



# Challenges and opportunities in the context of South African Higher Education: Towards a research agenda

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## Abstract:

Higher education in South Africa has rapidly changed in the past eight years. The #Feesmustfall movement in 2016 has highlighted structural issues within the system, and some changes are already seen within higher education institutions (HEIs). HEIs such as universities and colleges have had to rapidly adapt to the new demands. However, evidence points to slow transformation and murmurs of unhappiness amongst students and the private sector. There is, however, an opportunity to outline the specific issues that need to be addressed by HEIs. The study identifies and outlines the major and important challenges faced in higher education. Furthermore, it proposes possible solutions and directions on how to track the progress of implementation to outline only the most pertinent issues from the extant literature. The purpose is to generate a research agenda for future studies on contemporary issues in higher education. This article utilizes a systematic literature review and thematic content analysis to identify contemporary issues and potential solutions in the South African higher education context that should be focused on. The overview landscape is vast, so the focus was on identifying critical issues. Multiple issues were identified from the systematic literature review. These issues were categorized into five distinct groups, namely, accessibility, support, quality assurance, transformation, and work readiness. Several practical solutions were found within these groups from the systematic literature review. These strategies could assist HEIs in focusing on those areas regarding resource constraints.

**Keywords:** Decolonisation, Disadvantaged Students, Higher Education, Transformation

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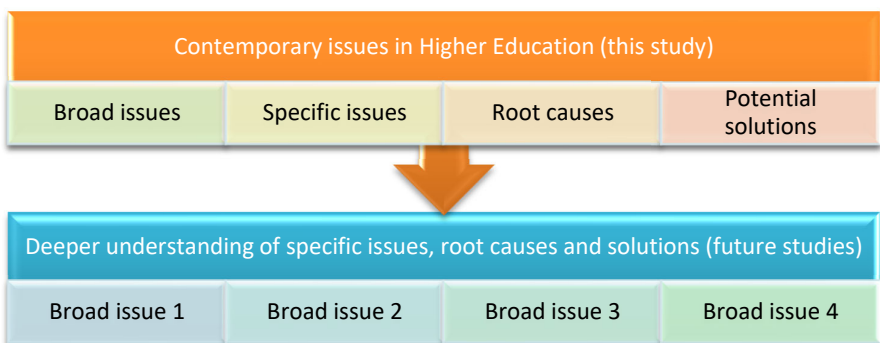
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## 1. Introduction

The advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994 has inherently promised to improve the lives of all South Africans, especially those from previously disadvantaged communities. In the context of higher education, this meant that students from all races would be incorporated at the same institution where previously they would have been segregated by the Apartheid policies from the previous regime. However, change has proven to be slower than expected over the last 30 years (Woldegiorgis, 2022). Higher education in South Africa faces a crisis as issues such as transformation, race, and culture at institutions are highlighted (Matthews & Tabensky, 2016). Gender inequality continues to plague higher education in South Africa. It prevents female students from gaining access and equal rights plague higher education in South Africa and prevents female students from gaining access and equal rights, especially in Engineering and Science, Engineering, Technology, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects (Eynon, 2017). Furthermore, transformation is considered a key challenge in South Africa in the post-apartheid era, mainly due to resistance from older academics and change in general (Pandor, 2018). Likely due to the aforementioned challenges, students in South Africa may be at substantial risk of dropout and academic failure (Samuel & Munro, 2015). In addition, HEIs suffer from low participation and scant enrollment rates in specific demographic categories and declining government funding (Case, 2016). Research outputs at South African HEIs have increased over the last few years. However, these HEIs are still ranked poorly compared to other developing countries such as India, Brazil, and China (Odhiambo & Ntenga, 2015). Furthermore, the industry is complaining about a lack of skilled graduates entering the job market (Ngwane, 2016). It is evident that issues in higher education in South Africa resemble a broad spectrum, and it may be important for institutions to focus on the most important issues.

South African HEIs consist of the larger public institutions and the smaller private institutions with an increased focus on profits. Higher education policies may differ fundamentally across private and public institutions due to working in isolation (Mariaye & Samue, 2019). Globalization has recently affected the economy and industries and, as a result, has become a key consideration for higher education in

South Africa. Subsequently, globalization has created new and different challenges for HEIs (Steynberg, Grundling, Liu & Li, 2019). Before the advent of democracy, HEIs in South Africa enforced colonial education (from European origin) in their curricula, which meant that students from different cultural backgrounds sometimes had little relevance in their contexts. As a result, achieving equality using a colonial higher education system in South Africa has proven to be a challenge in a diverse country (Tshimpaka, 2018). In addition, it was also found that culture in an organization can influence the achievement of performance goals (Wiseman et al., 2016). This may cause the high dropout rates observed at HEIs in South Africa. The causes of issues and challenges in higher education may have to be identified to establish a plan of action and control procedures. The National Development Plan (NDP) attempts to address the issues from the governmental perspective, which is aligned with HEIs (Department: Statistics South Africa, 2017). However, it may be necessary only to identify those specific issues, their root causes, solutions, and measurement tools. Therefore, this study's primary objective is to establish a broad research agenda for future studies to understand how the most important problems in contemporary higher education can be resolved and monitored. Therefore, this paper does not provide an exhaustive list of issues, known causes, and possible solutions but rather guides future researchers toward a deeper understanding of the broad issues. The conceptual framework and greater purpose of this study are illustrated in Figure 1.



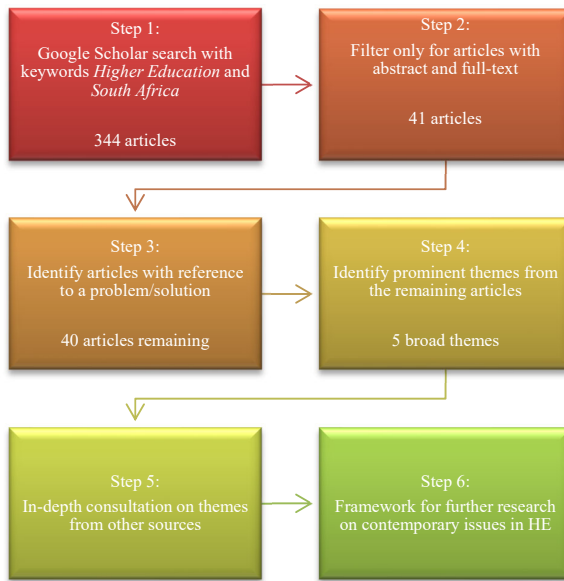
**Fig. 1: Conceptual framework**

**Source: Authors' construct**

## 2. Research methods and design

In the previous section, it was established that in South Africa, HEIs are currently facing several different challenges. In this ever-changing world, inevitably, there will always be new challenges that will test the resolve of institutions in the public and the private sector. Creating a broad framework for these institutions to focus on would require a focus on the different kinds of problems presented. Furthermore, it is crucial for institutions to identify the source of the problem and to search for possible solutions. A systematic literature review established the most important critical issues in higher education.

For the first step, a search was conducted on Google Scholar for articles using the keywords *Higher Education* and *South Africa* within the title for papers published from 2019 to 2023 (five years). A total number of 344 articles were presented in Google Scholar and subsequently imported into Mendeley. In the second step, only publications with an abstract and full text were kept in the Mendeley database for review. In addition, all duplicates were removed, after which a total number of 41 publications remained. In the third step, only publications that spoke about a problem and/or a solution to a problem were included, concluding with a total number of 40 articles remaining. In the fourth step, the remaining 40 articles were reviewed to identify prominent (broad) themes from the extant literature. Five themes were identified (detailed in the next section). The fifth step, involved consultation with other sources outside of the remaining 40 articles. The sixth and final step presents the framework for further research on contemporary issues in HE. Figure 2 below depicts the approach for conducting the systematic literature review.



**Fig. 2: Approach for systematic literature review**

**Source: Authors’ construct**

It was established from the remaining 40 publications using content analysis that the issues highlighted since 2019 could be broadly categorized into five different groups (refer to Figure 3). Transformation is the dominant theme arising from the systematic literature review with 16 articles focusing on these issues. The remaining themes included accessibility challenges, student support, quality assurance, and work readiness. These themes talk about the major difficulties HEIs in South Africa deal with on an ongoing basis.



**Fig. 3: Challenges in higher education**

**Source: Authors’ construct**

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Challenges relating to the accessibility of higher education

Access to higher education remains a challenge in South Africa. It was found that limited finances, transport, and housing issues, no parental support, and unplanned motherhood are contributors to low enrolment rates in HEIS (Matsolo, Ningpuanyeh & Susuman, 2018). Marginalized groups, such as foreigners aspiring to higher education, may be marginalized and excluded in degrees with limited spaces due to a preference for local talent (Mkwanzani & Wilson-Strydom, 2019). Furthermore, students with disabilities are still finding it challenging to access HEIs in South Africa despite the existence of appropriate policies (Dalton et al. 2019). A national movement demanding free education was mobilized across HEIs in 2015. The issues raised were around rising student debt, limited state funding, and increasing student fees (De Jager & Baard, 2019). This movement resulted in no fee increases for 2016 and comprehensive subsidies for students from poor backgrounds (Bitzer & De Jager 2018). Claims that free education is not necessary and viable are disputed. It was found that only 18% of students come from households that can be considered affluent and that insufficient state funding results in 80% of students requiring third-party funding (Nana, 2017). It is suggested that neo-liberalism in institutions' policies could be the source of the challenges students face in accessing higher education (Pennigton et al., 2017). Adopting these capitalistic policies within higher education may result in a loss of focus on the intended greater good of society (Mariaye & Samue, 2019).

A large majority of HEIs in South Africa only provide a teaching and learning environment based on English. This is a challenge for students who did not grow up with sufficient exposure to English as a communication language (Hibbert & Van Der Walt, 2014). To ensure the inclusivity of students from multicultural backgrounds, it is necessary to consider using a dual or multi-language policy. This is demonstrated in the few HEIs that follow this protocol (Hibbert & Van Der Walt, 2014). Minority groups, such as Islamic students, do not always have access to traditional Islamic value education at traditional HEIs and have to attend specific

Islamic institutions (Yasien Mohamed, 2021). Black females in South Africa, in particular, have historically been discriminated against in higher education enrolments (Stander, 2016). Furthermore, there may be a challenge for disabled students to access higher education on an international basis (du Toit, 2018). Even amongst students, it is deemed uneconomical to provide free education using a blanket approach due to uncontrolled state funding, and this approach would likely cripple the economy (De Jager & Baard, 2019). Implementing policies to facilitate free education has been hampered by power-driven individuals who conflicted with opponents (Molokwane, 2019). It may be that HEIs may need to adapt the policies to a stance that is more nationalistic or socialistic (Pennigton et al., 2017). The progress of increasing inclusivity at South African HEIs has also been slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Menon & Motala, 2022). To facilitate the challenges of disabled students' access to higher education internationally, a framework has been developed where special units are created to recruit disabled students from abroad and to ensure disabled students find opportunities abroad. The framework incorporates an international student support coordinator (ISSC), an international relations office (IRO), disability rights unit, and support from academic and non-academic units (Du Toit, 2018). A positive from this theme is that the emphasis on inclusivity appears to have increased, but much work is still needed.

### **3.2 Limited support for students with disadvantages**

Several issues have recently gained prominence relating to the limited support of students in disadvantaged positions compared to their more fortunate peers. It has become important for HEIs to ensure optimum customer satisfaction by implementing efficient support structures in the organization (De Jager & Jan, 2015). Increased access to higher education may affect the quality of support for students within the system, which affects the throughput of students (Manik, 2017). On-time graduation depends to a large extent on continued financial aid, income from families, and attributes such as proficiency in English and the quality of high school education (Carpenter & Roos, 2020). This means that students gain access to an HEI; there is no guarantee that continued support will be forthcoming.

There is anecdotal evidence that certain students lack food supply and adequate accommodation (Adeniyi, Mirugi-Mukundi & Nthoiwa, 2018). Foreign students may be hampered by a lack of support and marginalization in higher education in South Africa (Naidoo, 2018). It was found that the marking of assessments is often conducted without making comments or constructive feedback to the students (Ngcobo, 2015). Furthermore, with the advent of Learning Management Systems (LMS), students are expected to access online learning regularly. It was found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often do not have the prerequisite skills to fully utilize learning management systems (LMS), which hampers their academic progress (Matarirano et al., 2021). To address the issue of food and accommodation, it has been suggested that private stakeholders should be in the best position to address shortages in these areas (Adeniyi et al., 2018). It may be in the best interest of students for the relevant support departments to engage with these external stakeholders to find solutions to these shortages. Conversely, it may be in the best interest of HEIs to emphasize compassion in their policies and general behaviour (Ramrathan, 2017).

Although adopting appropriate policies is normal in South African HEIs, it is not certain if sufficient support is available to disadvantaged students such as physically challenged individuals (Dalton et al., 2019). Remote availability of academic and library services during challenging periods such as the COVID-19 era and recess will impact student success (Dube & Jacobs, 2023). Furthermore, community engagement is a driver to extend student support beyond the campus (Motsabi & Silinda, 2020). A lack of focus on support networks for students may result in a loss of talent to industry for many disadvantaged students.

### **3.3 Inconsistency in Quality Assurance**

The importance of quality assurance has recently been emphasized in extant literature. Due to globalization and the changing nature of the economy, HEIs in South Africa have seen increased demand, which necessitates robust quality assurance (Stander &



Herman, 2017). Robust and rigorous academic programs are not just meant for the individual student but in the interest of the greater good (Matsiliza et al., 2022). Quality assurance is seen as a private commodity at HEIs in South Africa rather than available for public scrutiny (Dipitso, 2022). In establishing a consistent delivery of knowledge it may be important to define the concept of knowledge (Maistry & Lortan 2017). There is a difference in the interpretation of what knowledge entails, why preference may be given to certain kinds of knowledge, and who the target market would be for this knowledge. It is argued that individuals are only developed in institutions in a target-based environment (Baijnath, 2018). Although technology is promoted to assist with the quality of teaching and learning, it is sometimes rejected by some teachers who find it disruptive (Chizwina & Mhakure, 2018).

It has been suggested that a phased approach should be used to develop a quality assurance framework for HEIs (Dirkse van Schalkwyk & Steenkamp 2019). The authors divided this approach into two phases: a qualitative phase involving management and a quantitative phase involving the students and academics. Critical and reflective frameworks have been proposed to develop students by engaging them in deeper thinking and a sense of belonging (Harrop-Allin, 2017). In ensuring a sustainable quality of teaching and learning, it may be important for support departments to uphold the same high and consistent standards. It was found that lean manufacturing principles, as typically applied in manufacturing organizations, can assist HEIs in eliminating waste and improving the quality of delivery (Kruger, 2015). Another innovation that was identified to improve the quality of assessment has been the advent of e-moderation, which assists with moderating examination scripts (Van Staden, 2017). However, according to the author, adoption has been slow. Similarly, using smartphones to deliver teaching and learning material is effective and innovative. However, there are practical challenges in using technology, such as connectivity issues and perceptions that are not “the real thing” (Willemsse, Jooste & Bozalek, 2019).

### **3.4 Slow progression in the transformation of higher education**

Academic freedom enables students and lecturers to pursue and teach knowledge

without restrictions from the government or other entities (Cherry, 2014). Responsible pedagogy has been highlighted as important to ensure ethical-political elements are incorporated into teaching and learning (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017). Institutional policy often reflects the orientation of the government, which could negatively affect the intended aim of the HEI (Cross, 2015). The author argues that government interference has grown since 1994, creating new challenges for HEIs. Despite these measures, postgraduate representation for black females has not evolved as expected since 1994 (Meela et al., 2021). There is a need for a framework that is centralized and considers the inequality that remains in part as a legacy from the past (Essop, 2020). The drive to fully decolonize HEIs in South Africa has lost impetus since the #Feesmustfall movement in 2016, and there appears to be hesitance to implement it despite the existence of appropriate policies. Furthermore, the primary stumbling block appears to be the reluctance to change from the Eurocentric curriculums currently dominating all disciplines (Govender & Naidoo, 2023). It is argued that failure to convert to an Africanised curriculum undermines local intellectualism and culture (Lebelo, Moloi & Chitumwa, 2021). Conversely, with the introduction of the Policy Framework for Internalisation, there is a growing realization that South African HEIs need local institutions to transform into international-orientated educational structures (Jooste & Hagenmeier, 2022).

It is recommended that separate transformation departments be created to ensure issues such as decolonization and adoption of e-learning are addressed and that progress is monitored continuously. In particular, the lack of statistical literacy is seen as a shortcoming in democratic South Africa (Krishnannair & Krishnannair, 2022). Gaps in digital technology at higher institutions remain high in South Africa and must be closed to align with international standards (Mhlanga et al., 2022). Students with physical challenges are not sufficiently highlighted in the transformation dialogue to ensure all talent is fostered (Dalton et al., 2019). It is suggested that changing from a master-apprentice model to a mentor model where the hierarchical structure is transformed into a non-hierarchical structure has been proposed for teaching and supervision models (Dhunpath, Matisonn & Samuel, 2018). To ensure that ethical-political elements are incorporated

into teaching and learning, it is important to engage with students (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017). The decolonization of the curriculum to include African Indigenous Knowledge (AIK) systems, a position in South Africa, continues to be seen as a key target for South African HEIs (Higgs, 2016). It is argued that transformation should start at the secondary level, where levels of parent involvement, academic rigour, and school connectedness may not be on the level of rural schools as in more affluent secondary schools (Lawrence & Nkoane, 2020). In the extant literature, it is suggested that institutional policies should take cognizance of the cultural history of students from rural areas (Mgqwashu et al., 2020). Based on extant literature, opportunities exist for addressing social injustice in higher education, but they still need to be addressed (Lawrence & Maphalala, 2021).

### **3.5 Disconnect between higher education and industry requirements**

Graduate unemployment is rising in South Africa although it remains relatively low compared to non-graduate employment (Van Broekhuizen, 2016). It is argued that higher education is an important mechanism in providing skilled labour to industries in South Africa (Ashwin & Case, 2018). Professionals must receive appropriate training in their respective fields before starting their careers. Students must be equipped with the appropriate attributes to ensure work readiness (Chauke 2021). Medical students have a high rate of providing incorrect medication doses during training which highlights the importance of thorough training (Abusaksaka et al., 2020). A study at a private HEI has found that students perceive the curriculum to have limited benefits for employability (Rukuni, 2018). It was found that in the field of the building environment, students were often inadequately prepared for the real-life demands of the professions (Akinshipe & Aigbavboa, 2018). In the hospitality industry, it was noted that South African higher education curricula do not equip students with the 127 required competencies (Moolman & Wilkinson, 2015). Furthermore, despite a robust training program, learners are sometimes discouraged by unprofessional treatment during practical training (Julie et al., 2019).

The public good and what it entails may need to be redefined in the current context to allow for better alignment between HEIs and industry (Case, 2016). Interns are

often trained with little consideration for the education received at HEIs in South Africa (Malapane & Mukonza, 2023). It was found that work-integrated learning can be an effective tool to ensure the employability of graduates (Ngwane, 2016). Developing soft skills during studies is considered important for later in the workplace but may not occur in the manner expected (Taylor, 2019). Furthermore, the development of entrepreneurial skills is becoming more important in the context of higher education (Walter & Zondo, 2016). It can potentially develop the students into innovative thinkers (Zondo, 2017).

#### **4. Discussion**

HEIs in South Africa have seen many challenges over the last few years. As with the rest of the world, higher education is constantly expected to transform to contribute to society's greater good. Many challenges identified in extant literature impact HEIs, students, and industry. Many talented students in South Africa may struggle to obtain admission to HEIs due to a lack of funding. The "missing middle" has been identified as problematic since they may have even less access to funding, and there may not be sufficient funding even if they come from the middle class. The quest for free education in 2016 has highlighted these struggles endured by many students. Literature has debated the feasibility of free education, but the solution may be in plain sight. The government has been rocked in the last few years, with billions of Rands laid to waste and every stakeholder held accountable. Addressing issues of governance of state finances may be the key to free education. Not only is there a challenge with financing higher education, but the English language medium has proven to be preferred by many institutions. Although English is a common language across most societies and internationally, it would be in the student's best interest to have the option to complete their studies in their preferred language since there may be no opportunity to improve the use of English to the required standard. Other issues about accessibility relate to the acceptance and inclusion of disabled and international students. It was found that these students often struggle with getting into the higher education system due to a lack of structures to specifically cater to these people. Special departments must welcome these students into the system and support them with the special needs that may be

required. The support of students within the system is important to ensure that these students can perform to the best of their abilities. Shortages of food and accommodation must be addressed, and a student should have the opportunity to see a specialized housing department or support department to voice their concerns and challenges.

It is proposed that HEIs align their curriculum with professional bodies and industry to ensure that the industry employs the expected competencies. A target-based approach across all HEIs in South Africa that constantly develops the student appears to be critical to ensure the quality of delivery and consistency throughout the country. Adopting a culture that thrives on delivering teaching and learning cannot be ignored. An enthusiastic teacher may very well be a good teacher. Finally, the ultimate goal is to develop and deliver a student to the workplace who can add genuine value to society and industry. There needs to be constant dialogue between industry and higher education to synchronize these efforts and ensure a significant contribution to the greater good.

## **5. Conclusion**

It is important for h HEIs in South Africa to accept the contemporary issues highlighted in extant literature. Awareness of the challenges within HEIs has increased since the #Feesmustfall movement in 2016. The five main categories, as identified in this paper, cover the majority of challenges raised. Not only is it important to identify these challenges, but solutions must be sought, implemented, and monitored continuously. The first category covers the challenges relating to the accessibility of students in HEIs. It was found that entry into HEIs may be difficult for a large number of candidates. The second challenge deals with issues of support for registered students. The third challenge outlines the issues with quality assurance of the curriculum. The fourth challenge speaks to the slow transformation experienced in post-democratic South Africa. The fifth, and final challenge deals with aspects relating to the workplace readiness of post-graduate students. Furthermore, specific problems (within the five broad categories), were identified during the study. In addition, root causes and high-

level solutions were proposed. The issues, root causes, and solutions are not exhaustive by any means, and therefore further investigation would be required to establish strategies to resolve these issues. This study, therefore, offers a platform for further research on contemporary issues in HEIs in South Africa. There is hope that higher education in South Africa can rise and become world-class, relevant, and progressive as it ought to be.

## **6. Recommendations and suggestions for future research**

It is recommended that future research focus on the importance of these issues in the different categories of higher education institutions, such as private, public, and college. Specific studies, relating to each of the five broad categories of contemporary challenges should be conducted to unearth all the potential issues, their root causes, and solutions to specific problems. It is suggested that empirical studies of a qualitative nature be used for this purpose. This empirical study should be conducted to assess the perceptions of students and academics on these issues. Furthermore, it is proposed that HEIs use the findings from this study and further studies to review their policies and consider the aspects within their strategic frameworks.

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