

Short courses as an alternative to degree programmes

For a host of reasons, many of South Africa's school-leavers will be unable to pursue a tertiary education in 2015. So what other options are available for these individuals?

 By [Rob Paddock](#) 27 Jan 2015



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In 2014, the Department of Higher Education and Training released a list of the top 100 scarce skill occupations in South Africa for comment. On this list, the usual suspects such as engineers, accountants, health professionals and architects were listed. University entrance requirements for most of these programmes are very high, and places limited. If a student is able to make it onto one of these programmes it subsequently requires many years of undergraduate and postgraduate study to gain entry into the profession. All factors considered, it's not altogether surprising that there is such a deficit of these skills in South Africa.

However, there are a surprisingly large number of occupations on this list that don't require years of study to enter the profession. Included in the list are professions such as Occupational Health and Safety Practitioners, Business Analysts, Project Managers, Software Developers, Supply Chain Managers, Computer Network Technicians and many more. To be clear, it's not that these professions don't require a high level of skill and competence to meet the needs of employers, but rather that they don't require years of study just to get a foot in the door to start climbing the proverbial ladder.

For individuals who are currently trying to decide what to study in order to prepare themselves for the employment market, it becomes clear that they don't necessarily have to choose a path that requires many years of study to gain the skills and knowledge that are desperately in demand by employers. The cost of labour for most professions is largely determined by supply and demand, and if an individual chooses a profession that is in high demand by industry, with limited supply from the labour market, they can expect to earn a premium.

To add some complexity to this decision, for many of the individuals currently deciding which career path to pursue, financial constraints mean they can't take a few years "off" to study. If they're going to study, they'll have to work and study at the same time, which means that their studies need to fit in with their work schedule.

A viable alternative for those who aren't able to pursue a tertiary qualification

Our experience is that open enrolment short courses, especially when delivered in a flexible format that allows students to work and study simultaneously, may offer a solution to addressing the demand for these

scarce skills, and simultaneously offer a viable alternative for those who aren't able to pursue a tertiary qualification. Employers are calling for practical skills and experience built on sound theoretical framework and short courses provide an opportunity for learning activities to be designed around real-world situations foster relevant, concrete skills development.

While short courses are not a silver bullet that can solve all of the complex issues facing the education landscape in this country, at GetSmarter we've seen that if used effectively, short courses can have a pronounced impact on addressing some of the most critical challenges facing employers and employees alike. Recent feedback from our past students revealed that as a result of the skills they developed on our short courses, and the certificate they received from the University of Cape Town upon completion, they dramatically increased their employment and career advancement prospects. To be precise, when surveyed six months after completing one of our short courses, over 83% of our past students reported some form of career advancement. In terms of the demographics of this student group, less than 50% already possess a bachelor's or degree or higher.

Statistics indicate that there are approximately 5.2 million unemployed people in South Africa, and yet there are roughly 800,000 unfilled positions for scarce skills professions. Institutions like the University of Cape Town and GetSmarter are taking important steps towards rectifying this skills mismatch by designing short courses which focus on scarce skills subjects, and are designed in collaboration with industry professionals. By combining the best of industry practice with leading academic research, our students are receiving an education that sets them up for success in the workplace, and provides a viable alternative for those who are unable to access formal tertiary education after school.

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