

# Drop in PhD students to affect skills

A shortage of supervisors for doctorates in business administration students has resulted in fewer enrolments this year, adding to SA's skills deficit.



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The problem has become so severe that some business schools are not enrolling new students and experts say the effect on the economy will be huge - particularly in the financial services and public sectors.

The decline in PhD students will curtail SA's ability to produce research that can drive innovation and economic growth.

South African universities have doubled doctoral output in the past 15 years, from 685 to 1,421 graduates, according to the Centre for Higher Education Transformation. This is far fewer than SA's peers in the Brics (Brazil, Russia, India and China) community, which produce an average of 2,244 doctorates a year.

The Department of Higher Education has set a target of three quarters of SA's academic staff acquiring a PhD.

Only 34% of them have the highest degree, compared with 98% in Brazil.

SA has 18 business schools and five have confirmed a shortage of supervisors for PhD candidates.

## Not enough supervisors

Council on Higher Education CEO Ahmed Essop says it is likely that the decline in the enrolment of doctoral students in business administration is caused by the fact that there are not enough academic staff members to supervise them.

"The precondition for supervision is that the supervisor must have a PhD. However, in the higher education system, as a whole, just under 40% of the staff hold doctorates," he says. SA produces about 1,000 doctoral graduates a year, well below the 6,000 target set by the Department of Science and Technology, he says.

Cleopas Sanangura, group CEO of Dawn Holdings and a supervisor at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of KwaZuluNatal and Stellenbosch University, says the shortage of supervisors has resulted in some schools not enrolling new students this year.

"Last year I had to take 18 students due to this problem and unfortunately the majority of the students have dropped out from the (PhD) programme," says Dr Sanangura.

Steve Burgess, director of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University business school, says more needs to be done to address the problem.

The South African Business Schools Association and the Association of African Business Schools are promoting programmes to support doctoral candidates and their supervisors.

"It is of vital importance that directors and deans promote improvements in doctoral supervision and research," says Prof Burgess.

University of KwaZulu-Natal spokesman Lesiba Seshoka says there is a shortage of suitably qualified supervisors, but the university's business school has received financial assistance over the past few years to secure "external" supervisors.

Wits Business School research director Gregory Lee says his institution has "contained" the problem. "We have implemented a policy of not hiring anyone without a PhD. This immediately keeps up the stock of supervisors," he says.

University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business director Walter Baets says some universities should not offer PhD programmes as they do not have the capacity.

"It's a difficult issue in SA to find academic staff. The only thing is to increase PhD funding (and) with that start with training black and coloured academics in order to service what we need," he says.

In 2014 Wits Business School had 67 students registered for PhDs and four for masters by research. Prof Lee says the school is expecting to register 28 PhD students this year.

The school has 22 internal supervisors and nine external supervisors - six of whom are former staff members who have continued to supervise students.

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University says it has more than 20 faculty members qualified to supervise PhD research.

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**Source:** Business Day