

LIVELIHOOD SKILLS CURRICULA AND HUMANITIES GRADUATES' ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

In recent years, South Africa has experienced an upsurge in unemployment, particularly among graduates. This is due to the global economic downturn, and the misalignment of skills acquired as well as the dynamism of labour-market demands. Graduates of non-technical courses and Faculty of Humanities are the worst affected. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore lecturers' perceptions of the inclusion of livelihood skills to enable graduates to become entrepreneurs and job creators rather than solely job seekers. The study adopted a qualitative research approach. The study population entailed lecturers in the Faculty of Humanities of a selected South African university. Using purposive sampling, the sample comprised 16 lecturers from different schools to get diverse perspectives on the issue under investigation. The data collection method consisted of semi-structured interviews. Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings revealed that the inclusion of livelihood skills would enhance access to employment opportunities through multiple pathways. However, its effectiveness depends on explicit pedagogy and enabling infrastructure. Based on the findings, the authors concluded that livelihood skills that respond to labour-market demand should be included in humanities curricula to equip students with entrepreneurial skills to launch entrepreneurial activities after graduation.

Keywords: *Graduate unemployment, livelihood skills, humanities graduates, labour market demand, human capital.*

1. Introduction

Graduate unemployment cuts across all disciplines in South Africa, but graduates from the Faculty of Humanities face a greater challenge transitioning from higher education to the work environment than their engineering, education and medical sciences counterparts. In South Africa, there is a tangible number of unemployed Humanities graduates (Mseleku, 2025). This may not be unconnected with Humanities being more of a theoretical discipline than a practical-oriented field of study (Masilela, 2024). This is largely due to the inadequacy of marketable skills in the curricula offering of programmes in Humanities in relation to a dynamic labour market (Khumalo, 2024). Given the foregoing, the inclusion of livelihood skills, such as entrepreneurial skills, in the Humanities curricula would support entrepreneurial skills development among Humanities students (Mukesh, Pillai & Prthap, 2019). The goal is to ensure that humanities graduates become creators of jobs and employers of labour rather than perpetual job seekers.

Graduate unemployment has persisted despite colossal investments in higher education, a pivot on which socio-economic transformation thrives. The expected returns on educational investment have not translated into tangible employment opportunities for graduates (Brophy, Fiona & Scurry, 2025). Various extant literature indicates that graduate unemployment has risen significantly to 9.7% in the second quarter (Q2) of 2024 (MacGinty, 2024). This is partly traceable to misalignment between academic qualifications and available jobs in the communities (Moloto et al., 2025). It is against this background, the inclusion of livelihood skills in the Humanities curricula to equip the undergraduate students with entrepreneurial skills for job creation and self-employment was considered.

1.2. Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in Human Capital Theory. Human capital simply means the value an individual adds to a workforce due to training or education acquired (He & Norazlinda, 2025). Human capital encompasses employee knowledge, skills, and education as critical factors in development and labour market productivity (Li, 2026). The contention is that education, training, and skills acquisition are

essential tools for increasing income and promoting the economic development of humanity (Nwachukwu & Njoku, 2024). Within the South African context, skills mismatches and deficiencies in market responsive skills such as entrepreneurial skills, digital skills, and self-efficacy persist as gaps within the labour force. In a bid to bridge this gap, this paper suggests integrating entrepreneurial skills (livelihood skills) in the Humanities curricula would increase human capital by improving employability (self-employment) among Humanities graduates (Chivige & Magidi, 2026).

Furthermore, Human Capital Theory gives the researchers a clear understanding of what they want from the participants. The questions established a link and relationship between the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills and human capital. In data analysis, the explanations and interpretations of the participants relied on the impact of acquired skills towards the development of human capital (Holmes, 2023). Therefore, it is no exaggeration that employability is developed through enhancing personal qualities and skills that make graduates appealing to employers.

2. Research design and methodology

The qualitative approach was adopted to examine lecturers' perceptions of the integration of livelihood skills (entrepreneurial skills) into the curriculum of programmes in the Faculty of Humanities, to prepare graduates for entrepreneurship. A phenomenological research design was adopted for this study to obtain wider perspectives of a phenomenon (Tomaszewski, Zarestky & Gonzalez, 2020). The lecturers in the Faculty of Humanities of the selected university constituted the population of study. The researchers used purposive sampling to select 16 lecturers from a selected university to participate in the study. The selection criteria were based on the lecturers who had taught in the Faculty of Humanities for a minimum of 5 years at the undergraduate level and must be willing to participate in the study.

The research instrument was developed by the researchers, using theoretical framework, literature review, and research objective as a guide. The method adopted for qualitative data collection was a one-on-one semi-structured interview (Saepudin et al., 2022). The researchers interviewed 16 lecturers from the faculty of humanities. The interview session lasted 30 to 60 minutes with each participant.

Thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the transcribed audio recordings from semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis helped to identify themes useful for addressing the research question of this study. This was followed by attaching meanings to sets of data that were useful in determining the integration of entrepreneurial livelihood skills in the curriculum of programmes in the faculty of humanities.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee of the university concerned. Participants were duly informed about the details of the study via email before they volunteered to participate. The interview session had no adverse consequences on the participants. The confidentiality of participants was guaranteed as such codes were used in the place of names in the reporting of the findings in this article.

3. Result

Knowing that the present findings are extracted from a big research project, the paper focuses on integrating entrepreneurship training in the curricula within the Faculty of Humanities to students acquire entrepreneurial skills, knowledge and mindset. Table 1. Presents the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the semi-structured interview with the participants.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes about integration of entrepreneurial skills Humanities curricula

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Entrepreneurial and Self-employment	1.1 Job creation versus job search
	1.2 Cooperative and enterprise formation
	1.3 Assessing capital and support
2. Challenges and Barriers to Implementation	2.1 Curriculum structure and credit complaints
	2.2 Discipline boundaries and market absorption limitation

3.1. Theme 1: Entrepreneurship and self-employment

The participants expressed their views from different perspectives on the inclusion of entrepreneurial skills in the Humanities curricula.

3.1.1 Subtheme 1. Job creation vs. job seeking. Participants view skills training as a process of developing graduates to become entrepreneurs and job creators rather than solely job seekers.

Participant (PAQ02) said:

If you equip them with the livelihood skills...I will emphasise the entrepreneurial skills. Because the entrepreneurship has been identified as the pillar of the economy. Because once you equip them, they will be able to stand on their own.

Participant (PAQ03) said:

Can't we...introduce business management modules within Humanities programmes to assist these students? should it happen that you...do not find work in your field. How about now, we have trained you...go and see what you can do with this...encourage them to become one of the formal sectors out there.

Participant (PAQ04) added:

There are many unemployed graduates. If they have skills that are transferable to the market, then they would be employable. Livelihood skills would also allow students to be entrepreneurial and, therefore, to deal with the unemployment problem.

The above quotations indicate that the inclusion of entrepreneurial skills in Humanities curricula will enable graduates to create jobs. This is because such skills are transferable to the market, making graduates employers of labour rather than job seekers.

3.1.2 Subtheme 2: Cooperative and enterprise formation. The participant gave real life examples of graduates using curriculum-embedded skills to establish successful businesses.

Participant (DSP01) expressed it as follows:

We have one of our graduates. He, together with his classmates...started a cooperative. They submit their applications for large tenders. If these students did not learn...presentation skills through the curriculum, I doubt if they could have been able to start. If we did not expose them to debating in class, negotiation, conflict resolution...they would not have been able to get to a stage where they are able to stand and raise their hands...

Participant (DSP01) views entrepreneurial skills as multiple pathways to employment generation.

We have some of our students who have started non-governmental organisations. They are even able to write proposals and submit those for funding...within and outside the country, which is part of our development studies curriculum.

The analysis of the above quote reveals that existing skills have proved to be useful. Therefore, integrating entrepreneurial skills in Humanities curricula will create more access to employment opportunities.

3.1.3 Subtheme 3: Accessing capital and support systems. They participants contended that the success of entrepreneurial skills in the curriculum requires government participation through capital provision. The participant (PAQ02) said:

I think there are multiple role players that can be put in place. Government in the main, must play a serious role in building that conducive environment...For entrepreneurship to thrive, some entrepreneurial skills will need capital.

Participant (PAQ02) emphasised the ecosystem requirements for skill utilisation by saying:

If government itself cannot provide a basis for capital or research skills. We are availing ourselves as a research repository. This is where you can be able to access people with capital...such livelihood skills will not be able to see the light of the day without capital.

The quotes from the participants shows that the combination of intellectual asset of the academia and financial resources from the government is required for successful integration of entrepreneurial skills in the Humanities curricula.

3.2. Theme 2: Challenges and implementation barriers

The expansion of curricula content with entrepreneurial skills may face challenges. This is due to the structure of Humanities curricula, heavy credit load and disciplinary boundaries.

3.2.1 Subtheme 1: Curriculum structure and credit constraints. The participants view the structural and credentialing challenges as an impediment to the inclusion of entrepreneurial skills in humanities curricula. The participant (LSP01) said:

The university is also struggling with credit loads. Will that be a credit-bearing skill, or will it just be a non-credit-bearing skill? How will they get...to show...I have this skill which I acquired along with my qualification.

The participant (LSP01) buttressed:

If these things have not been done at the lower levels, then it becomes a bit difficult...to say that you are introducing these skills. This student has maybe only one year. How much time will the student be able to dedicate?

The analysis from the above quotes suggests a limitation to the inclusion of livelihood skills (entrepreneurial skills) due to already bloated credit load in Humanities programmes.

3.2.2 Subtheme 2: Discipline boundaries and labour market absorption capacity. Some participants argue that integrating practical skills into disciplines in Humanities is unimaginable. They emphasised that the capacity of the labour market to absorb graduates is limited, regardless of skills.

The participant (HSE01) said:

For me, as a historian, it is quite difficult to imagine how to include such skills. Because history is in many regards a philosophy. It is not necessarily even a subject that many people study to go out into the field of work.

Participant (HSE01) said.

Within those urban environments, there are quite a significant volume of students studying history simply to be intellectually enriched. When it comes to these parameters that you are setting...they require physical labour. I find it very difficult to imagine where history can fit in.

Participant (PAQ02) attributed unemployment to saturated labour market:

Looking at the unemployment rates in the country. The space or employment spaces that are supposed to absorb the graduates are becoming very fewer. They are becoming very narrow.

The quotes from participants suggest that the curricula of Humanities programmes are already bloated. Therefore, integrating livelihood skills, such as entrepreneurial skills, will lead to curriculum overload. Other obstacles to the integration of entrepreneurial skills include disciplinary boundaries, among others.

4. Discussion

Participants affirmed that such skills transform graduates from job seekers into job creators, a position corroborated by recent findings. Entrepreneurship education is a fundamental guide in higher education reform, fostering students' entrepreneurial awareness while developing integrated practical skills, including innovative thinking, teamwork, project management among competencies favoured in today's job market (Ajani, 2024). This finding is strengthened by Nkomo et al., (2025) finding that South Africa must encourage entrepreneurial thinking to lower the current wave of unemployment.

The finding on cooperative and enterprise formation aligns with recent evidence that entrepreneurship education goes beyond teaching business skills alone. Daynti (2025) emphasized that the success of entrepreneurship education is enhanced by problem-solving skills, critical thinking, among other skills, which are veritable tools for addressing the challenge of unemployment.

However, regarding the challenge of curriculum overload, embedding employability into existing modules, rather than introducing standalone courses, overcomes the disadvantage of not clearly aligning the degree subject with employability aspects (Koseda et al., 2025). This has been identified as an alternative pathway for Humanities programmes.

Human Capital Theory, which underpins the study, is affirmed by evidence that students who possess strong entrepreneurial skills such as problem-solving, adaptability, communication and leadership showcase higher levels of university to workplace readiness (Deepani & Kumaravel, 2025).

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that Humanities lecturers broadly support integrating entrepreneurial skills into curricula to address graduate unemployment in South Africa. Participants affirmed that such skills are transferable and can transform graduates from job seekers into job creators and entrepreneurs. However, significant barriers exist, including bloated credit loads, rigid disciplinary boundaries, and insufficient capital support. The findings confirm that curriculum reform alone is insufficient without broader systemic enablers such as government funding and industry collaboration.

It is recommended that universities should embed entrepreneurial skills as credit-bearing modules within existing Humanities programmes to ensure formal recognition. Government should establish accessible funding frameworks to support graduate entrepreneurship. Curriculum designers should work across disciplinary boundaries to develop contextually relevant, market-responsive content.

Future research should explore student perspectives and longitudinal employment outcomes following curriculum reform.

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