South Africa's higher education system lacks a consistent approach to the collection, reporting and use of graduate outcomes data. While many institutions collect some form of graduate destination, employment or further study information, IFC benchmarking findings indicate substantial variation in the indicators measured, methodologies employed, timing of data collection, response rates achieved, quality assurance processes applied, and the extent to which findings are used to support institutional improvement. As a result, graduate outcomes data are often difficult to compare across institutions and are not always used systematically to inform programme review, curriculum enhancement, strategic planning, or quality assurance processes. This limits the value of graduate outcomes evidence for institutional improvement, sector benchmarking, and system-level quality assurance.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen Curriculum Relevance Through Structured External Input and Faculty Development

South African institutions deploy several good practices to support curriculum relevance and outperform the global benchmark regardless of institutional type. Regular curriculum review is already well established across much of the sector, and institutions have generally recognized the importance of transferable skills, digital literacy, and curriculum responsiveness. However, Benchmarking findings suggest that two challenges remain.

First, external stakeholder engagement is generally focused on soliciting external input during initial programme accreditation (and re-accreditation for private institutions), while engagement between audit cycles aimed at maintaining relevancy of the module/course contents is informal and varies from institution to institution. Second, while many institutions recognize the importance of transferable skills and digital literacy/competency, integration remains uneven and is often constrained by the extent to which academic staff are supported to embed these capabilities into curriculum design, teaching and assessment. This absence of in-service faculty development programmes is closely associated with institutional capacity or institutional organization.

Recommendation 3: Broaden Experiential Learning as a Mechanism for Employer Engagement

The Benchmarking suggests that employer engagement is most mature where it is linked to mandatory work-integrated learning (WIL) and professional programme requirements (clinical placements and service learning). However, engagement is less consistently embedded through a wider range of experiential, work-related and externally connected learning opportunities that can strengthen graduate employability across disciplines. While institutions demonstrate considerable activity in this area, there is variation in how experiential learning is defined, evidenced and integrated within programme design. As a result, many forms of employer-connected learning remain peripheral, optional or unevenly implemented.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen Recognition of Applied Research

The National Benchmarking results suggest that applied research remains unevenly embedded across institutions, despite its potential to strengthen employer engagement, innovation capacity, and graduate employability. As a result, opportunities to connect students, employers, communities and academics in collaborative problem-solving activities may be underutilized.

Building a More Integrated Employability System

The National Employability Benchmarking exercise confirms that South Africa's higher education system has established a meaningful foundation for employability, but that this foundation is not yet consistently translated into mature, integrated institutional practice. Across the dimensions of employability, more mature practice is concentrated in curriculum - be it in the frequency of the review (Publics) or engagement of lecturers with professional background (Privates), formal WIL, and provision of activities that support entrepreneurship. Comparatively less mature practice is found in areas that require deliberate and strategic approaches to employability, including the use of data for decision-making and the incorporation of formal and regular employer and graduate feedback into curriculum.

The central conclusion of this report is that employability support is unevenly embedded in teaching, research and services. Employability-focused activities are often fragmented, dependent on particular programmes or

champions, and insufficiently connected to institutional strategy, evidence systems, and quality enhancement processes.

This finding has important implications for CHE's stewardship role in helping institutions move from isolated practices towards coherent systems. This includes support for strategies that set expectations, data that inform action, curriculum processes that are shaped by external employer insights, and a broader approach to experiential learning to allow more students to benefit from practical learning experiences. This will require clear expectations, improved evidence, and mechanisms to allow institutions to learn from one another while strengthening practice in ways that fit their mission, scale, and capacity.

The recommendations in this report are intended to provide a practical pathway for strengthening graduate outcomes evidence, clarifying expectations for structured engagement with industry, supporting teaching staff to embed employability-related capabilities, broadening experiential learning, and mobilizing alumni as part of a wider employability ecosystem.

A critical next step will be to connect employability maturity more directly with evidence of graduate transitions. This National Benchmarking exercise has clarified where institutional systems and practices are more or less mature. The next suggested step is to examine how these maturity patterns relate to outcomes data, by conducting a national graduate outcomes study.

Ultimately, the value of the Benchmarking exercise lies in its use as a platform for continuous improvement. CHE can help build a higher education system in which graduate employability is not treated as an add-on, a compliance requirement, or the responsibility of a single unit but rather a shared institutional commitment, embedded across learning, teaching, partnerships, student support, data use, and quality assurance.

2. Methodology

This report is prepared for the Council on Higher Education (CHE) as part of the 2025/26 National Employability Benchmarking exercise, conducted in partnership with the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group. It documents the National Benchmarking process, outlines the analytical framework used to assess employability practices, presents findings from the participating South African higher education institutions (HEIs), and outlines recommendations for continuous improvement.

In South Africa, the higher education sector lacked a common national evidence base for assessing the maturity of employability-related practices across institutions of different types and sizes. The study addresses this gap by establishing a validated baseline that highlights sector strengths, areas for improvement, and documents institutional variation, while enabling South African practices to be considered alongside a broader global benchmark. Importantly, the study is not solely focused on outcomes and is founded in documenting and assessing the practices that affect student and graduate employability.

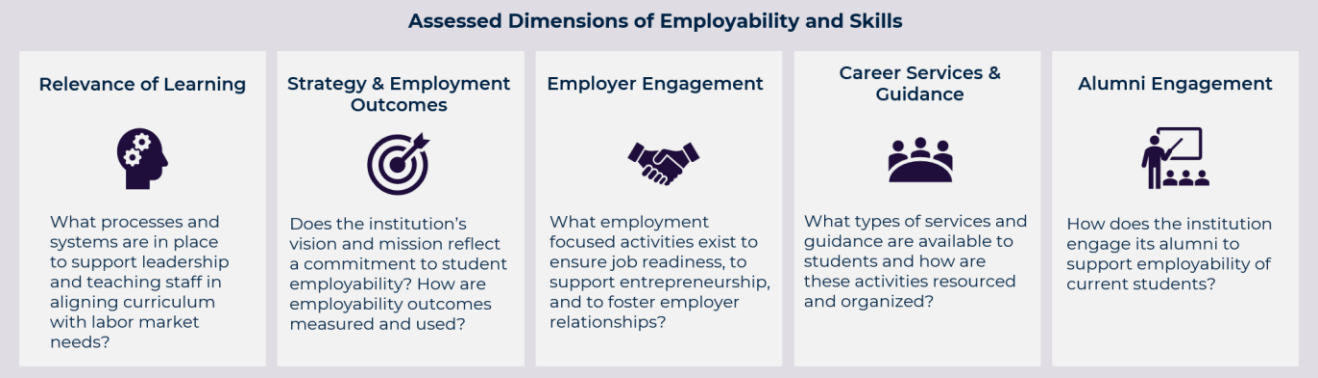
National Employability Benchmarking relies on institutional self-assessment of practices across five dimensions of inquiry, with responses validated and reviewed by the IFC team. The benchmarking was designed to serve both institutional and system-level purposes:

- **Institutional assessments:** Each participating institution received a tailored assessment of its employability practices, with institution-specific recommendations and opportunities for improvement.
- **National strategic overview:** The consolidated analysis provides a system-wide view of employability practices in South Africa, supports comparisons across institutions, identifies potential gaps in the regulatory framework, and positions national findings against a global benchmark.

The findings provide CHE with evidence on where the Higher Education Practice Standards (HEPS) that are under development would benefit from further clarification. For institutions, Benchmarking offers a practical reference point for prioritizing improvements, strengthening coordination across employability functions, and monitoring progress over time. The Benchmarking also establishes a foundation for differentiated support, peer learning, and future rounds of measurement, aiming to shift employability from a collection of fragmented activities towards a more coherent, deliberate and strategic agenda.

The sections that follow describe the participating institutions, present overall as well as dimension-level findings, and set out recommendations to inform sector-wide improvement and future quality-enhancement dialogue.

IFC's Vitae Employability Tool Assessment analyses institutional processes that promote student and graduate employability across five dimensions:



The **Vitae Benchmarking scoring system** provides a score for institution results for each assessed dimension:



The Benchmarking exercise follows a mixed methodology. This includes institutional self-assessment, validation/calibration, and reporting. Participating institutions completed an online self-assessment survey focused on specific employability practices, with some questions allowing the submission of supporting evidence. The IFC team reviewed responses, verified them against publicly available information where relevant, and conducted validation through online meetings or email queries with institutional representatives. The analysis informed both individual institutional reports and this national report.

- **Self-assessment (quantitative):** Institutions complete an institutional self-assessment questionnaire, which is administered online. The assessment covers the five assessed dimensions of employability.
- **Validation session (qualitative):** Following the self-assessment, the IFC conducts an online validation session with each institution to discuss responses and make any amendments necessary. In a small number of cases (10% of the total sample), validation was conducted via email for some of the smaller institutions.

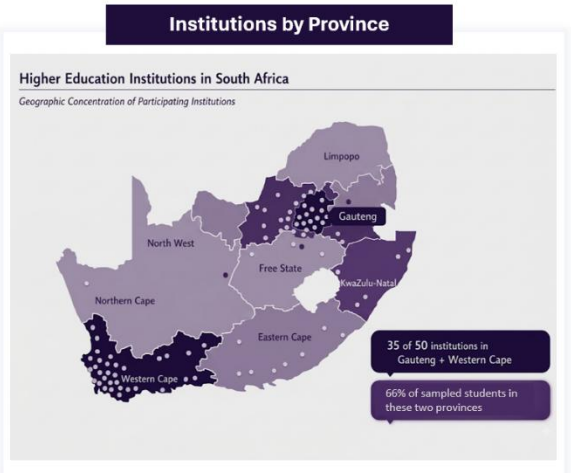
Each participating institution received a tailored report providing key findings and recommendations aligned with national and global good practices. Each institution's result is benchmarked to the national average of all participating South African institutions, as well as the aggregate global average in the IFC Vitae Employability database. Throughout this report, results of South African institutions are compared against this 'global average' or 'global benchmark' drawn from an aggregate dataset of 154 institutions across 25 countries.

Profile of Institutions in the Global Employability Benchmark

The global benchmark used throughout this report comprises 154 institutions across 25 countries in IFC's Vitae database. The comparison group includes a mix of public and private institutions, of different institutional sizes, and broadly comparable programme offerings: 56% private and 44% public institutions; 25% small institutions and 75% medium to large institutions. This profile supports a like-for-like interpretation of South African results while recognising variation by institutional type and scale.

3. Profile of South African Participating Institutions

A total of 50 higher education institutions participated in the National Employability Benchmarking, representing a diverse cross-section of South Africa's higher education landscape. Together, these institutions account for **698,441** undergraduate students.



50 Institutions

698,441 Enrolled Students

Province	N. Institutions	% of Students
Gauteng	20	40%
Western Cape	15	26%
Eastern Cape	4	11%
Free State	2	8%
North West	2	8%
KwaZulu-Natal	5	4%
Limpopo	1	3%
Northern Cape	1	1%
Mpumalanga	-	-

Figure 1: Benchmarked institutions by region and student reach

Participating public sector institutions (n=16) represent 61% of all public South African HEIs and include 8 traditional public universities, 5 comprehensive universities, and 3 universities of technology.

Participating private sector institutions (n=34) capture a diverse cross-section of registered providers, the majority of which are specialized institutions focused on specific professional verticals.

The 16 participating public HEIs enroll 65% of students captured by the Benchmarking. Meanwhile, private providers comprise two-thirds of all participating providers. This is reflective of the structure of South Africa's higher education sector and emphasizes public institutions' vital role in providing educational access in South Africa, while private institutions are more numerous yet tend to be smaller and more specialized. Public

institutions have a disproportionate influence on system-wide student reach, while private institutions contribute strongly to institutional diversity and niche provision.

For the purpose of interpreting the benchmark, the Benchmarking sample combines a large number of smaller private providers with fewer but higher-enrolment public institutions. As a result, data analyzed by institutional count and by student reach exhibits different aspects of the sector as a whole.

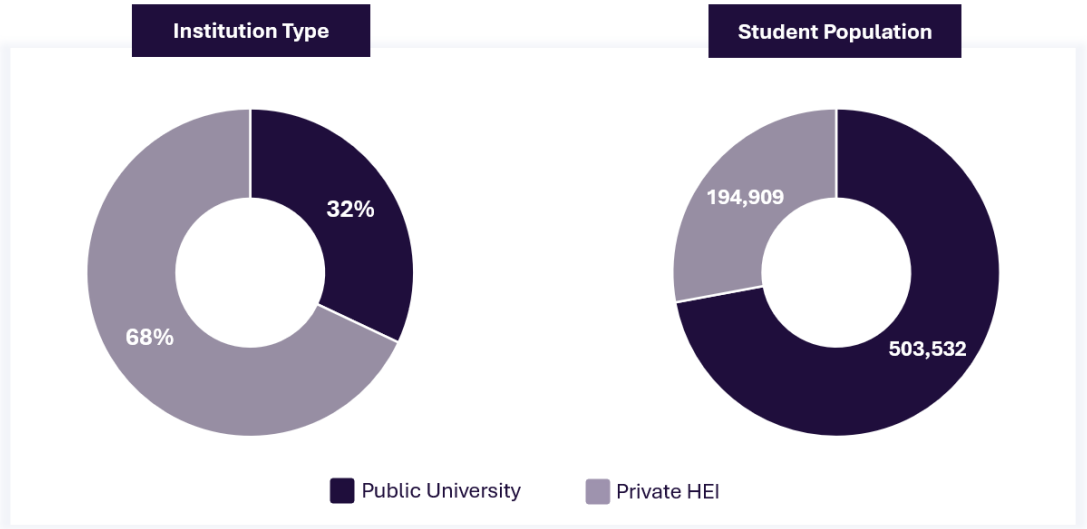


Figure 2: Benchmarked institutions by type and student population by institution type

A. Institutional type classification

Differences between results of private and public institutions should be interpreted within the context of South Africa's higher education landscape. Public universities are generally larger, longer established and often possess greater organizational scale. This supports more formalized systems, partnerships and institutional functions associated with employability. Benchmarking findings show that public institutions are more likely to monitor graduate outcomes regularly and are more likely to embed employability within institutional strategy as they have had a longer exposure to quality assurance expectations set by CHE.

Whilst there are a few large private higher education institutions that have emerged, private provision predominantly comprises smaller, often specialized institutions focused on specific professional niches. These private providers typically operate with less institution-wide infrastructure, and they have only been more recently exposed to CHE institutional audits. Differences in benchmark performance should therefore be read primarily as variations in scale, maturity, mission, and operating context.

B. Institutional size classification

The institutional size classification adapts the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education by grouping institutions into three categories: small, medium, and large. Small HEIs consolidate the Carnegie

small and very small categories; medium HEIs align with the Carnegie medium category; and large HEIs consolidate the large and very large institutional categories. This approach supports comparison between specialized private providers and higher-enrolment public institutions in the South African sample.

For analysis, each institution was assigned to one size category based on undergraduate enrolment in 2025. The resulting distribution is used to contextualize patterns in the benchmark. In this sample, all public universities fall into the medium or large categories. Private providers are typically small and specialized. This classification is used throughout the report to distinguish institutional size from institutional type when interpreting findings.

Size lens	Typical profile	Likely strength	Interpretive caution
Small HEIs	Often specialized and more concentrated in the private sector.	Responsiveness and niche professional alignment.	May have thinner staffing, weaker alumni systems, and less formal infrastructure.
Medium and large HEIs	Includes all public universities in the sample and selected larger private providers.	Greater ability to sustain systems, dedicated units, and external partnerships.	Stronger capacity does not automatically imply stronger integration or use of evidence.

Figure 3: Institutional size as an interpretive lens for benchmark results

C. Geographic concentration and system reach

Participating institutions are distributed across eight provinces. Together, Gauteng and the Western Cape account for 35 of the 50 participating institutions and approximately 64% of the undergraduate student enrolment captured in the Benchmarking. The remaining 15 institutions are located in KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Free State, Northwest, Limpopo, and the Northern Cape, indicating national coverage but an uneven geographic footprint.

Interpretive note: Geographic concentration and regional labour-market context

The concentration of participating institutions in Gauteng and the Western Cape is noted as a sampling characteristic. Because employer engagement and career services are likely shaped by local partnership infrastructure and regional labour-market conditions, institutions in under-represented provinces may face different employer density, absorption capacity, and partnership opportunities. CHE may therefore wish to examine the relationship between institutional location, regional labour-market context, and employability practice in future benchmarking cycles, particularly as the participating sample expands.

4. Overall Results: Strong foundations, with maturity shaped by institutional context

The National Employability Benchmarking findings show a system that has established a foundation for employability but has not yet reached consistent institutional maturity. Overall institution Employability scores ranged from 1.0 to 3.6. As outlined in the sample profile, the aggregate results should be read alongside institutional type, size classification, and geographic distribution, which provide important context for the variation behind the national averages.

Sector Overview: Performance differences reflect scale, capacity, and institutional maturity

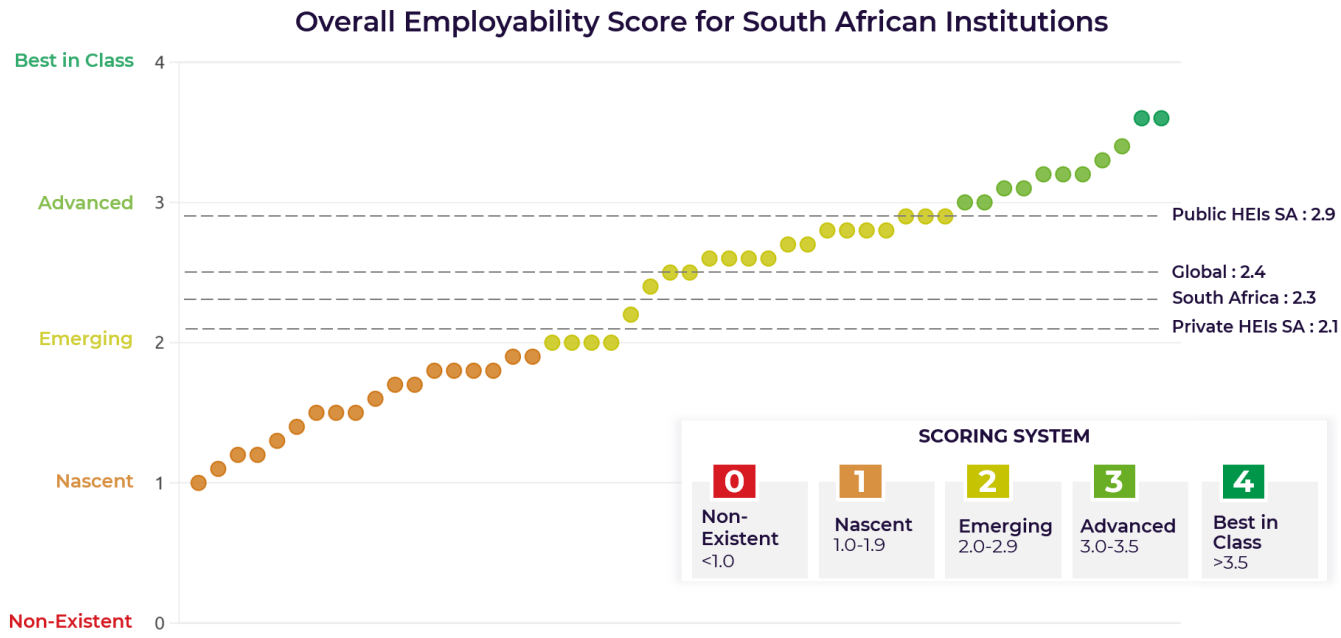


Figure 3: Employability performance by institutional type compared to global benchmark

Note: Each dot represents the overall Employability Benchmarking score of one South African institution (n = 50); dashed horizontal lines indicate the average scores for all South African benchmarked institutions (n=50), public South African institutions (n=16), private South African institutions (n=34) and the global average (n=154).

The South African sector average is broadly aligned with the global benchmark, with high variability amongst individual institutions. The aggregate employability performance of participating South African HEIs is 2.3 "Emerging" which is close to the global average of 2.4. This reflects the sector's established foundation across the assessed dimensions of employability. However, the distribution of institutional scores also shows substantial variation. Two institutions (4% of the sample) are "Best in class", nine institutions (18%) are "Advanced", 21 institutions (42%) are "Emerging", while 18 institutions (36%) are "Nascent". The aggregate result is therefore a sector-wide reference point rather than evidence of uniform maturity across institutions.

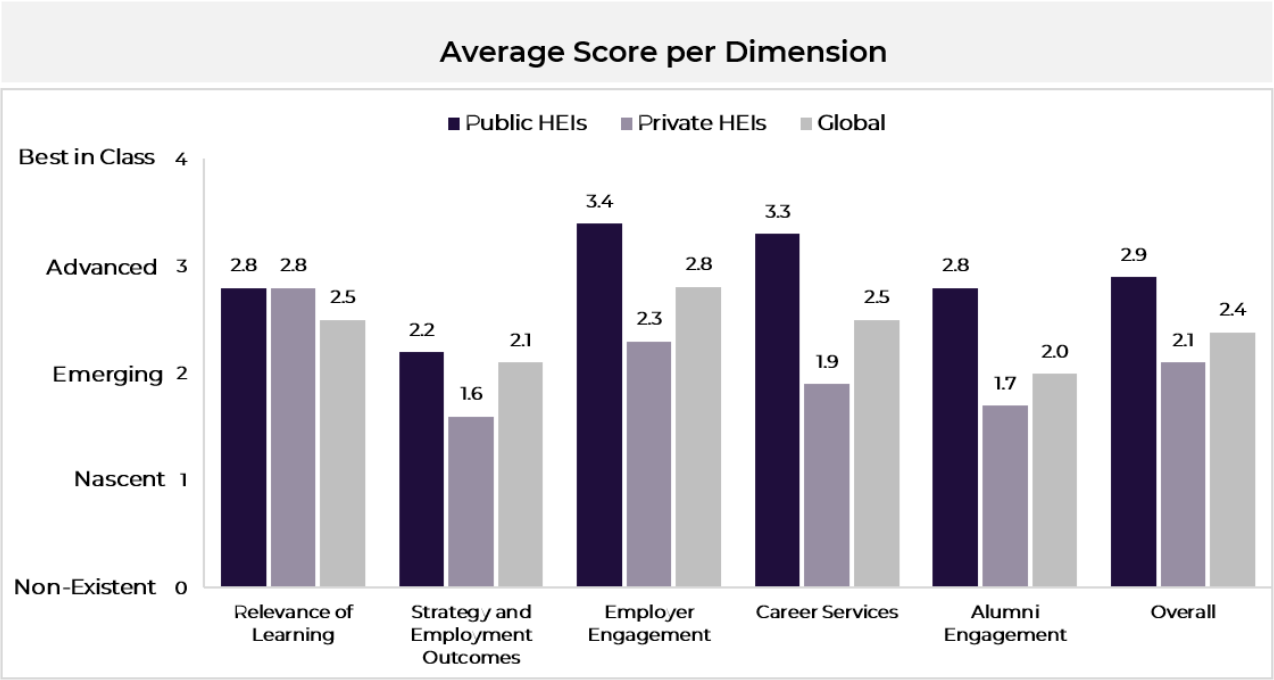


Figure 4: Employability performance by institutional type compared to global benchmark

Dimension Profile: Stronger performance in curriculum relevance and employer engagement but weak graduate outcomes monitoring

The sector performs strongly in the two dimensions that connect curriculum and employers. South African institutions outperform the global aggregate in Relevance of Learning and are broadly on par in Employer Engagement. Together, these dimension results indicate that many institutions have established mechanisms to keep learning relevant and connect academic provision with employers through curriculum input, work-integrated learning, entrepreneurship, and other forms of external engagement. The results point to a strong foundation, while the dimension-level analysis that follows examines how consistently these practices are structured and sustained.

Monitoring post-graduation student success is the sector's weakest area. The weakest performance is in Strategy and Employment Outcomes, particularly the systematic collection, analysis, and use of graduate outcomes data. Although some institutions track employment or further-study destinations, practices remain uneven and often lack common indicators, regular collection cycles, disaggregated analysis, and clear links to curriculum review or institutional planning. This limits the sector's ability to assess whether employability initiatives translate into successful graduate transitions and informs the use of comparable evidence for continuous improvement.

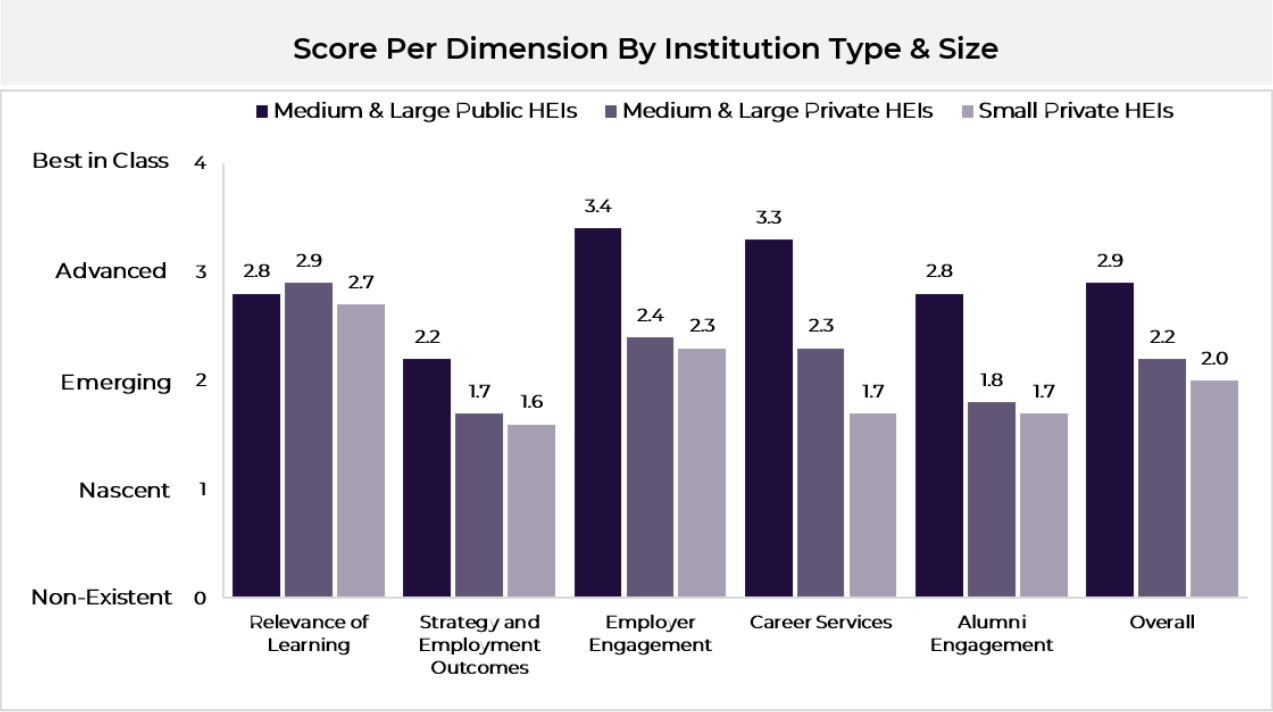


Figure 5: Employability performance by type and size

Institutional size and organizational capacity did not affect the sector's performance in Relevance of Learning. Larger and better-resourced institutions are generally more able to sustain the staffing, systems, partnerships, and coordination required for mature employability practice. Institutional type also matters because public and private HEIs often differ in scale, mission, and operating model. However, these structural differences do not produce a meaningful overall performance gap in Relevance of Learning: both public and private institutions perform strongly against the global benchmark. Size and type therefore help explain variation in system-dependent dimensions, such as graduate outcomes tracking, career services, and sustained external engagement, but they should not be treated as direct measures of curriculum relevance or institutional quality.

5. Sector Results by Dimension

5.1. Strategy and Employment Outcomes: 'The weakest link in the employability system'

SECTOR SCORE	BENCHMARK POSITION	MAIN PATTERN
Nascent (1.8)	Below global average	Public institutions closer to global benchmark

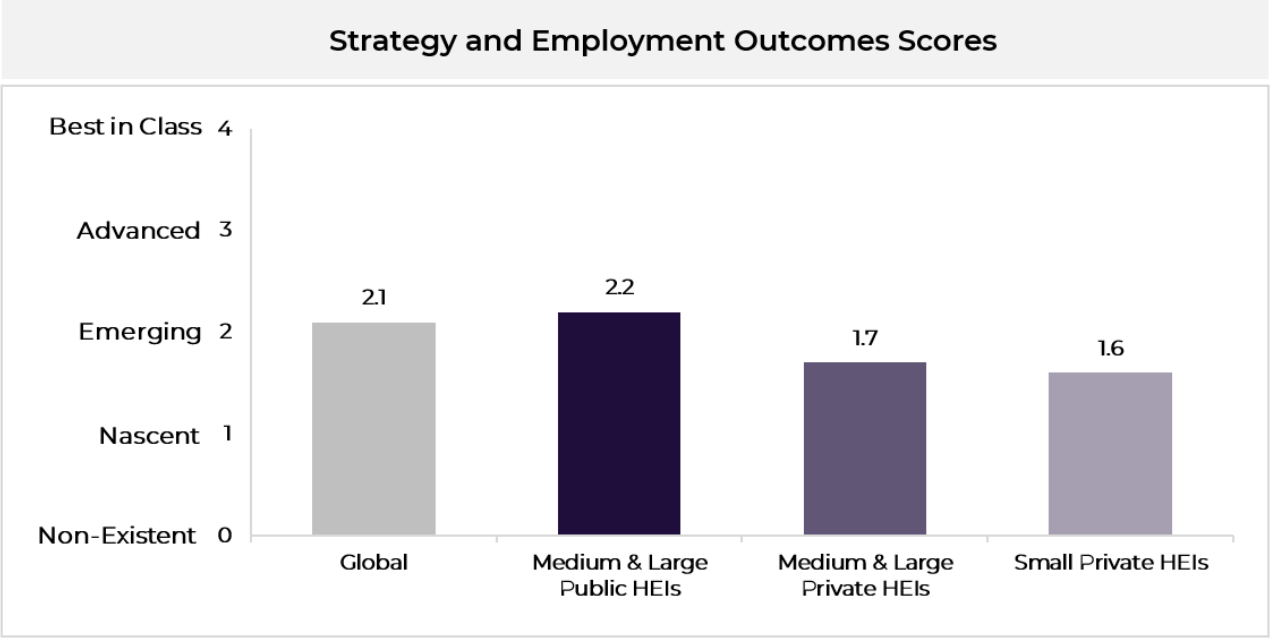


Figure 6: Strategy and Employment Outcomes scores in South Africa vs Global

5.1.1 Employability Strategy

Strategy and Employment Outcomes dimension assesses whether institutions articulate "employability" in their strategic plans, establish performance indicators/measures of success and how they track these.

Overall, the sector average for this dimension is ***nascent***; however, this aggregate result masks an important institutional divide. Public institutions are more closely aligned with the global benchmark, while both large and small private institutions perform below this level and pull down the sector average. This distinction is important to establish before examining the dimension in greater detail.

The weakest feature of this dimension is not the presence or absence of employability language in institutional plans, but the limited availability of robust graduate outcomes evidence to inform institutional decision-making. While many institutions reference employability in strategic terms, relatively few systematically collect,

analyze and apply graduate outcomes data to support quality enhancement, planning and curriculum improvement.

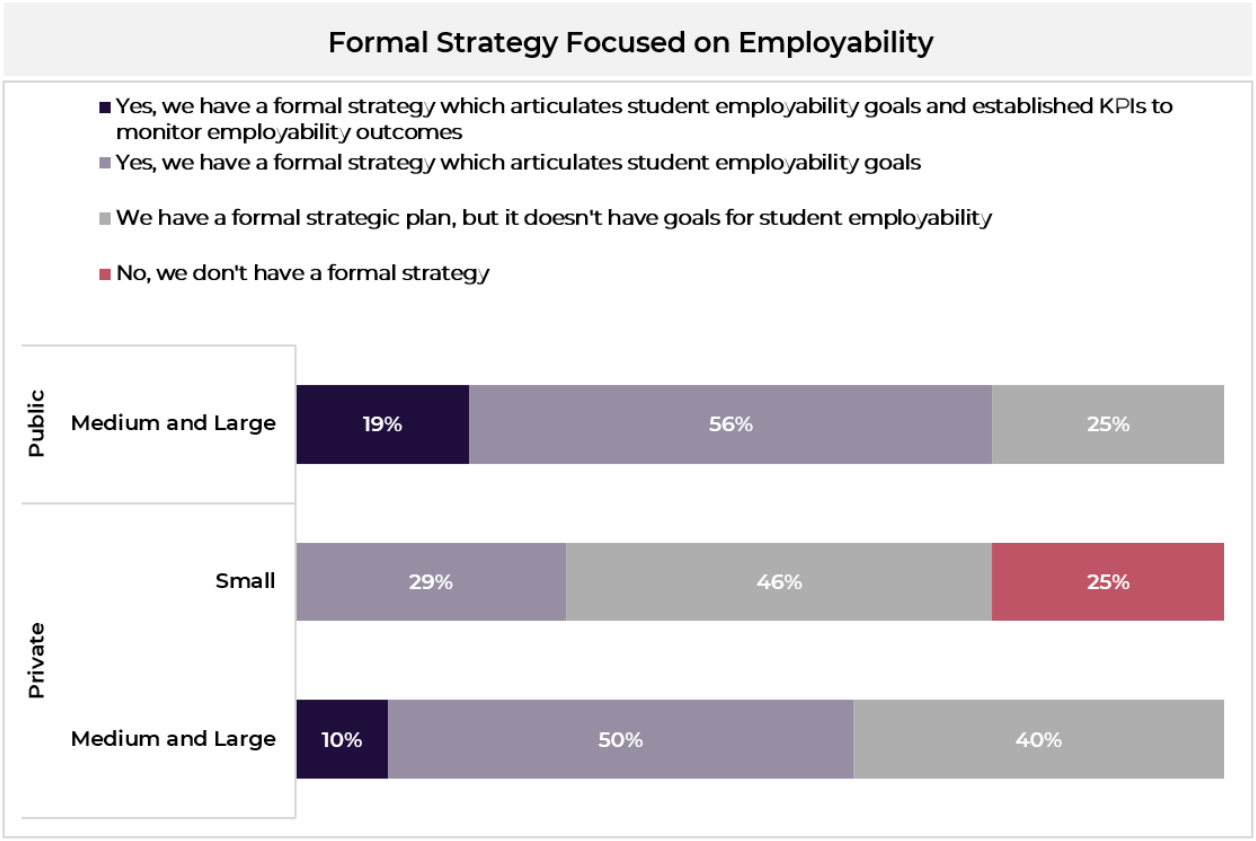


Figure 7: Formal strategy focused on employability across benchmarked institutions (n=50)

The national benchmarking findings reinforce this point by showing that institutions with a formal employability strategy perform substantially better across other dimensions, particularly employer engagement, career services, and alumni engagement (see figure 8).

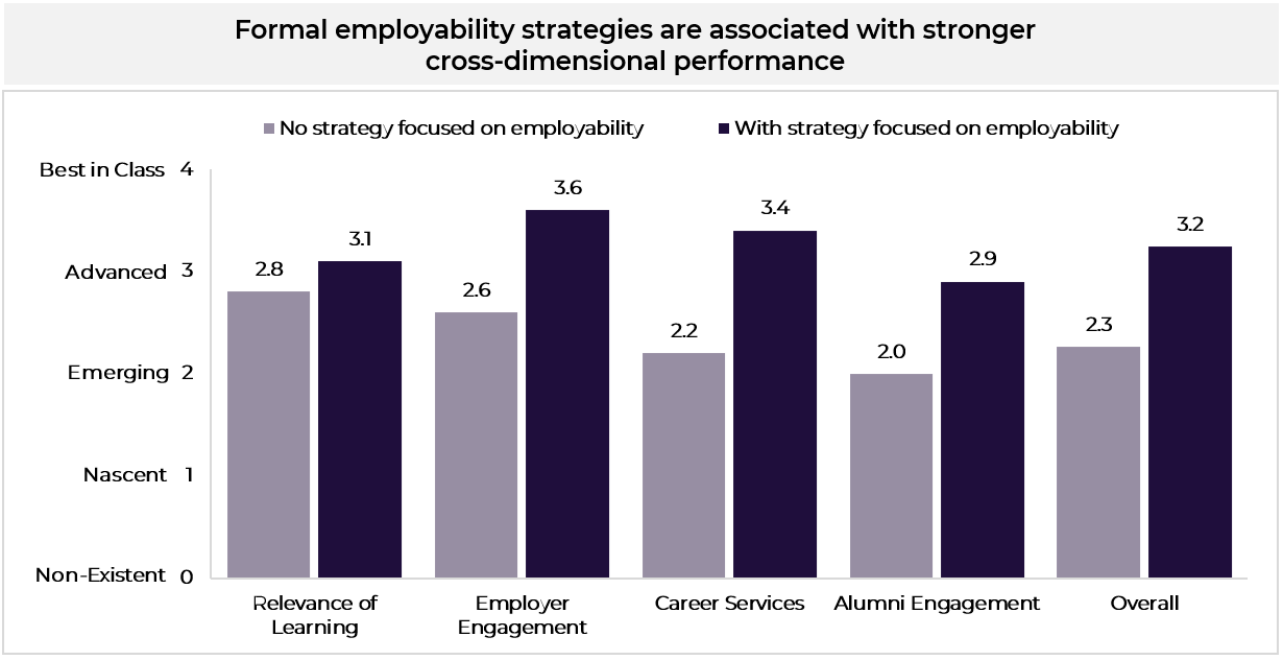


Figure 8: Relationship between formal employability strategy and performance across employability dimensions, among all benchmarked South African HEIs (n=50)

The findings suggest that stronger institutional performance is associated with more deliberate and coordinated approaches to employability. However, the more significant challenge for the sector remains the limited availability and use of graduate outcomes evidence to assess whether these approaches translate into improved student and graduate transition outcomes.

5.1.2 Graduate Labour Market Outcomes Tracking

Graduate outcomes tracking remains one of the central structural weaknesses in the sector's employability architecture. The core challenge is not only whether institutions collect some form of information on graduates, but whether they do so systematically, consistently, and in a way that can support institutional learning and sector-level comparison. Current practice is highly uneven, ranging from relatively mature annual or multi-interval tracking in some institutions to ad hoc collection or no tracking at all in others. As a result, the sector lacks a sufficiently coherent evidence base to assess graduate transitions, programme relevance, or the effectiveness of employability interventions over time.

This weakness is strongly differentiated by institutional type and size. Public institutions, and especially large public institutions, are more likely to have formal tracking arrangements, dedicated Institutional Research (IR) capacity, and regular reporting cycles. By contrast, smaller private institutions are much more likely to rely on fragmented or informal practices, with limited staff capacity, weaker alumni databases, and reduced ability to

generate programme-level or disaggregated insights. The challenge is therefore not only methodological but structural because graduate employment tracking is unevenly distributed across the system.

Even where formal tracking exists, practice often remains too narrow to support meaningful institutional decision-making. Institutions are more likely to collect basic employment information than richer evidence on the quality, relevance, and trajectory of graduate outcomes. Few consistently analyze results by programme, gender, or other variables that would make the data more useful for understanding differential outcomes and informing targeted improvement. In this sense, the issue is not only data collection, but the limited analytical depth of the data being collected.

INSIGHT

Maturity in Strategy and Employment Outcomes is achieved when institutions move beyond aspiration to coordinated delivery. Stronger institutions establish clear ownership, measures, and tracking mechanisms across employability functions, then deliberately apply the resulting evidence to planning, programme review, resource allocation, and continuous improvement. The key distinction is therefore not simply whether an employability strategy or graduate outcomes data exist, but whether the institution has the capacity and discipline to implement, assess, and refine its approach over time.

5.2. Relevance of Learning: ‘Strong but unevenly supported’

SECTOR SCORE	BENCHMARK POSITION	MAIN PATTERN
Emerging (2.8)	Approaching advanced	Strong foundations, uneven external input

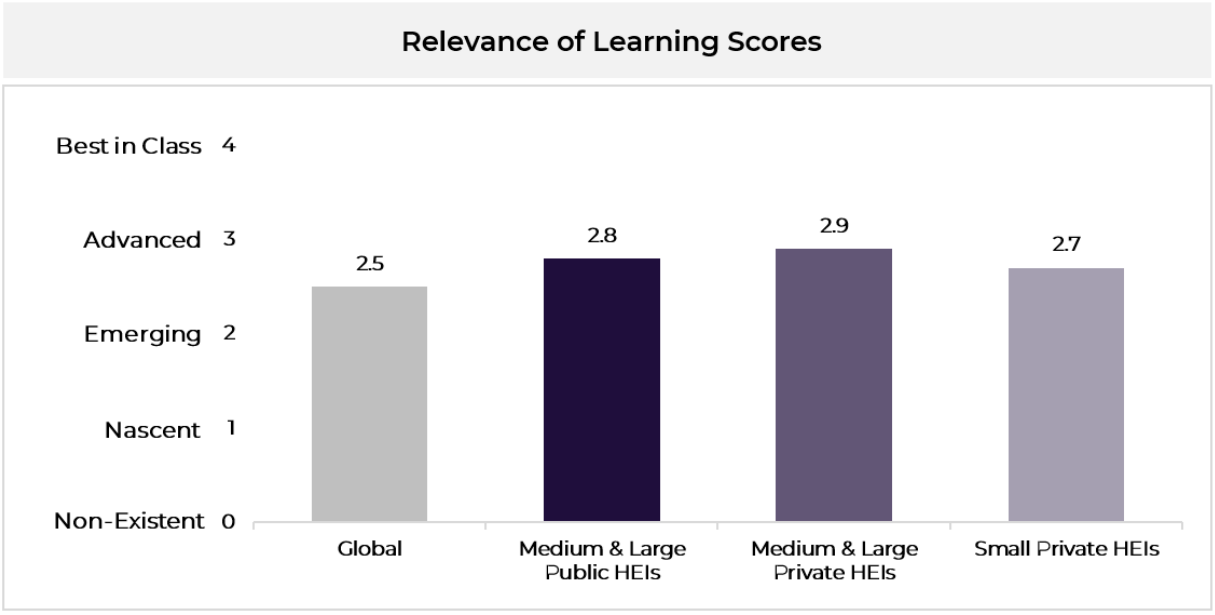


Figure 9: Relevance of Learning scores in South Africa vs Global

5.2.1 Curriculum Review and Industry Engagement

The Relevance of Learning dimension examines how institutions keep their courses relevant and current between audit cycles, and how faculties are prepared to innovate in course design so that essential employability capabilities, including transferable and digital skills, are integrated into teaching and assessment. The results indicate that sector practice is predominantly mature and, in some cases, approaches the advanced level, with no significant overall difference by institutional size or public–private status. The aggregate score nevertheless reflects different strengths: public institutions demonstrate stronger practice in systematic industry engagement, while private institutions are more likely to review module content frequently.

5.2.1.1 Frequency of Course Review

Relevance of Learning is one of the stronger dimensions, reflecting established curriculum review processes and a broad commitment to responsiveness. However, the benchmarking indicates that review quality depends not only on frequency, but also on structured external input and faculty support to translate that input into curriculum, teaching and assessment.

The public–private comparison reinforces this distinction: although private institutions tend to review module content more frequently, public institutions demonstrate stronger systematic industry engagement. Review

frequency should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of stronger external engagement or implementation capacity.

5.2.1.2 Industry Involvement in Curriculum Review

Teaching staff with industry experience >40%		
Small private HEIs	● ● ● ● ○	81%
Medium and large HEIs	● ● ● ○ ○	50%

Smaller institutions tend to rely more heavily on teaching staff with industry experience to keep module content relevant. The central challenge is not whether institutions engage industry, but whether external engagement is sufficiently structured, documented and sustained to inform curriculum enhancement on an ongoing basis. National benchmarking suggests that many institutions do engage external stakeholders, yet this often occurs through ad hoc or programme-specific interactions rather than through durable institutional arrangements. This matters because informal engagement may provide useful insight in the moment, but is less likely to create continuity, accountability, or a visible record of how external input shapes curriculum relevance and associated learning opportunities.

In this context, Industry Advisory Boards or Committees (IABs) are significant not because they are the only possible mechanism, but because they signal a higher level of institutional maturity in employer engagement. Where they exist, they make it easier for institutions to move beyond one-off consultation towards regularized input on curriculum, experiential learning, applied research, and other programme priorities. Their importance therefore lies less in the structure itself than in the institutional discipline they can create around reciprocal engagement and documented follow-through.

The pattern across institution types suggests that structured engagement capacity is unevenly distributed. Public institutions appear more likely to have moved towards formalized mechanisms, while smaller private institutions rely more heavily on informal relationships, internal practitioner staff, or regulator-driven engagement in selected programmes. This reinforces the finding that the key sector challenge is not a lack of industry engagement, but uneven institutionalization of mechanisms that enable external perspectives to systematically inform curriculum review, renewal and enhancement.

Taken together, these patterns suggest a two-tier picture. At one level, industry relevance is widely acknowledged, and many institutions have found ways to bring external perspectives into curriculum review. However, at another level, the depth and reliability of that engagement vary considerably. Smaller and more specialized institutions can sometimes compensate through practitioner faculty or close sectoral ties, but these substitutes do not always provide the same continuity, documentation, or breadth of input as more formal mechanisms. This is precisely why the recommendations focus on clarifying evidence of structured engagement rather than assuming that contact with industry, on its own, is sufficient.

Where engagement is limited to selected programs, the evidence suggests that external input is often being activated in response to regulatory or professional requirements rather than embedded through institution-wide academic practice. This creates a narrower model of curriculum relevance in which employer engagement is strongest where it is required, but less consistently treated as a core quality process across the institution.

HEIs indicated various additional ad hoc strategies to solicit industry input to inform the curriculum review process during qualitative interviews. These include engaging employers as external moderators and examiners and soliciting employer input during WIL placements.

5.2.2 Employability Skills Integration

5.2.2.1 Transferable Skills

Transferable skills are considered essential employability skills and are the key enabler of graduates' adaptability to new job realities. Most South African institutions recognize the relevance of integrating transferable skills into the curriculum. However, evidence also suggests that in many cases, these transferable skills are thought of as an isolated set of skills addressed through specific courses/modules rather than skills imparted through course design and teaching/learning approaches across the curriculum. IFC benchmarking examines what mechanisms institutions put in place to assist lecturers in designing their modules so that soft skills are fully integrated.

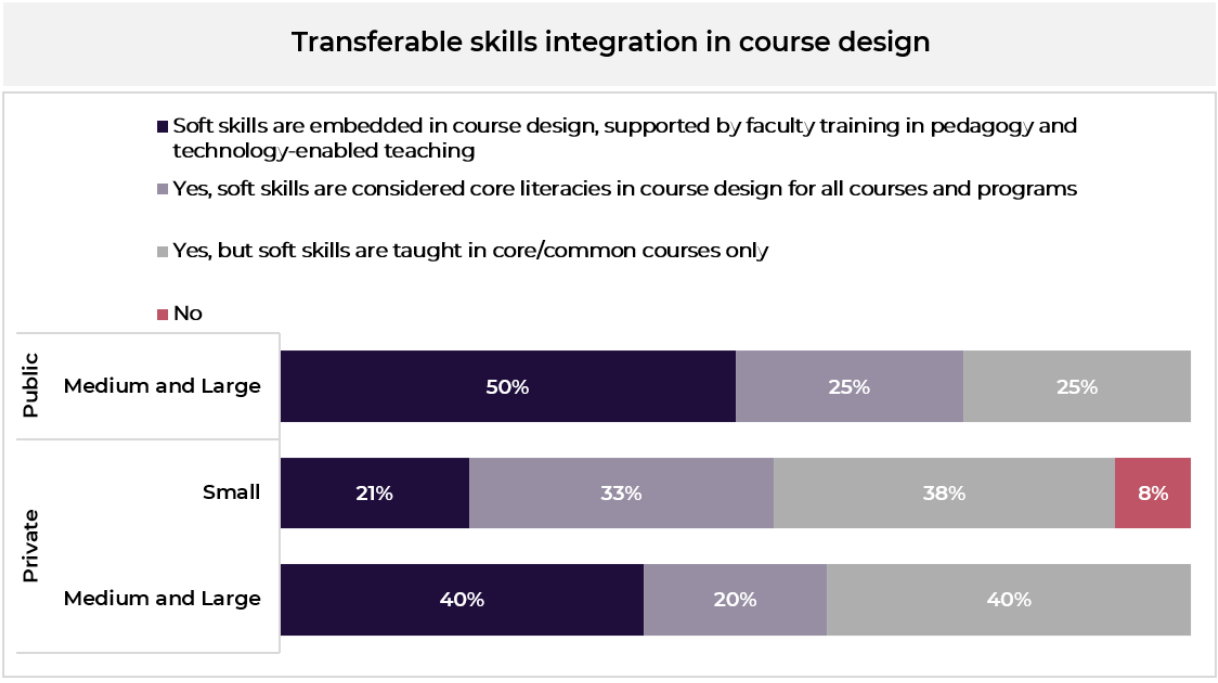


Figure 10: Institutional approaches to embedding transferable skills in course design across all benchmarked institutions (n=50)

The study asks whether institutions offer in-service faculty development programmes focused on pedagogy, inclusive teaching, and teaching with technology. Typically, these supports are organized through Centres for

Teaching and Learning, Centres of Academic Excellence or similar structures. The findings suggest that public institutions, with considerably more comprehensive resources, outperform smaller institutions.

5.2.2.2 Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is an essential employability capability because graduates must be able to work, communicate, create, and make informed decisions in increasingly digital professional environments. It extends beyond the use of discipline-specific software or online learning platforms to include information literacy, collaboration in digital environments, critical evaluation and creation of digital content, and safe, responsible participation as digital citizens. Many SA institutions have established a baseline for development of digital skills, but digital literacy is not yet consistently embedded and assessed across the curriculum.

IFC's Vitae framework examines how institutions operationalize digital literacy across curriculum design, teaching, and assessment. It considers whether students develop information literacy, collaborate effectively in digital environments, critically evaluate and create digital content, and participate safely and appropriately online. The assessment therefore looks beyond access to technology or exposure to digital tools to determine whether students can demonstrate relevant digital capabilities in disciplinary, professional, entrepreneurial, and lifelong-learning contexts.

The findings suggest that digital adoption has advanced further in teaching than in curriculum design and assessment. Many students encounter digital platforms and tools during learning, but are less consistently required to apply, create, evaluate, and communicate digitally in authentic or discipline-specific tasks. This creates a gap between exposure and demonstrated capability: where access to technology does not by itself provide evidence that graduates can transfer digital literacy into professional practice.

The findings suggest that more mature practice is characterized by deliberate integration of digital literacy across modules, pedagogies, and assessment, supported by clear curriculum expectations and faculty development mechanisms.

5.2.2.3 Continuous Professional Learning

The overarching implementation challenge in this dimension is therefore institutional support for teaching staff. Benchmarking findings suggest that institutional capacity to support Continuous Professional Learning represents one of the most important enablers of consistent integration of transferable skills, digital literacy and employability capabilities across programmes. Embedding transferable skills, digital literacy, and curriculum relevance at scale requires more than curriculum intent; it requires sustained academic development and coherent Continuous Professional Learning arrangements. The findings suggest that many institutions still rely on ad hoc staff development, which limits their ability to translate employability-oriented ambitions into consistent academic practice across programmes and modes of delivery.

INSIGHT

The benchmarking points to two complementary institutional mechanisms for strengthening relevance of learning. Industry Advisory Boards provide structured and sustained external input that can inform curriculum renewal, experiential learning, and emerging skills priorities, while creating a documented basis for academic decision-making. Centres for Teaching and Learning help translate this external insight and wider employability priorities into teaching practice by preparing faculty to integrate transferable skills, digital literacy, authentic assessment, and industry-informed learning across programmes. Overall, curriculum relevance depends on both credible external engagement and coordinated academic development: where IABs help institutions understand what should change, CTLs support faculty to implement those changes consistently and at scale.

5.3. Employer Engagement: ‘Active, but narrowly channeled’

SECTOR SCORE	BENCHMARK POSITION	MAIN PATTERN
Emerging (2.7)	Broadly aligned with global	Visible activity, uneven institutionalization

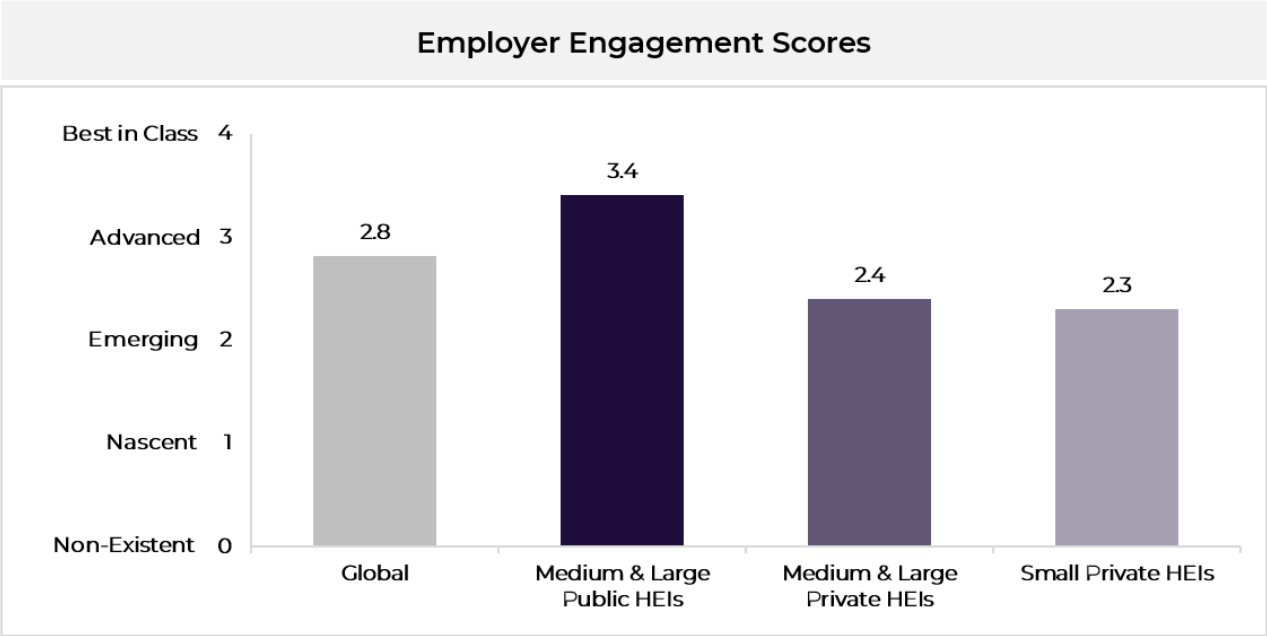


Figure 11: Employer Engagement scores in South Africa vs Global

The Employer Engagement dimension examines the extent to which institutions build purposeful and reciprocal relationships with employers and industry partners across the employability ecosystem. It considers not only employer input into curriculum, but also the range and maturity of employer-facing practices that connect students, graduates, staff, and programmes to the world of work. These include work-integrated and experiential learning, entrepreneurship support, corporate training and custom provision, and applied research focused on solving problems in industry or the community.

5.3.1 Entrepreneurship Support

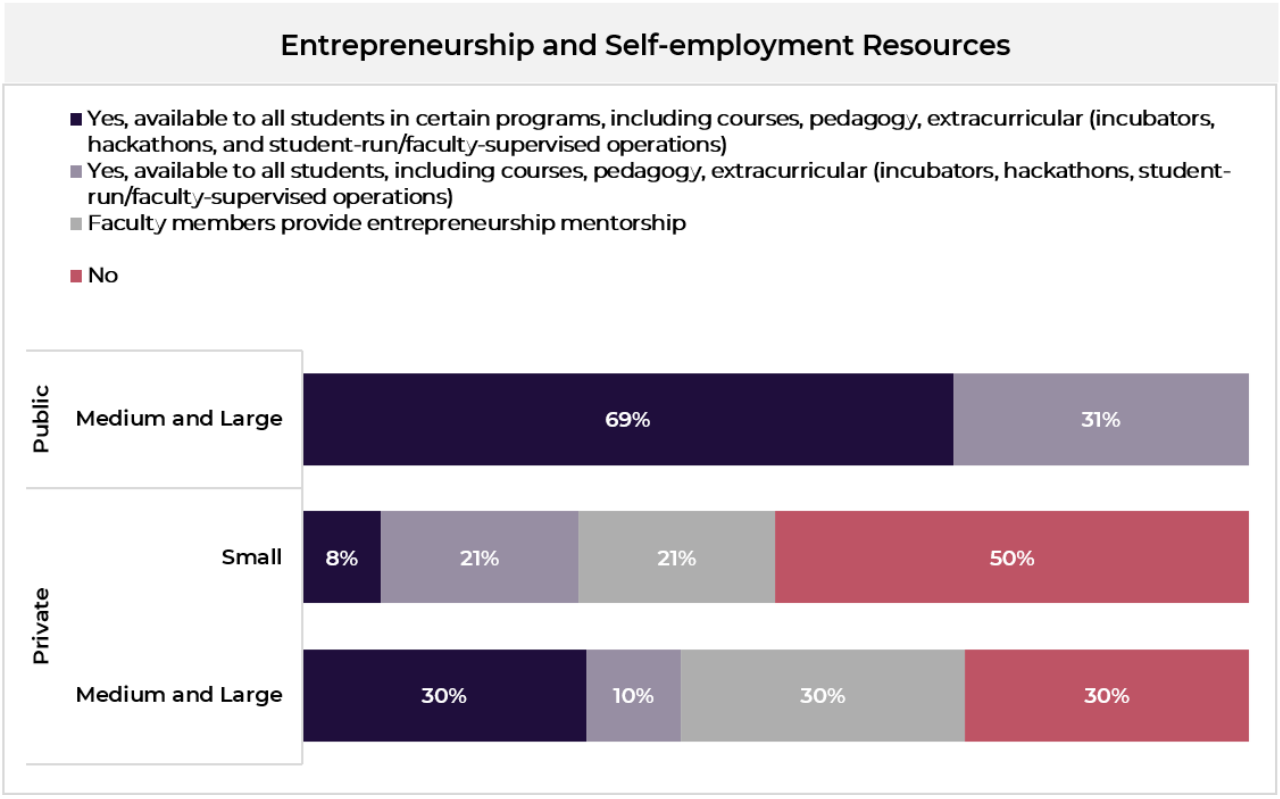


Figure 12: Entrepreneurship and self-employment resources availability across benchmarked institutions (n=50)

Entrepreneurship is one of the more mature and visible employer engagement pathways identified in the benchmarking. This reflects not only the availability of entrepreneurship-related resources, but also a broader understanding of employability that includes self-employment, venture creation, and innovation. Qualitative discussions suggest that, where entrepreneurship practice is more mature, it is rarely confined to a stand-alone module. Instead, it is supported through broader institutional ecosystems that may include incubators, competitions, mentoring, external partnerships, and links to community or industry problem-solving. This shifts entrepreneurship from a narrow curricular topic towards a more applied and outward-facing model of student transition.

The wider benchmarking findings also suggest that entrepreneurship is an area in which institutional mission and external engagement capacity matter considerably. In institutions demonstrating stronger practice, entrepreneurship tends to sit alongside broader employability infrastructure, including career services, external partnerships, and, in some cases, applied or industry-linked projects. This reinforces the view that entrepreneurship support is most effective when it forms part of a connected institutional strategy rather than a discrete initiative. Even so, access to this ecosystem remains uneven across the sector and is more mature in public institutions, particularly where private providers have limited scale, staffing, or partnership infrastructure.

While entrepreneurship represents one mechanism for connecting students to economic opportunity, work-integrated learning remains the most widely recognized and established form of employer-connected learning within the higher education system.

5.3.2 Work-Integrated Learning

Access to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) remains concentrated in programmes where it is a mandatory graduation requirement. This suggests that employer-connected learning is frequently organized around compliance requirements rather than a broader experiential learning approach that enables students across disciplines to engage with authentic workplace, community and industry contexts.

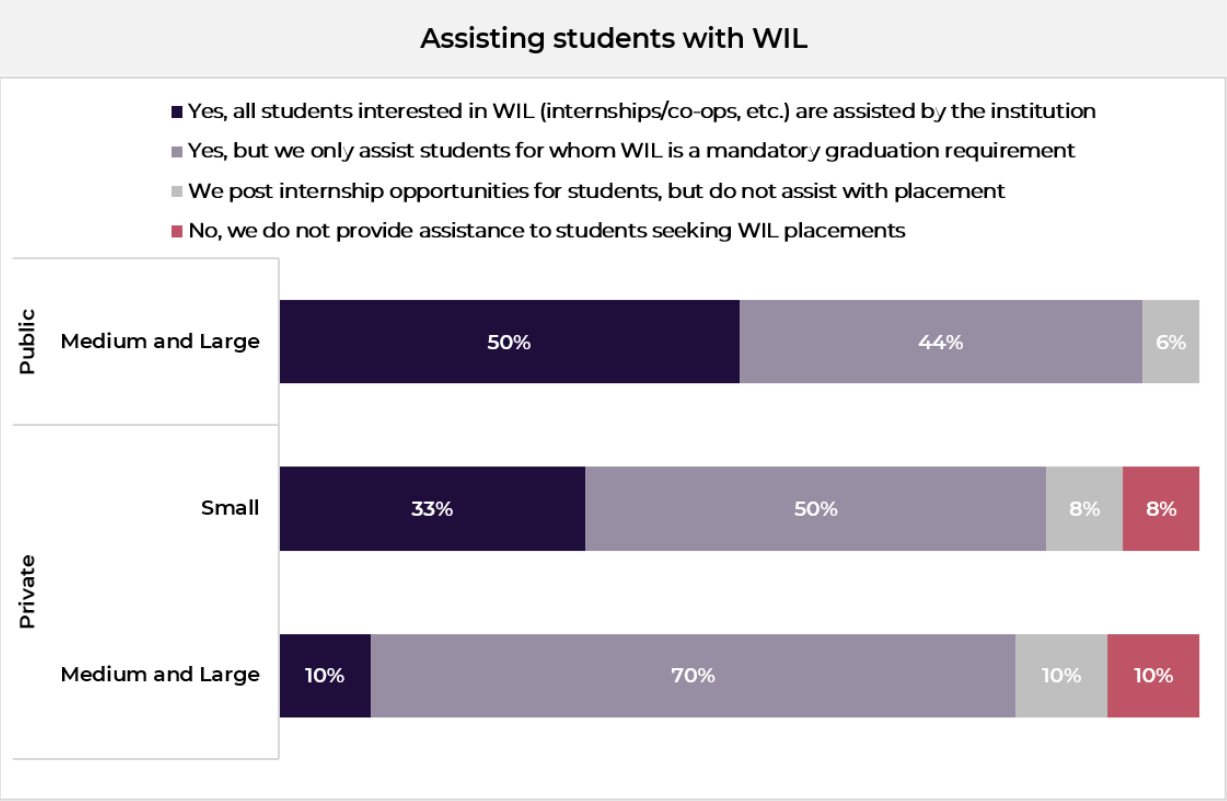


Figure 13: WIL assistance for students across all benchmarked institutions (n=50)

Only about half of medium and large public institutions, and approximately 10% of medium and large private institutions, support all interested students to participate in WIL. Most institutions, particularly private providers, primarily facilitate WIL for students whose programmes require it. This pattern suggests that WIL is still largely understood as a compliance mechanism tied to professional or qualification requirements, rather than as an embedded experiential learning component available across curricula, including programmes that do not formally require a placement.

At the same time, the qualitative findings suggest that WIL is often interpreted in relatively narrow terms, with strongest practice concentrated around formal placements required by professional or regulatory requirements. As a result, other forms of experiential learning, including applied projects, service learning,

industry-sponsored projects, consultancy assignments and applied research, remain less visible and less consistently embedded across the student lifecycle.

A wider reading of the benchmarking points is an important distinction between institutions that facilitate employer engagement through isolated modalities and those that sustain it through a broader partnership model. In the latter group, WIL tends to sit alongside entrepreneurship support, bespoke employer-facing provision such as executive or custom training, and more systematic external relationships. This suggests that stronger practice is not defined by any single activity, but by the extent to which institutions can build reciprocal, multi-channel connections with employers. Furthermore, applied research remains comparatively less mature as a mainstream channel of employer engagement. It appears more often as an emerging or localized practice than as a routine feature of institutional employability strategy.

5.3.3 Corporate Training and Employer Partnerships

The benchmarking also highlights a second dimension of employer engagement that extends beyond student-facing activities: institutional partnerships developed through customized learning provision and workforce development initiatives.

Corporate training, executive education, and custom programmes appear in the benchmarking as an important indicator of a more mature employer engagement model because they require institutions to move beyond one-off student-facing interactions towards sustained, reciprocal relationships with industry. Where these activities are present, they suggest stronger institutional capacity to understand employer needs, translate them into tailored learning provision, and maintain ongoing external partnerships that can also inform curriculum relevance, staff exposure to industry practice, and wider employability ecosystems. In this sense, corporate training is significant not only as a revenue-generating activity, but as a marker of whether an institution has developed the organizational infrastructure, credibility, and partnership orientation needed to engage employers through multiple channels rather than through placements or advisory input alone.

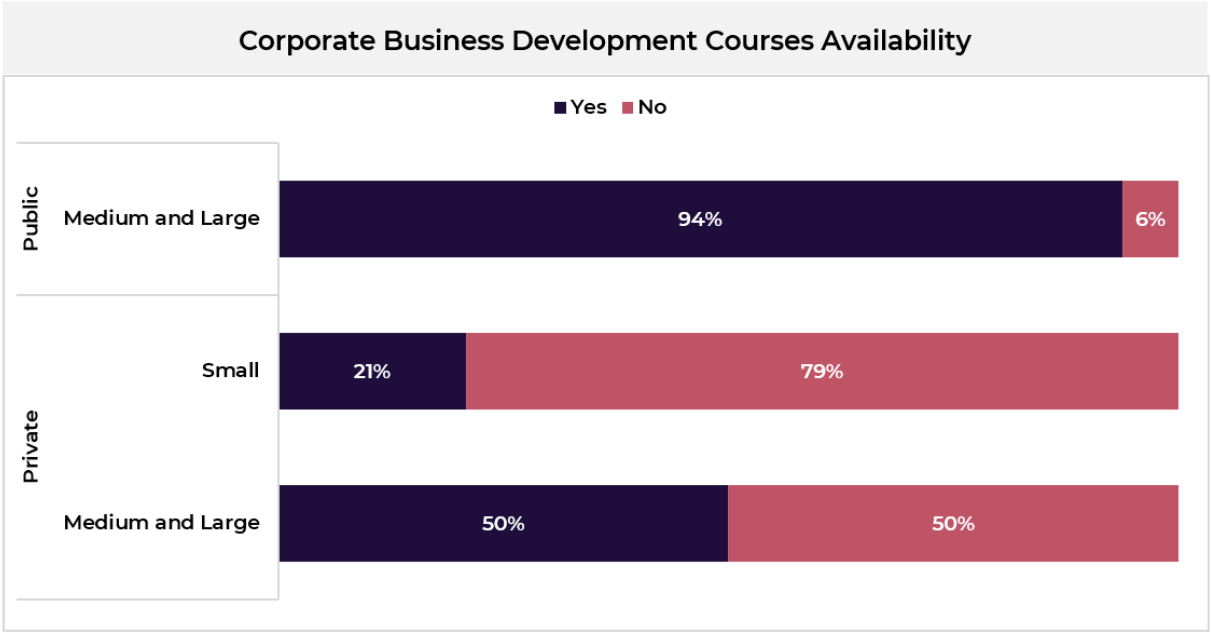


Figure 14: Availability of corporate business development courses across benchmarked institutions (n=50)

Corporate training and customized employer provision remain uneven across the sector, with stronger uptake among larger public institutions and much more limited practice among private providers. This suggests that sustained, multi-channel employer partnerships depend significantly on institutional scale and the capacity to design and deliver tailored external programmes.

5.3.4 Applied Research

Applied research remains strategically important but comparatively less mature than other employer engagement practices identified in the benchmarking. Although institutions recognize its value, it is rarely embedded as a deliberate mechanism for strengthening employability, employer engagement, innovation, and societal responsiveness. As a result, opportunities to connect learning, research, and external problem-solving are not yet consistently realized across the sector.

INSIGHT

The maturity shift in employer engagement is from isolated employer activities to a broader experiential learning ecosystem. Stronger institutions use employer partnerships to support multiple forms of work-related, community-connected and industry-connected learning that extend beyond formal WIL placements. The issue for quality enhancement is therefore not whether employer engagement exists, but whether it is intentionally designed, sequenced and evidenced as part of student learning.

5.4. Career Services: ‘Available, but not yet comprehensive’

SECTOR SCORE	BENCHMARK POSITION	MAIN PATTERN
Emerging (2.3)	Below stronger dimensions	Present, but not yet fully developmental

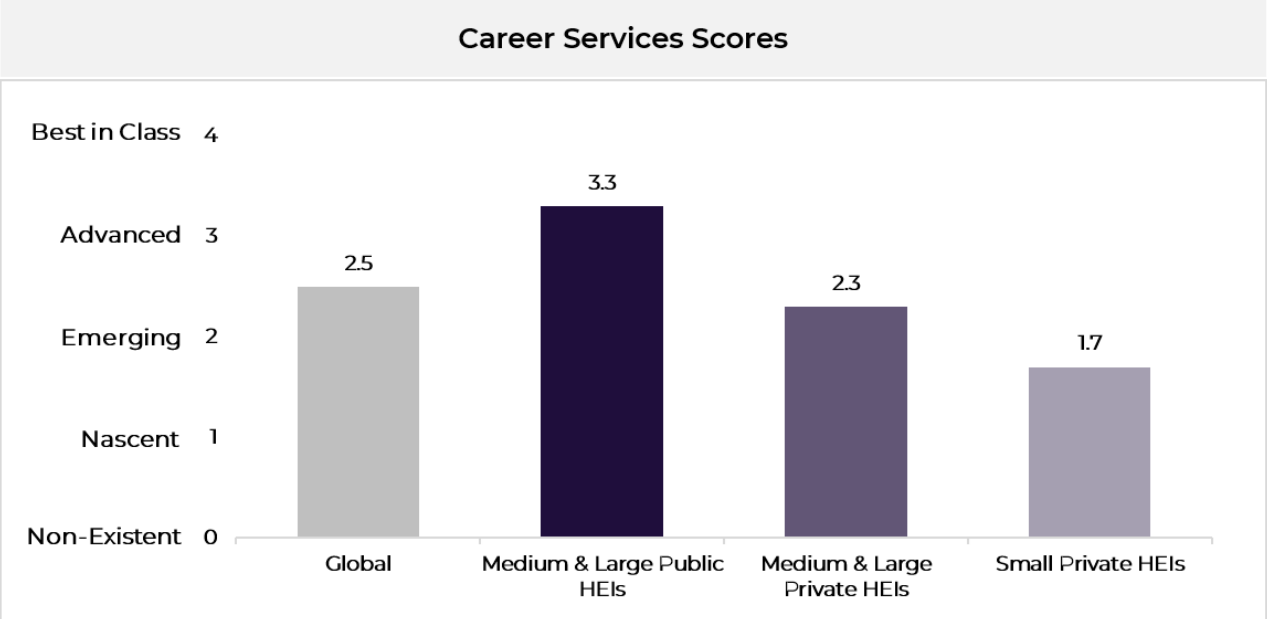


Figure 15: Career Services dimension scores in South Africa vs Global

The Career Services dimension assesses how institutions organize and deliver career development support across the student life cycle. It considers whether career services are structured as a coherent institutional function, with appropriate staffing, visibility, delivery channels, and links to academic programmes, employer engagement, WIL, and graduate transition support. The dimension also examines the range and maturity of services offered, including career information, advising, coaching, mentoring, employability workshops, job-search preparation, employer events, placement support, online resources, and flexible delivery models that enable students to access support at different stages of study and transition.

5.4.1 Service Model and Institutional Capacity

Career services emerge in the benchmarking as an important but unevenly institutionalized part of the employability ecosystem. The central issue is not whether students can access some form of career support, but whether that support is organized as a coherent institutional function with sufficient visibility, staffing, continuity, and links to the wider academic and employer engagement agenda. Where career services are more mature, they operate not simply as an optional support office, but as an enabling structure that helps students interpret labour market information, prepare for transitions, connect with employers, and navigate work-related opportunities throughout their studies rather than only at the point of graduation.

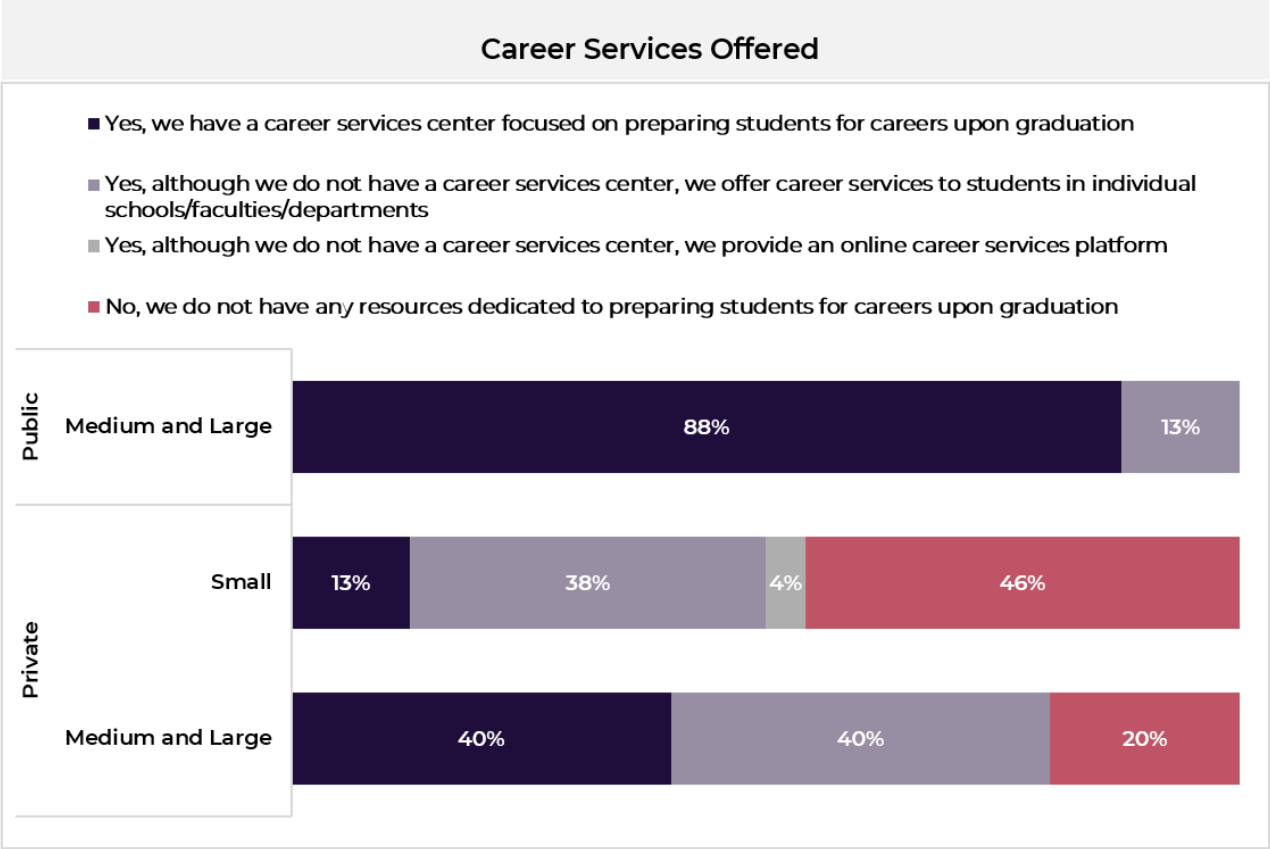


Figure 16: Availability of career services across benchmarked institutions (n=50)

Benchmarking findings suggest that maturity in career services is strongly associated with institutional scale and organizational capacity. Larger institutions tend to have more mature practice because of dedicated structures, clearer service portfolios, and stronger connections between career services, employer engagement and student transition support. In contrast, weaker-performing institutions are more likely to rely on fragmented, ad hoc, or lightly staffed arrangements that may provide useful services in isolation but do not yet constitute an integrated career development model. In that sense, variation in career services reflects a wider difference in institutional capability rather than a simple difference in whether some activities exist.

The strongest career services models in the sample are distinguished less by the existence of a single centre than by the degree to which multiple elements are connected: physical and digital access points, employer-facing activities, work-related learning opportunities, and practical tools that support job search and transition. This points to an important maturity distinction. Stronger institutions are not only offering more services; they are more likely to have organized those services into a recognizable student journey, supported by delivery infrastructure and clearer institutional ownership.

Across the sector, foundational services such as career information, job-search preparation, employer exposure and access to work-related opportunities are relatively common. The distinguishing feature of more

mature practice is not the existence of these activities, but the extent to which they are supported by dedicated staffing, delivery infrastructure and institutional coordination.

The sector reflects a capacity and coordination gap rather than a complete absence of career services. Strengthening this area will depend partly on improvements already identified elsewhere in the benchmarking, including stronger graduate outcomes evidence, clearer employer engagement mechanisms and more deliberate institutional approaches to student transition and employability.

5.4.2 Developmental Career Support

Developmental career support helps students build career management capabilities over time, including self-reflection, career decision-making, labour market awareness, professional identity and network development.

Qualitative insights from the benchmarking suggest that support is often more focused on immediate transition tasks than on structured career learning across the student journey. Coaching, mentoring, employer exposure

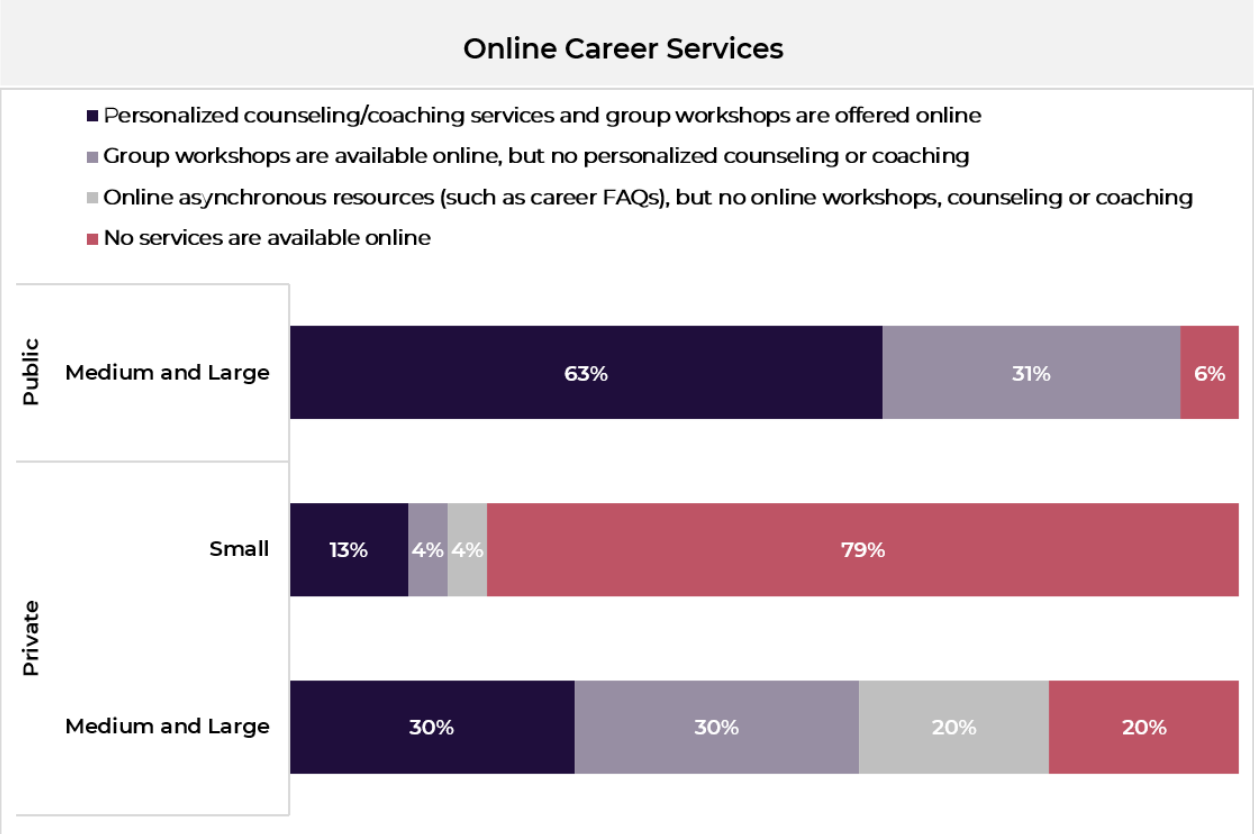


Figure 17: Availability of online career services across benchmarked institutions (n=50)

and alumni interaction can help address this gap when introduced early and reinforced through curricular and co-curricular experiences. However, the available evidence does not establish how consistently these approaches are implemented across the sector.5.4.3 Digital and Online Career Services

Online provision adds an important layer to these findings. Digital delivery has the potential to extend access, increase flexibility, and mitigate staff capacity constraints, especially in systems where students may be dispersed across campuses, modes of study, or work commitments. Yet the benchmarking results suggest that online career services are not consistently present as a robust extension of in-person support. In many cases, digital provision remains limited in depth, with relatively few institutions offering richer asynchronous resources or more sophisticated technology-enabled pathways that could broaden reach and continuity of support.

This creates an important equity issue within the career services landscape. Where digital and in-person services are both limited, students are less likely to benefit from continuous, personalized, and accessible forms of guidance. The findings suggest that the sector challenge is not only to expand availability, but to strengthen the institutionalization, developmental depth, and accessibility of career services so that they function as a meaningful bridge between learning and post-study transition.

INSIGHT

Career support has greater value when discrete activities are connected across the student journey. Service availability matters, but its impact depends on whether students can access timely guidance, employer exposure and transition support before graduation.

5.5. Alumni Engagement: ‘Active, but underleveraged’

SECTOR SCORE	BENCHMARK POSITION	MAIN PATTERN
Emerging (2.0)	Above several dimensions	Promising strength, untapped strategic value

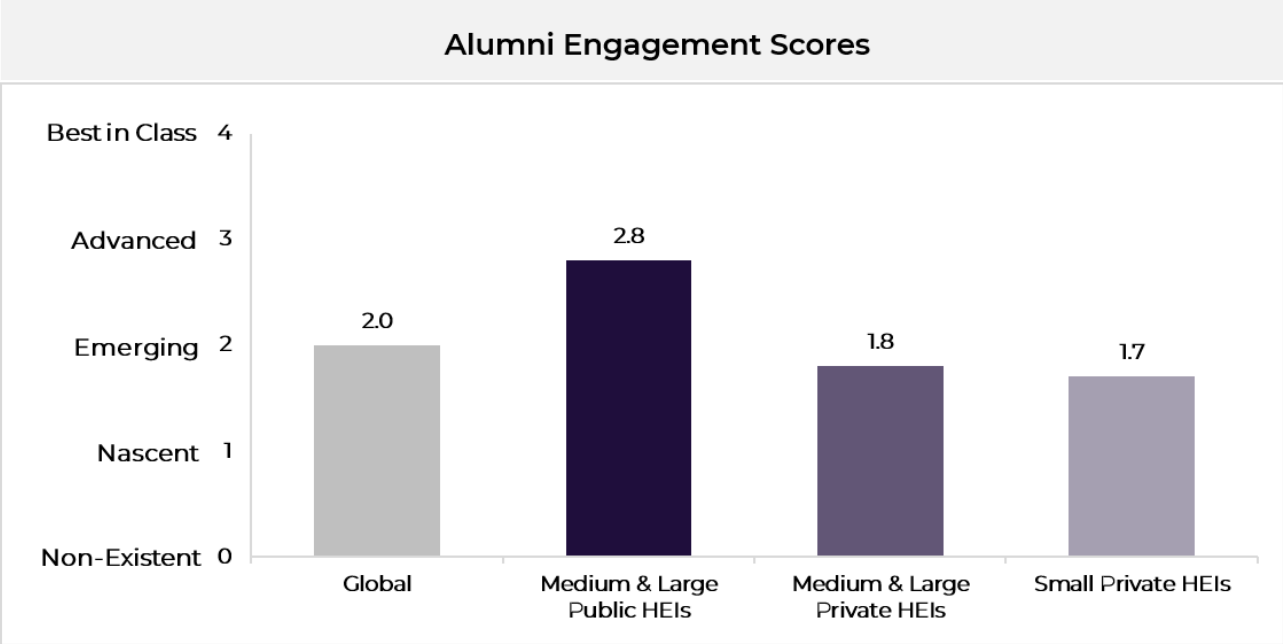


Figure 18: Alumni Engagement scores in South Africa vs Global

Alumni engagement complements career services by extending institutional relationships beyond graduation and creating pathways to employment, mentoring, professional networks, and labour market insight. The dimension assesses how institutions sustain relationships with graduates and mobilize alumni as part of the wider employability ecosystem. It examines whether alumni engagement is organized through deliberate structures, systems, and data practices, and whether alumni are used to support student transition, mentoring, labour market insight, employer connections, WIL and placement opportunities, entrepreneurship, applied research, and institutional learning. This dimension therefore looks beyond the existence of an alumni network to consider how effectively institutions convert alumni relationships into practical support for students, graduates, programmes, and external engagement.

This is one of the more promising dimensions in the South African sample because many institutions already recognize alumni as a meaningful bridge between higher education and the labour market. The significance of this lies not only in the number of institutions engaging alumni, but in the fact that alumni represent a distinctive form of external relationship: they combine first-hand knowledge of the institution with current insight into

workplace realities, making them especially well positioned to support student transition and institutional relevance.

The findings point to a capacity divide. Institutions with stronger alumni engagement are more likely to possess the systems, staffing and data infrastructure required to sustain relationships with graduates and mobilize alumni beyond occasional or informal engagement.

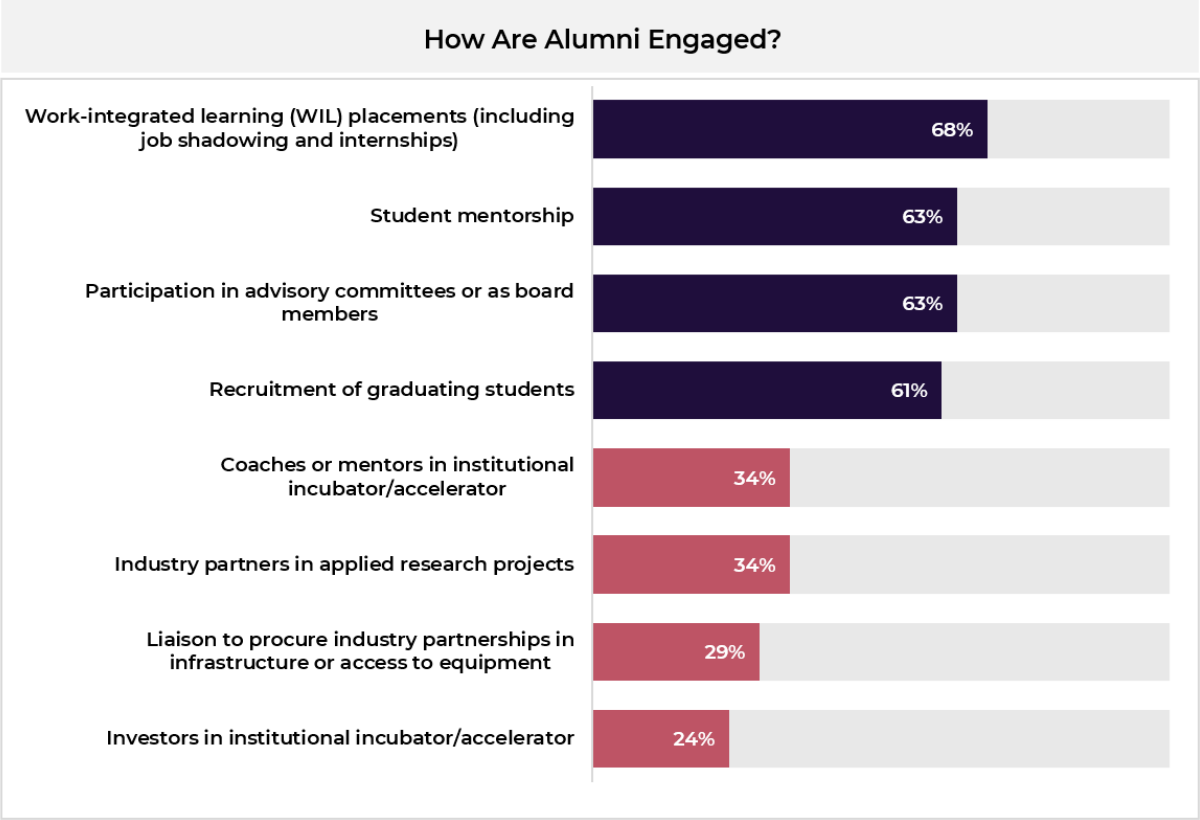


Figure 19: Activities in which alumni are participating among benchmarked institutions who engage alumni to support students' employability (n=38)

5.5.1 Alumni as Transition Support

Where alumni engagement is stronger, it is used primarily as a transition support mechanism. Institutions appear most comfortable mobilizing alumni in roles that connect directly to current students' immediate employability needs, such as opening access to placements, mentoring, labour market insight, and recruitment pathways. This suggests that alumni are already understood as a valuable practical asset in supporting graduate readiness, even if their contribution is still most visible in student-facing rather than institution-shaping functions.

5.5.2 Strategic Alumni Engagement

More strategic forms of alumni engagement remain comparatively less mature. Alumni are still rarely positioned as contributors to applied research, entrepreneurship ecosystems, innovation support, or

infrastructure partnerships. This is an important maturity signal: across much of the sector, alumni engagement remains concentrated on immediate employability support rather than being embedded as a broader, cross-functional institutional resource that contributes to learning, external partnerships, innovation, and long-term graduate outcomes.

5.5.3 Alumni Systems and Data Capacity

Taken together, the findings suggest that South African institutions have established a solid foundation for alumni engagement, but that alumni are not yet consistently integrated into wider employability, employer engagement and graduate outcomes systems.

> **INSIGHT**
>
> Strong alumni relationship management provides a valuable foundation, but greater institutional value comes from mobilizing alumni as strategic enablers of student transitions, employer engagement, curriculum insight, innovation and wider institutional development.

6. Recommendations

This section sets out a series of recommendations to support CHE in strengthening employability practices across the sector. Wherever possible, the recommendations are aligned with proposed amendments and clarifications to the Higher Education Practice Standards (HEPS), while remaining consistent with the non-prescriptive, enabling intent of HEPS. The proposals therefore focus on areas where CHE can provide support, and clear guidelines, clarify expectations, identify appropriate evidence and support institutional improvement.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen Graduate Outcomes Evidence for Quality Assurance and Improvement

Graduate employment outcomes are increasingly recognized as an important indicator of how effectively higher education supports graduates' transition into employment and further study. South Africa's higher education system lacks a consistent approach to the collection, reporting and use of graduate outcomes data. While many institutions collect some form of graduate destination, employment or further study information, IFC benchmarking findings indicate substantial variation in the indicators measured, methodologies employed, timing of data collection, response rates achieved, quality assurance processes applied, and the extent to which findings are used to support institutional improvement. As a result, graduate outcomes data are often difficult to compare across institutions and are not always used systematically to inform programme review, curriculum enhancement, strategic planning, or quality assurance processes. This limits the value of graduate outcomes evidence for institutional improvement, sector benchmarking, and system-level quality assurance.

The Data Value Chain HEPS already emphasizes the importance of data governance, reporting, dissemination, planning, decision-making, monitoring and impact.

CHE could build on these existing expectations by clarifying:

1) the minimum standards for graduate outcomes data collection; and
2) the ways in which graduate outcomes evidence may be used within institutional quality assurance and enhancement processes.

Such an approach would strengthen the reliability, comparability and usefulness of graduate outcomes evidence while remaining aligned with CHE's role as a quality assurance agency rather than a data collection body.

Initiative 1.1. Establish a Graduate Outcomes Data Protocol

CHE could develop a national Graduate Outcomes Data Protocol that provides guidance on the minimum data standards institutions should apply when collecting graduate outcomes information. This may include **common definitions, core indicators, recommended collection intervals, minimum methodological expectations, response-rate guidance, documentation requirements and principles for data governance**

and quality assurance. Such guidance would improve consistency, enhance confidence in institutional data and support more meaningful benchmarking and sector-level analysis.

Illustrative Example:

Institutions should be able to demonstrate alignment with common graduate outcomes data standards which may include:

1. Common Definitions and Core Indicators
    a. Use of standard CHE definitions for employment, unemployment, self-employment, entrepreneurship, further study, and job relevance.
    b. Collection of a minimum set of system wide indicators using common definitions.
    c. Documentation describing how indicators are calculated and reported.
2. Standardized Collection Timeframes
    a. Surveys administered at agreed intervals (6,12,24 months after graduation).
    b. Institutional procedures that demonstrate consistent timing of data collection across cohorts.
3. Data Governance and Responsibility
    a. Institutional policies identifying ownership and responsibility for graduate outcomes data.
    b. Defined roles for data management, quality assurance, data audit and reporting.
    c. Procedures for protecting confidentiality and ensuring ethical use of graduate data.
4. Data Quality Assurance Processes
    a. Procedures for verifying graduate contact information.
    b. Documented approaches to follow-up and non-response management.
    c. Data cleaning, validation and quality-check procedures.
    d. Reports documenting response rates, limitations, and known data quality issues.
5. Survey Administration Standards
    a. Methodologies and administrative protocols.
    b. Standard communication and follow-up procedures.
    c. Evidence that surveying approaches are applied across programs and cohorts.
6. Reporting and Transparency
    a. Reports that clearly document methodology, sample size, response rates, and limitations.
    b. Use of standard reporting templates or data submission formats.
    c. Evidence that data is reported in a transparent and comparable manner across programs and reporting cycles.
7. Comparability and Benchmarking
    a. Submission of graduate outcomes data using CHE defined indicators and reporting conventions.
    b. Ability to compare outcomes across programs, institutions or reporting periods using common metrics.
    c. Participation in national benchmarking or sector-level reporting events.

Initiative 1.2. Clarify the Use of Graduate Outcomes Evidence for Quality Enhancement

Collecting data is not sufficient unless it informs institutional learning and improvement. The Data Value Chain HEPS already emphasizes that institutions should demonstrate how data are not only collected and reported, but also used to support planning, decision-making, monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement. CHE could therefore clarify how the existing expectations of the Data Value Chain **HEPS apply specifically to graduate outcomes evidence**. Rather than prescribing a particular institutional model, CHE could provide illustrative guidance on the ways in which institutions may demonstrate graduate outcomes data inform programme review, curriculum enhancement, institutional planning, career services development, and other quality assurance processes. This would strengthen the use of evidence for quality enhancement while remaining consistent with the broader intent of the Data Value Chain HEPS.

Illustrative evidence may include:

- Programme review reports that explicitly consider graduate outcomes findings;
- Faculty board, senate, or programme committee discussions informed by graduate outcomes evidence;
- Institutional dashboards or reports that communicate graduate outcomes trends to academic leaders and decisionmakers (data socialization evidence);
- Analysis triangulates graduate outcomes data with employer feedback, labour market intelligence, student success indicators, or professional accreditation requirements;
- Action plans developed in response to identified graduate outcomes trends; and
- Evidence that institutions monitor whether actions taken have resulted in improvements over time.

Illustrative Practices for consideration

International Practice
International practices suggest that regulators rarely prescribe a single institutional approach to graduate tracking, but commonly establish shared indicators, common definitions, collection, protocols, and reporting conventions. **Australia** operates one of the world's most mature graduate outcomes systems through the *Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching* (QILT) initiative, funded by the Australian Government. *The Graduate Outcomes Survey* is administered nationally using a common methodology, common indicators, standard collection periods and central reporting arrangements. Results are used for institutional benchmarking, quality improvement, student information and regulatory analysis. The system also includes a longitudinal study that tracks graduates approximately three years after graduation. ***The UK's Graduate Outcomes survey*** is coordinated nationally by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). All higher education providers participate in a common survey administered 15 months after graduation using a standard

International Practice

methodology and reporting framework. HESA also *publishes guidance*, manuals, methodology documentation and national datasets to support consistency and transparency.

European Higher Education Area developed a *European Graduate Tracking Initiative* (EGTI) and deploys a *EUROGRADUATE* survey to create a comparable graduate tracking system across European countries. The survey provides harmonized data on graduate employability, career pathways, skills utilization, mobility and further study using a common methodology applied across participating countries. The initiative was developed specifically to improve the availability, quality, and comparability of graduate outcomes data across higher education systems.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen Curriculum Relevance Through Structured External Input and Faculty Development

South African institutions perform relatively strongly in the Relevance of Learning dimension, outperforming the global benchmark regardless of institutional type. Regular curriculum review is already well established across much of the sector, and institutions have generally recognized the importance of transferable skills, digital literacy, and curriculum responsiveness. However, benchmarking findings suggest that two challenges remain: external stakeholder engagement is often informal, programme-specific, or concentrated around accreditation and review events rather than sustained as part of ongoing curriculum enhancement.

While many institutions recognize the importance of transferable skills and digital literacy/competency, **integration remains uneven** and is often constrained by the extent to which academic staff are supported to embed these capabilities into curriculum design, teaching and assessment. This absence of in-service faculty development programmes is closely associated with institutional capacity or institutional organization.

Initiative 2.1: Clarify Expectations for Structured External Input into Curriculum Review and Renewal

CHE's published accreditation criteria (https://che.ac.za/publications/criteria-programme-accreditation) require programs to demonstrate relevance, fitness of purpose, and ongoing review, but they do not appear to specify how institutions should obtain and document external stakeholder input. As a result, institutions may rely on ad hoc consultations associated with programme approval or review processes, or on industry experience of individual academics, rather than maintaining systematic and recurring mechanisms for obtaining sector-wide feedback.

While preserving institutional flexibility, CHE could indicate that institutions should be able to demonstrate intentional, structured and recurring engagement with employers, industry representatives, professional bodies, alumni and other external stakeholders at programme or programme-cluster level.

Industry Advisory Boards (IABs), Programme Advisory Committees (PACs), professional advisory groups, employer forums and similar mechanisms may all provide suitable evidence. The emphasis should not be on mandating a specific governance structure, but on demonstrating that institutions have established mechanisms through which external perspectives are periodically gathered, considered, and translated into curriculum enhancement. When regulators and quality assurance agencies undertake such performance standard updates, they often use Industry Advisory Boards as an illustrative example of mechanisms to demonstrate evidence.

Illustrative examples of evidence:

Institutions may be able to demonstrate:

- existence of programme or programme-cluster advisory mechanisms;
- frequency of engagement and participation by external stakeholders;
- examples of advice related to emerging skills needs, industry trends, professional practice, technological developments or employability capabilities;
- evidence that external input influenced module content, assessment approaches, experiential learning opportunities or graduate attributes; and
- documentation showing how curriculum changes occurring between major programme review cycles were informed by external stakeholder feedback.

Initiative 2.2: Strengthen Guidance on Faculty Development and Sustained Continuous Professional Learning

Transferable skills, digital literacy and digital competencies are increasingly recognized as essential graduate attributes that influence employability, adaptability and lifelong learning. Benchmarking findings suggest that institutions broadly recognize the importance of these capabilities, but integration remains uneven and is often dependent on individual academic practice rather than supported through institution-wide approaches to curriculum design, teaching and assessment.

CHE could therefore clarify what the expectations are and how institutions can demonstrate support for teaching staff (including new lecturers, mid-career and late-career academic staff). Consistent with HEPS on Continuous Professional Learning and Learning, Teaching and Assessment, CHE could indicate that institutions should be able to evidence how teaching staff are supported in pedagogy (including digital pedagogy), inclusive teaching, and teaching-with-technology.

International Practices
International quality assurance frameworks increasingly formalize industry engagement as a component of quality assurance. The frameworks often explicitly use industry advisory boards as an illustrative example of a mechanism institutions can deploy. While these frameworks do not prescribe specific governance arrangements, they provide a

useful example of a quality assurance approach in which institutions are expected to demonstrate ongoing engagement with external stakeholders.

The **UK Quality Code for HE** lists industry advisory panels as common practices to engage with industry and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies in the design and ongoing development of courses (see Guiding Principle 4, p.8). Some of the Quality Assurance Agency's Subject Benchmark Statements, such as the Subject Benchmark Statement for **Engineering**, emphasize the role of industry advisory boards as 'good practice', providing 'essential input into the design of Engineering courses'.

In Australia, the **Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)** mandates through its *Higher Education Standards Framework Threshold Standards* that institutions demonstrate active industry integration across curriculum design, work-integrated learning (WIL), and research. This regulatory requirement is often reinforced by professional bodies such as *Engineers Australia*, which specifically requires documented evidence of consultation with industry advisory bodies. While TEQSA does not prescribe Industry Advisory Boards as a regulatory requirement, institutions commonly use advisory boards and industry reference groups as evidence that programme design, review and quality assurance processes remain responsive to employer and workforce needs.

North American frameworks also emphasize industry engagement. In the United States, the **Perkins Act** of 2006 requires business and industry involvement in Career and Technical Education programs, a requirement often met through the implementation of **Industry Advisory Boards (IABs)**. Similarly, in Canada, Ontario's ***Minister's Binding Policy Directive*** explicitly mandates that Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology establish **Programme Advisory Committees (PACs)**.

Illustrative evidence:

- Centres for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) or equivalent academic development structures;
- Institutional CPL frameworks for academic staff;
- Professional development opportunities focused on curriculum design, assessment and employability skills;
- Guidance on embedding transferable skills across programmes rather than through stand-alone modules; and
- Support for digital pedagogy and discipline-specific digital competencies.

Examples of how academic development initiatives informed curriculum and assessment redesign; evidence that digital literacy and transferable/durable skills are embedded, assessed, and continuously reviewed.

International Practices

International practice increasingly recognizes that curriculum relevance depends not only on curriculum review processes, but also on the capability of academic staff to design, teach and assess in ways that promote contemporary graduate capabilities. In North America, HEIs generally indicate the need for pedagogical training

International Practices

through faculty contract or promotion conditions. Several European higher education systems have established formal expectations regarding pedagogical competence development for academic staff.

Sweden's national framework for higher education teaching recognizes *10 weeks of pedagogical development (minimum 5)* as the basis of teaching competence.

Norwegian universities commonly require newly appointed academic staff to complete structured university pedagogy programs (typically 200 hours).

Denmark has adopted *a national framework that links pedagogical competence to recruitment, promotion and ongoing academic development.* Together, these examples illustrate a growing international expectation that institutions should be able to demonstrate systematic support for faculty capability development in areas such as curriculum design, digital pedagogy, assessment, student-centred learning and graduate capability development.

Finally, international digital competency frameworks for consideration in articulating digital competencies and literacies, as well as designing faculty training programmes, include the European Digital Competence Framework (Dig Comp), which provides useful examples of how digital competencies can be framed across levels.

Recommendation 3: Broaden Experiential Learning as a Mechanism for Employer Engagement

The Benchmarking suggests that employer engagement is most mature where it is linked to mandatory work-integrated learning (WIL) and professional programme requirements (clinical placements). However, engagement is less consistently embedded through a wider range of experiential, work-related and externally connected learning opportunities that can strengthen graduate employability across disciplines. While institutions demonstrate considerable activity in this area, there is variation in how experiential learning is defined, evidenced and integrated within programme design. As a result, many forms of employer-connected learning remain peripheral, optional or unevenly implemented.

CHE could therefore strengthen interpretive guidelines within the relevant HEPS by clarifying that **experiential learning (EL) encompasses a broader range of modalities than formal WIL placements alone** and by identifying the types of evidence institutions may provide to demonstrate intentional design, sequencing and evaluation of employer-connected learning experiences.

Initiative 3.1. Clarify Expectations for Experiential Learning and WIL

While WIL remains an important modality, international practice increasingly recognizes a broader range of experiential learning approaches through which students develop employability capabilities and connect learning with professional practice – within the entire student lifecycle.

CHE could clarify, through HEPS guidance, audit expectations and illustrative practice examples, that **institutions may demonstrate employer engagement and experiential learning through multiple modalities** appropriate to their mission, discipline mix and student population. The emphasis should be on intentional design, learning outcomes, reflection and evidence of learning rather than on any single modality of WIL. Instead, institutions could be encouraged to show how they intentionally design, sequence, scaffold, and evaluate multiple modalities across the student life cycle, in ways that support learning, employability, and societal responsiveness.

Illustrative evidence may include:

- internships and professional placements (considerable uptake in SA HEIs);
- service learning and community-engaged projects;
- industry-sponsored projects and capstone experiences;
- applied research addressing industry or societal needs/challenges;
- consultancy projects undertaken with external partners;
- simulations and practice environments; and
- externships and job shadowing.

Institutions could also be encouraged to demonstrate:

- where experiential learning is intentionally embedded across programs;
- progression from introductory to more advanced experiences throughout the student lifecycle, i.e. introductory → developmental → capstone (e.g. field placements in early stages progressing to internship and culminating in applied research projects); and
- alignment between experiential learning activities and programme learning outcomes.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen Recognition of Applied Research

National benchmarking suggests that applied research emerges as one of the least institutionalized forms of employer engagement within the benchmarking. Applied research appears less institutionalized than other forms of employer engagement, including curriculum engagement, WIL and entrepreneurship. While some institutions demonstrate strong examples of externally connected and problem-oriented research, these practices are not yet consistently embedded across the sector and are often concentrated within specific programmes, disciplines or institutional contexts.

CHE could provide useful framing for this issue by recognizing applied, problem-oriented research undertaken in partnership with industry/employers, communities, or other external stakeholders, including alumni, **as a legitimate expression of research significance and societal relevance.** This clarification would not diminish the importance of fundamental research and scholarship but rather broaden the types of research contribution institutions may demonstrate.

CHE could therefore encourage institutions to show how employer and external engagement extends beyond curriculum advice and placements into applied research collaborations that address clearly defined real-

world challenges. This does not require privileging applied research over fundamental or theoretical scholarship. Rather, it would clarify that where institutions claim societal relevance, innovation, or employability impact, they may also be expected to show whether and how they support co-created research and problem-solving activities linked to external needs.

- Clarify, through HEPS guidance or related guidance/regulatory intervention that institutions may provide evidence of applied research partnerships with industry/communities/government relevant to their mission and discipline/programme mix.
- Encourage institutions to consider how applied research can connect with experiential learning, entrepreneurship, and alumni engagement, thereby creating more integrated pathways between learning, innovation, and transition into work.

International Practices

Internationally, there is growing recognition that research contributes to higher education quality not only through scholarly outputs, but also through its ability to generate **societal, economic, community and industry impact**. HEIs are expected to demonstrate applied research and technology transfer initiatives. Several higher education systems have therefore expanded the ways in which research contribution is recognized and assessed.

In the UK, the *Research Excellence Framework* (REF) evaluates not only research quality but also research impact beyond academia, including benefits to industry, public policy, communities, health systems and wider society. Universities are required to demonstrate how research has contributed to real-world change through *impact case studies*.

Similarly, *Australia's Engagement and Impact Assessment (EI)* was established to assess how effectively universities engage with end-users of research and translate research into economic, social, environmental and cultural benefits beyond academia. The framework explicitly recognizes collaboration with industry and other external stakeholders as an important dimension of research performance. In North America, an increasing number of universities recognize community-engaged and applied scholarship within promotion and tenure processes. The Campus Contact – a membership organization maintains *a repository of promotion and tenure examples* related to applied research.

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