

Positioning BRICS as a global voice on skills standards

By: Mapule Ncanywa, Chairperson of Skills, Applied Technology & Innovation Working Group in the SA Chapter of the BRICS Business Council

On June 16 this year, 25-year-old graduate Zola Nobhadula* stood at a busy Cape Town intersection holding a handwritten sign asking for work. He may not have been aware of it, but on this historic day in South African history, he was making a statement about a crisis that reaches far beyond the modest borders of his hometown in northern KwaZulu-Natal. Millions of people all over the world are in his position – with a 40% unemployment rate among those between the ages of 15 and 24, even though they only make up 18% of the world's population.

Despite his desperate situation on Youth Day, which marked the 50th anniversary of the Soweto youth uprisings, Lungelo is better off than millions of his peers. Globally, around 267 million young people (ages 15–24) are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) — a major underutilization of human capital. BRICS nations are home to the world's largest youth and emerging workforce. Together these countries account for a significant share of the global youth population and millions of new labour market entrants each year. BRICS Business Council has devised an urgent strategy to respond to the global youth employment emergency. At precisely the moment when artificial intelligence, green technologies, advanced manufacturing, and digital industries are creating unprecedented demand for new capabilities, employers across the world report persistent shortages of skilled workers. Businesses cannot find the people they need, while graduates cannot find the jobs they deserve. The disconnect lies in the bridge between education and employment. This is where the BRICS Skills, Applied Technology & Innovation Working Group (STIWG) believes the conversation must change. The future of work cannot be addressed country by country in isolation. Labour markets have become global, technologies spread across borders overnight, and industries increasingly rely on international value chains. Thus, the approach to skills must be equally connected and coordinated.

BRICS: A Global Voice on Skills Standards

The first priority is creating common standards that employers can trust. Today, qualifications often mean different things in different countries. This limits workforce mobility, complicates recruitment, and prevents talented people from pursuing opportunities beyond their own borders. Developing a comprehensive BRICS Skills Quality Framework would create shared benchmarks for technical and vocational education, engineering qualifications, competency-based assessments, and professional certifications. Such a framework would not replace national systems; it would make them more transparent, comparable, and globally recognized.

Second, we must transform apprenticeships from optional programmes into central pillars of economic development. Young people simply do not need more education. They need meaningful workplace experience while they are learning. Countries with strong apprenticeship ecosystems consistently demonstrate smoother transitions from education into employment because students develop practical competencies alongside theoretical knowledge. A coordinated BRICS Apprenticeship Cooperation Platform could dramatically expand these opportunities through joint industry programmes, cross-border exchanges, and shared best practices. Combined with emerging digital employment platforms powered by artificial intelligence, young professionals could access opportunities across BRICS economies while employers gain access to a much broader talent pool.

Third, we must redefine lifelong learning. Technological disruption means careers will increasingly involve continuous reskilling rather than a single qualification earned in early adulthood. Universities, technical colleges, and employers must become partners in offering flexible micro-credentials, digital certifications and industry-validated learning pathways that evolve as rapidly as technology itself.

Equally important is ensuring that innovation becomes inclusive. The green economy, artificial intelligence and digital transformation should not create a divide between those working in emerging industries and those employed in traditional sectors. Manufacturing workers, logistics specialists, artisans, and service professionals must all be supported to acquire new digital and green competencies without abandoning the expertise they have already built over decades.

Finally, we must give young people opportunities not only to compete for jobs but also to create them. BRICS has extraordinary potential to become a global ecosystem for applied technology and entrepreneurship. By connecting universities, research institutions, startups, venture capital, and established industries across member countries, we can accelerate the commercialization of innovation while creating entirely new employment opportunities. Skills competitions, technology challenges, and startup collaboration are not side projects; they are investments in future industries that do not yet exist.

Zola Nobhadula*s story raises important questions about why someone with talent, education and determination had nowhere else to stand. The answer lies not with individuals, but with institutions. Governments must modernize policy. Universities must align more closely with industry. Businesses must invest in apprenticeships and workforce development. International partnerships such as BRICS must create practical pathways that allow skills, knowledge, and opportunity to move as freely as ideas. The future will not be defined by the number of graduates we produce. It will be defined by how many of them are given the opportunity to build, innovate, and lead.

****Not his real name***

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