

South Africa needs both private and public universities

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There has been a growing narrative of misinformation related to "private universities" within the context of the crisis in the public higher education sector, says Roy Douglas, CEO of ADVTECH Ltd, which owns the country's largest registered private higher education provider, The Independent Institute of Education.



The Independent Institute of Education (The IIE) already has in excess of 90 accredited qualifications including Bachelors, Honours and Masters degrees into which 33 000 students are enrolled this year.

Douglas says that although there is much talk about how "private universities" will mushroom and grow because of the crisis in the public sector, the country needs strong institutions in both the public and private sector.

"Our growth trajectory continues as before – we do not have significantly more interest being expressed due to the crisis in public higher education than in previous years and indeed we would be concerned if we did, as we do not believe that it is in anyone's interest for the private sector to be growing only off the back of real challenges in the public sector.

"We hope that the crisis in the Universities is resolved sooner rather than later as this instability in education serves no-one's interests."

It was also necessary to address the continued use of the term "private universities", he says.

"While the existing Higher Education Act and the proposed amendments do open the possibility for private higher education institutions to be called Universities, this is not an imminent reality," says Douglas.

"The criteria have not been defined and the Higher Education Minister, Dr Blade Nzimande, was also recently quoted as saying Government remains opposed to the wholesale development of private universities, because they pose a threat to the public education sector."

Douglas points out that many well established private higher education institutions – such as The Independent Institute of Education and its brands which include Varsity College, Rosebank College, Design School SA and Vega, have offered degrees to tens of thousands of students for more than a decade. And although the growth trend has not been inhibited by the ban on the use of the term University, private institutions would welcome an evening of the playing field, says Douglas.

"Public and private degrees are accredited and registered in exactly the same way against the same criteria by the same regulatory authorities," he says.

Furthermore, just as the growth of the sector has not been inhibited by the lack of access to the term "University", it will also not suddenly dramatically accelerate as a result of the crisis in public higher education.

"People make decisions about where to study after school for many reasons including, in the case of private higher education, the strong work readiness focus, and the different environment and individualised approach which is appealing to those seeking a different higher education experience.

"They are also however correctly cautious about moving away from the big names within the public higher education space,

and earning the trust of students is far more than a process of simply designing degrees and getting them accredited."

Douglas says that ADvTECH's approach in the higher education sector continues to show unprecedented success as evidenced through consistent growth in student numbers and graduates finding employment soon after graduation.

"However our growth is not premised on benefitting from the disruption on some public campuses. The key is to continue delivering value to students, their families and all other stakeholders by offering meaningful choices to students who know exactly what they want and where to get it.

"We are justifiably proud of what we have achieved in a regulatory environment that can be quite hostile and furthermore we are determined to continue to claim our space on merit alongside public higher education. Growth in our sector has nothing to do with exploiting the anxiety and tensions related to the crisis in the public sector."

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