Closing the AI Readiness Gap: Strategic Communication Education for Inclusive Graduate Employability

A qualitative study of AI competency, curriculum reform and inclusive graduate employability in South African strategic communication
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Why it matters

Core issue: AI adoption can widen, not close, employability inequality when curriculum, infrastructure and industry exposure are uneven.

- AI now shapes communication through audience analytics, automation, generative content and ethical decision-making.
- South African higher education remains unequal: some institutions expose students to AI, while others lack infrastructure, trained staff and formal modules.
- The result is a readiness gap that threatens inclusive graduate employability.

Research aim

To investigate the nature and extent of the AI readiness gap in South African strategic communication by comparing graduate, industry and academic perspectives.

Objectives

1. Mapthe AI/digital divide among strategic communication graduates.
2. Evaluate industry perceptions of graduate readiness for AI-driven roles. 3. Explore how academics are integrating AI-related skills into curricula.

Theoretical lens

Digital Divide
access + skills + use

Diffusion of Innovations uneven adoption

Global Capabilities
technology + ethics

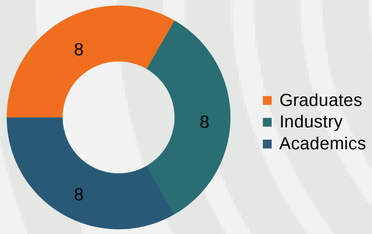
Poster argument: the gap is systemic, not a deficit of student motivation.

Methods

- Qualitative research design using semi-structuredinterviews.

- Purposive sample across three stakeholder groups.
- Interviews conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams.
- Reflexive thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke.
- AI tools supported coding comparisons, while the researcher retained interpretive authority.

Participant mix (n = 24)



8 graduates + 8 industry professionals + 8 academics = a 360-degree view of readiness.

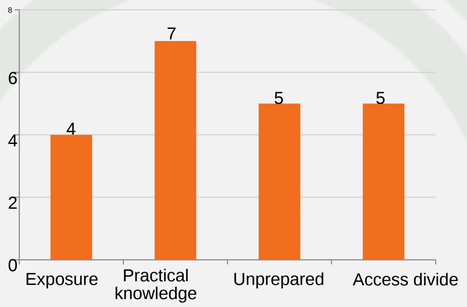
Analytical pathway

Transcripts
↓
Initial codes
↓
Themes
↓
Synthesis

Quality safeguards: consent, anonymisation, secure storage, member checking and triangulation across stakeholder groups.

Findings: Graduates

Theme frequency amonggraduates



Theme frequency counts indicate how many graduate participants mentioned each issue (maximum 8).

- AI exposure depended strongly on institutional context.
- Practical knowledge was the most frequent graduate gap.
- Many graduates relied on self-learning or internships to compensate for missing curriculum exposure.
- Digital content skills were stronger than AI analytics, automation or ethical AI use.

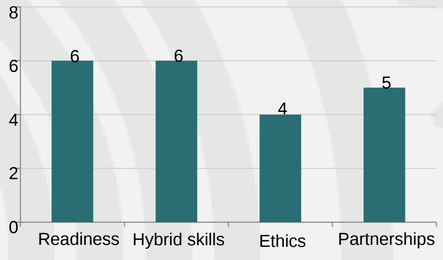
Graduate voice: "AI is the future, but our curriculum is stuck in the past." - GRAD05

Readiness against technological competencies
Data + analytics: low familiarity
Automation + AI tools: minimal direct training
Digital content: moderate basics, weak AI workflows Ethical technology use: rarely addressed
Strategic digital platforms: tactical, not strategic

Implication: unequal opportunity, not unequal ability, shapes AI readiness.

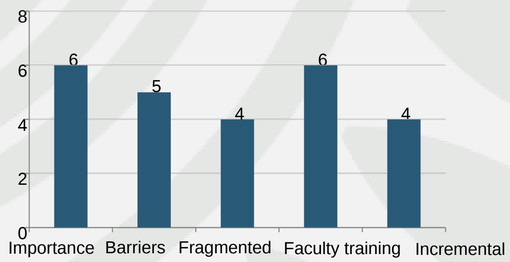
Findings: Industry + Academics

Industry theme frequency



- Employers reported basic digital literacy, but weak AI analytics, automation and strategic application.
- The desired graduate profile blends creativity, critical judgement and technological fluency. - Industry participants signalled willingness to co-create modules, guest lectures and internships.

Academic theme frequency



- Academics recognised AI as central to communication education.
- Integration remains ad hoc: guest lectures and optional workshops often substitute for formal pathways.
- Faculty readiness, funding and policy guidance are key constraints.

Synthesis: the readiness gap is produced by uneven infrastructure, outdated curricula and weakly institutionalised collaboration.

Closing the gap

Inclusive AI readiness model

1. National AI literacy standards
Common baseline for communication programmes
↓
2. Faculty upskilling
Training, tool access and AI pedagogy
↓
3. Inclusive infrastructure
Open labs, multilingual resources, regional hubs
↓
4. Industry-embedded learning
Live briefs, internships, guest teaching and ethics

Recommendations

- Embed AI across core strategic communication modules, not only optional workshops.
- Teach ethical judgement alongside technical AI skills.
- Prioritise funding for historically disadvantaged and rural institutions.
- Institutionalise university-industry partnerships through co-designed modules, internships and applied projects.

Conclusion

Inclusive AI readiness requires coordinated policy, curriculum innovation and partnership so graduate opportunity is not determined by institutional privilege.

Selected references
Bawa(2021);Bosch(2022); Braun & Clarke (2022); Calandro & Stork (2022); Fourie (2023); Global Alliance (2021); Mhlanga (2023); Moodley & Singh (2022); Van Dijk (2005).