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ELEVATING STRATEGY AND INNOVATION FOR RELEVANCE FOR SOUTH AFRICAN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Private higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa are confronted by rapid technological change, shifting student expectations, and evolving workforce requirements. Without state subsidies, their sustainability depends on strategic agility and the ability to deliver future-ready graduates. Literature highlights that higher education is experiencing unprecedented digital disruption, intensified by COVID-19 and the rapid rise of hybrid learning, educational technologies (EdTech), and artificial intelligence (AI). While hybrid models enhance flexibility, they also raise challenges such as the digital divide. Studies further stress that organisational innovation and cultural transformation are essential for institutions to adapt, embed future-ready skills, and sustain relevance in competitive environments. This study explores how South African private HEIs can strengthen their relevance through strategic innovation, hybrid learning, EdTech, and organisational culture. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, the research employed a mixed-methods survey of students, academic staff, and industry partners. Findings revealed four dominant themes: the importance of hybrid learning for flexibility and access; the need to embrace EdTech and artificial intelligence (AI) to remain competitive; the integration of digital and soft skills into curricula to enhance employability; and the critical role of fostering an innovation-oriented culture for institutional resilience. The study presents practical recommendations include aligning curricula with the digital economy, embedding soft skills and digital literacy across programmes, leveraging EdTech strategically, and forging stronger industry partnerships. The study contributes both theoretically and practically by offering a roadmap for HEIs navigating disruption.

KEYWORDS: *Digital transformation; hybrid learning; educational technology; innovation culture; employability; private higher education*

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Higher education in South Africa stands at a pivotal moment. Rapid technological change, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, has transformed how knowledge is produced, delivered, and valued. Hybrid learning, artificial intelligence (AI), and educational technologies (EdTech) are reshaping pedagogy and graduate expectations, while employers demand adaptable, digitally fluent graduates. For private higher education institutions (HEIs), which operate without state subsidies, these disruptions raise existential questions: how to remain relevant, competitive, and financially sustainable in a fast-changing landscape.

This paper investigates how South African private HEIs can enhance competitiveness and sustainability through strategic innovation. It explores how hybrid learning, EdTech, and organisational culture intersect to influence institutional relevance in an era of digital transformation. Drawing on mixed-methods research involving students, academic staff, and industry partners, the study identifies four interconnected dimensions shaping future-ready institutions: (1) hybrid learning as a flexible and inclusive model, (2) strategic adoption of EdTech and AI, (3) integration of digital and soft skills to enhance employability, and (4) fostering a culture of innovation to drive adaptability and resilience. The paper proceeds by outlining the research problem and questions, reviewing the literature on digital transformation and innovation culture, and presenting key findings and recommendations. It argues that, for private HEIs, disruption offers not only challenge but opportunity—to redefine themselves as agile, future-focused, and socially responsive institutions.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Disruptions to higher education are multifaceted: technological innovation, evolving student needs, and changing workforce expectations converge to challenge traditional models. For private HEIs in South Africa, the absence of state support exacerbates these pressures, necessitating agile responses to remain competitive.

This study was guided by four core research questions:

1. What essential knowledge and skills are required of future-fit graduates in the 21st century?

2. How are digital technologies reshaping curricula, delivery methods, and engagement in higher education?
3. What areas of strategic integration are required for private South African HEIs to remain relevant?
4. How can fostering a culture of innovation enhance adaptability and sustainability?

These questions stem from the broader problem that private HEIs must reimagine their strategies in order to maintain stakeholder confidence, sustain enrolments, and ensure long-term survival.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HEIs globally are confronted by disruptive forces that challenge long-standing practices of knowledge transmission and graduate preparation. The rapid advancement of digital technologies, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, has reshaped delivery models, student expectations, and employer demands. The literature identifies hybrid learning, EdTech, AI, and organisational culture as critical domains influencing institutional relevance and competitiveness. This review explores these themes to establish the scholarly context for examining strategic adaptation in South African private HEIs.

Disrupting higher education

The concept of digital disruption has been widely applied to higher education, describing the transformative impact of emerging technologies and new business models on the sector's value proposition (Skog, Wimelius and Sandberg, 2018). These disruptions are not isolated events but part of broader socio-economic shifts that compel institutions to rethink their strategies. Globally, COVID-19 accelerated the digital shift, compelling HEIs to adopt online teaching and administrative practices at unprecedented speed (Dhawan, 2020).

Research indicates that many of these pandemic-era adjustments have persisted beyond the immediate crisis. Hybrid work and study arrangements, for example, have become preferred by both students and employees for their flexibility and accessibility (Cassidy, 2025; Riaz et al., 2023). At the same time, employers increasingly demand graduates who are proficient in digital collaboration, virtual communication, and data-driven decision-making (Choudhury et al., 2024). For HEIs, particularly in tuition-dependent contexts such as South Africa, failure to adapt to these expectations risks institutional obsolescence.

Yet, the literature also acknowledges enduring challenges. Digital divides, infrastructure limitations, and unequal access to connectivity exacerbate inequalities in higher education (Guàrdia et al., 2021). Moreover, institutions face the tension of maintaining academic quality and integrity while reengineering traditional delivery modes to fit digital and hybrid contexts.

Hybrid learning

Hybrid learning, which blends online and face-to-face modes of delivery, has emerged as a cornerstone of institutional adaptation. Studies consistently point to its benefits, including enhanced flexibility, cost savings for students, and increased opportunities for personalised learning (Raes et al., 2020; Faraniza, 2012). Hybrid models can support critical thinking, adaptability, and self-management skills – competencies valued in contemporary workplaces (Adera, 2025). Nevertheless, hybrid learning is not without challenges. Research highlights concerns around student isolation, reduced peer interaction, and risks to learner engagement (Zeyab and Alayyar, 2023). Faculty workloads are often intensified by the need to prepare materials for both physical and virtual delivery (Tong, Uyen and Ngan, 2022). In addition, hybrid learning places significant demands on digital infrastructure, connectivity, and educator competence (Omodan, 2024). These challenges underscore the importance of institutional support and leadership in ensuring effective implementation. Without deliberate investment in digital infrastructure and professional development, hybrid models risk entrenching inequalities rather than enhancing inclusivity. For private HEIs, which must balance innovation with cost-effectiveness, hybrid learning presents both opportunity and risk.

EdTech and AI

The rise of EdTech has transformed higher education. Learning management systems (LMSs), chatbots and immersive tools such as virtual reality are now integrated into teaching and learning environments (Chugh et al., 2023; Jantjies, Moodley and Maart, 2018). These tools enable personalised learning, support collaboration, and enhance efficiency by streamlining administrative processes (Purwanto et al., 2024).

AI extends these capabilities, offering adaptive tutoring, automated assessment, predictive analytics, and real-time feedback (George, 2023; O’Rinbekovna, 2024). Research shows that students respond positively to AI tutors and assistants, noting their ability to increase engagement and motivation (Pratama, Sampelolo and Lura, 2023). However, adoption challenges remain. Concerns include uneven staff readiness, varying levels of student digital literacy, and issues of academic integrity and cybersecurity (Noroozi et al., 2024; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021). Reliance on AI also raises ethical questions regarding data privacy, bias, and the role of educators. Literature therefore stresses the importance of adoption strategies that balance innovation with pedagogical integrity.

Innovation and organisational culture

The literature also stresses the role of institutional culture in enabling or constraining innovation. Studies highlight that successful adaptation requires cultural openness, collaboration, and leadership commitment (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021). Institutions with innovation-oriented cultures are better equipped to integrate technology, rethink curricula, and respond to stakeholder demands.

Barriers, however, are well documented. Resistance to technology, fear of displacement, and limited institutional support can undermine adoption (Almaiah and Al Mulhem, 2019). Without strong leadership, innovation often remains fragmented, with inconsistent practices across departments. Embedding innovation as a strategic priority – supported by professional development and resources – is therefore essential for sustainability in times of disruption.

Review conclusion and gap identification

The literature demonstrates that digital disruption, hybrid learning, EdTech, and organisational innovation are central to the transformation of higher education. Collectively, these studies highlight both opportunities and challenges for institutions seeking to prepare graduates for an increasingly complex world of work. However, most scholarship is situated in Global North contexts, with limited attention to private HEIs in South Africa. These institutions, reliant on tuition fees and operating without state subsidies, face unique pressures to remain relevant and competitive.

The gap identified is therefore twofold: first, a lack of empirical research foregrounding the experiences of private HEIs in South Africa, and second, insufficient integration of stakeholder perspectives – students, staff, and industry – in shaping strategies for institutional adaptation. Addressing this gap is essential if private HEIs are to thrive as agents of innovation and skills development in the South African and global higher education landscape.

RESEARCH DESIGN METHODOLOGY

The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, underpinned by a relativist ontology and interpretivists epistemology, which emphasizes understanding meaning from stakeholder perspectives. Data was collected through mixed-methods surveys administered to three key stakeholder groups: students, academic staff, and industry partners. Analysis of the 200 returned surveys combined quantitative results with qualitative thematic analysis, enabling triangulation of findings across groups. Ethical clearance was obtained, and measures of credibility included triangulation and authenticity checks.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study explored stakeholder perspectives – students, academic staff, and industry partners – on how South African private HEIs can adapt its strategy to remain competitive and relevant amid digital disruptions. The findings are presented around four dominant themes: 1) the importance of hybrid learning; 2) the need to embrace EdTech and AI; 3) the competencies required for future-ready graduates; and 4) the cultivation of innovation-oriented organisational cultures. Each theme is discussed in relation to existing literature.

Theme 1: Importance of hybrid learning

Stakeholders consistently emphasised the value of hybrid learning models. Students identified flexibility as a key advantage, noting that hybrid modes enabled them to balance study, work, and personal responsibilities. Many reported that hybrid delivery reduced commuting times and costs, making education more accessible. For industry partners, exposure to hybrid learning prepared graduates for workplaces increasingly characterized by hybrid work arrangements. Academic staff echoed these sentiments, stressing that hybrid models allowed for more diverse and inclusive teaching strategies.

At the same time, stakeholders flagged challenges. Students highlighted feelings of isolation when online interaction replaced face-to-face engagement, and some expressed concerns about unreliable internet connectivity and uneven digital literacy. Staff reported increased workloads due to the dual demands of preparing materials for both physical and virtual delivery. These concerns mirror findings in the literature that hybrid learning can deepen inequalities if institutions fail to address infrastructural and pedagogical barriers (Zeyab and Alayyar, 2023; Omodan, 2024). Despite these challenges, the stakeholder consensus was that hybrid learning is no longer optional but essential. For private HEIs, strategically leveraging hybrid models enhances both competitiveness and accessibility, while also aligning curricula with workplace readiness.

Theme 2: Embracing EdTech and AI

Stakeholders strongly endorsed the integration of EdTech and AI as critical for institutional relevance. Students described EdTech as enhancing engagement and improving access to learning materials. They highlighted the value of tools such as learning management systems and AI-enabled platforms that provide real-time feedback and personalised learning pathways. Academic staff saw potential for EdTech to support innovation in pedagogy, though some admitted to limited training and confidence in using advanced tools.

Industry partners expressed a particularly strong interest in AI. They argued that graduates proficient in AI tools – ranging from data analytics platforms to generative AI applications – would enjoy significant advantages in employability. Employers emphasized digital literacy and AI literacy as non-negotiable skills for future workers. This aligns with scholarship identifying AI as transformative in both pedagogy and administration (George, 2023; O'Rinbekovna, 2024).

Concerns were also raised. Staff and students mentioned the risks of over-reliance on technology, challenges in maintaining academic integrity, and exposure to cybersecurity threats. Industry partners flagged the ethical implications of AI adoption, particularly data privacy and algorithmic bias. These findings resonate with literature that calls for a balance between technological innovation and pedagogical integrity (Noroozi et al., 2024). The overall message is clear: EdTech and AI are indispensable to the future of HEIs. However, their effectiveness depends on deliberate investment in infrastructure, training and ethical frameworks.

Theme 3: Future-ready graduate skills

Across all stakeholder groups, there was strong agreement that graduate employability depends on a blend of digital and soft skills. Industry partners prioritized analytical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, and digital communication. They also highlighted emotional intelligence, entrepreneurship, and ethical reasoning as crucial in navigating complex work environments. Students emphasized the need for digital literacy, time management, and critical thinking. Academic staff underscored the importance of embedding these competencies across curricula, rather than treating them as add-ons.

These findings align with global research indicating that hybrid and technology-enabled education must be paired with the cultivation of 21st-century skills (World Economic Forum, 2023). The emphasis on adaptability and resilience is particularly noteworthy, reflecting the recognition that graduates will face roles and challenges not yet fully defined by industry. What emerges is that future-ready graduates are not defined solely by technical proficiency, but by their capacity to integrate technical, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills. For private HEIs, this requires a curriculum that balances disciplinary expertise with holistic skill development, ensuring that graduates can transition seamlessly into diverse and evolving work contexts.

Theme 4: Innovation and organisational culture

The final theme highlighted the need for HEIs to cultivate innovation-oriented cultures. Academic staff respondents stressed that institutional leaderships plays a pivotal role in setting the tone for innovation. Professional development opportunities, recognition of innovative teaching, and transparent communication were identified as mechanisms to support cultural change. Students expressed a desire for institutions to model innovation not only in teaching but also in student services and support systems. Industry partners emphasised that innovation capacity is a marker of institutional competitiveness. They argued that institutions demonstrating adaptability and creatively are more likely to produce graduates who can thrive in disruptive environments. This finding reflects the literature on learning organisations, which links innovation capacity to institutional resilience and sustainability (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021).

Barriers to innovation were also acknowledged. Resistance among staff, fear of technological displacement, and uneven institutional support were identified as obstacles. These concerns echo previous research that highlights the importance of strong leadership and structured

support in overcoming resistance (Almaiah and Al Mulhem, 2019). Embedding innovation into institutional culture is thus essential for private HEIs. It allows them to adapt not reactively, but proactively, positioning themselves as leaders in shaping the future of education and work.

Integrating themes

Together, these four themes present a coherent picture of stakeholder expectations and institutional priorities. Hybrid learning provides the delivery model, EdTech and AI offer the tools, future-ready skills define the learning outcomes, and innovation culture sets the organisational foundation. The findings confirm that South African private HEIs face both urgent challenges and unique opportunities. Stakeholders broadly agree that hybrid learning, EdTech, AI, and innovation culture are not optional but essential for sustaining institutional relevance. However, these must be pursued strategically, with deliberate investments in infrastructure, professional development, ethical frameworks, and curricular redesign. By embedding these elements into strategy, pedagogy, and culture, private HEIs can elevate their role as engines of employability and innovation, contributing not only to their own sustainability but also to the broader social and economic development of South Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings highlight the necessity for South African private HEIs to adopt strategies that simultaneously address digital disruption, stakeholder expectations, and graduate employability. Based on stakeholder insights and alignment with the literature, five interrelated recommendations are proposed.

1. Align institutional strategies and curricula with the digital economy

HEIs must ensure that institutional strategies explicitly integrate digital transformation imperatives. Curricula should be regularly updated to reflect emerging technological and workplace realities, while governance structures must support agility in academic and operational planning. This alignment will enhance institutional competitiveness and relevance in a rapidly changing environment.

2. Integrate digital literacy and soft skills in all programmes

Employers emphasise that future-ready graduates require both technical proficiency and socio-emotional competencies. HEIs should embed digital literacy, adaptability, communication,

critical thinking, and ethical reasoning into curricula across disciplines. These competencies should not be confined to specialist modules but woven into the fabric of academic programmes.

3. Leverage hybrid learning and EdTech strategically

Hybrid learning has become a defining feature of higher education delivery. Institutions should strengthen their digital infrastructure and provide comprehensive staff training to ensure that hybrid models deliver on their promise of flexibility and inclusion. The strategic use of EdTech and AI should be directed toward enhancing pedagogy, increasing access, and supporting personalised learning, while mitigating risks of inequality and academic integrity concerns.

4. Foster a culture of innovation and continuous learning

Institutional resilience depends on cultivating a learning-oriented and innovation-driven culture. Leadership should promote professional development, incentivize innovative teaching and research practices, and foster collaborative knowledge exchange among staff and students. By embedding innovation into institutional culture, HEIs can move beyond reactive adaptation to proactive engagement with disruption.

5. Strengthen partnerships with industry

Stronger and more structured collaboration with industry is essential for aligning academic outcomes with labour market needs. Regular dialogue with employers can ensure curricula remain responsive, while partnerships can expand opportunities for work-integrated learning and graduate employability. These collaborations also enhance institutional reputation and strengthen the social compact between HEIs and the broader economy.

Collectively, these recommendations emphasise that private HEIs in South Africa must approach disruption not as a threat but as an opportunity. By strategically integrating technology, skills development, innovation, and partnerships, these institutions can enhance their relevance, sustain their competitiveness, and contribute meaningfully to both national development priorities and global higher education discourses.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how South African private HEIs can sustain their relevance and competitiveness in an era defined by digital disruption, shifting stakeholder expectations, and

rapidly evolving workplace demands. Drawing on insights from students, academic staff, and industry partners, the findings underscored the importance of four interrelated domains. The evidence demonstrates that strategic integration of these domains is not optional but essential. For private HEIs, which rely on tuition fees and operate without state subsidies, embedding hybrid learning, digital competencies, and innovative practices into institutional strategy is fundamental for long-term sustainability. These conclusions align with global scholarship on the future of higher education, while adding an important perspective from the South African private sector – a context often underrepresented in the literature. The study contributes practically by offering five actionable recommendations that address the digital economy, graduate employability, institutional culture, and industry collaboration. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to track how strategic innovations evolve over time. Ultimately, the study reaffirms that disruption, while challenging, also presents an opportunity for private HEIs to redefine their role as agile, innovative, and future-focused institutions. By proactively engaging with technology, skills development, and organisational culture, these institutions can not only survive but also thrive as key contributors to South Africa’s educational, social, and economic development.

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