



A Systematic Review of Academic Exclusion in Higher Education Institutions in South Africa: Causes, Consequences, and Remedial Measures

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Abstract. Addressing academic exclusion in South African higher education institutions requires a multifaceted approach, given the complex interplay of race, gender, socio-economic status, and ability. This study underscores the importance of intersectional research in fully understanding these nuanced challenges. A systematic review, following PRISMA guidelines, was conducted to identify patterns and causes of academic exclusion. Peer-reviewed journals from ScienceDirect, Scopus, and Google Scholar were used, resulting in the inclusion of 31 relevant articles. The review process involved a rigorous search strategy, data collection, and evaluation, summarizing research on the causes, consequences, and remedial measures of academic exclusion. An initial search yielded 463 articles, of which 265 were removed due to duplication. After screening 198 abstracts, 167 papers were excluded for not meeting the study's objectives. The final 31 articles were thoroughly analyzed. The study highlights that empowering student through active participation in decision-making and advocating for their representation is critical to creating an inclusive educational environment. Prioritizing student voices allows institutions to develop responsive, student-centric policies. Collaboration with the community and government enhances support networks and ensures equitable resource allocation. A comprehensive strategy combining intersectional research, student advocacy, and collaborative efforts offers promising solutions to mitigate academic exclusion. Adopting these methods can help South African higher education institutions foster inclusivity and transform the educational landscape, ultimately benefiting all students and advancing broader societal goals. Policymakers must implement affirmative, flexible, and context-specific policies to address structural inequalities and remove financial barriers. Institutional leaders should prioritize inclusive curriculum development and equitable resource allocation for marginalized students. Continuous assessment and multi-stakeholder collaboration are essential to ensuring effective interventions and holistic student support.

Keywords: Equity, Exclusion, Higher Education, Inclusivity, Transformation

1. Introduction

In the realm of higher education, the issue of academic exclusion has emerged as a significant concern, particularly in South Africa. Marginalized students, including those from diverse racial, gender and socio-economic backgrounds, often encounter

systemic barriers that impede their academic success (Hazel, Ngirande, & Khashane, 2024). This study aims to delve into the multifaceted nature of academic exclusion and explore the interconnectedness of various factors contributing to this phenomenon. Academic exclusion is not a singular issue but is influenced by an intricate web of social, economic, and cultural dynamics (Mtshweni, 2024). Understanding these complexities is paramount in developing effective strategies to address academic exclusion (Kang'ethe & Muhuro, 2014). Through interdisciplinary research and analysis, examining the intersectionality of these factors provides a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by different student populations.

Higher education institutions play a crucial role in facilitating a supportive and inclusive environment (Mashwama & Dywili, 2023). Beyond academic curricula, institutions are responsible for providing holistic support to students, ensuring that their diverse needs are met. This involves resource allocation, representation, and advocacy for marginalized students within the institutional framework (Hazel, Ngirande, & Khashane, 2024). Collaboration between higher education institutions, the community, and government entities is essential in creating a comprehensive support network for marginalized students (Bokana, 2010). Community engagement and outreach, advocacy for equitable policies, and targeted resource allocation are key components in fostering an educational landscape that uplifts and supports all students (Ramohai, 2014).

Consequently, academic exclusion impacts not only individual students who are unable to complete their studies but also has broader societal implications (Hazel, Ngirande & Khashane, 2024). It perpetuates cycles of poverty and inequality, widens the labour market skills gap, and hinders the country's overall development. Therefore, addressing academic exclusion is crucial for building a more equitable and prosperous future for South Africans. Moreover, by embracing a multifaceted approach spanning from the institutional, community, and governmental levels, South African higher education institutions can endeavour to create an inclusive and supportive educational environment for all students.

This systematic literature review (SLR) aims to provide comprehensive information on understanding academic exclusion in higher institutions, causes, consequences and remedial measures. It consolidates a significant volume of information

from various articles, contributing to the understanding of the global context and encouraging further research and applications in this area. This review aims to increase interest in research and applications, providing insights into sustainable education with technological and economic benefits. The paper systematically examines and assesses the current landscape of inclusive practices in higher education facing academic exclusion, aiming to identify effective strategies, challenges, and opportunities. The study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of existing inclusive initiatives for students facing academic exclusion and recommendations for advancing inclusive practices to promote equal opportunities and accessibility within the higher education sector.

2. Understanding Academic Exclusion in Higher Education

Student academic exclusion in South African higher education institutions is a complex issue rooted in historical inequalities, leading to persistent challenges like inadequate secondary-level preparation, financial constraints, and limited support services for disadvantaged students (Munyoro & Dube, 2020). Addressing this requires a comprehensive approach targeting systemic issues and providing individual support through initiatives like financial aid programs, academic support services, mentorship, and curriculum reforms (Papier, 2010). Understanding the multifaceted nature of academic exclusion and implementing holistic solutions can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment, contributing to the country's social and economic development (Dhunpath & Subbaye, 2018). However, it is essential to consider the practical implications of implementing broad remedial measures (Fataar, 2018). Some argue that targeted interventions may strain limited resources and suggest allocating resources to overall educational quality enhancement instead (Kang'ethe, 2016). There is concern that an excessive focus on remedial measures may compromise academic standards, potentially devaluing qualifications and impacting the competitiveness of South African credentials globally (Lumby, 2000). Additionally, resistance from faculty and administrators to changes such as mentorship programs and curriculum reforms may create divisions within the academic community, posing challenges to successful implementation (Nel., 2014). While addressing academic

exclusion is crucial, it is vital to carefully consider the potential repercussions of proposed measures and ensure alignment with institutional goals (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015). Finding a balance between inclusivity and maintaining academic standards is essential for the long-term success of the education system.

3. The South African Higher Education Landscape

To fully grasp the extent of academic exclusion in South African higher education institutions, it is crucial to explore the complexities of the country's education system (Munyoro & Dube, 2020). South Africa's higher education sector includes a diverse range of institutions, each facing unique challenges and contributing differently to the nation's academic and social landscape (Collins & Gillespie, 1993). The interplay of historical, socio-economic, and political factors, particularly the legacy of apartheid with its racial segregation and systemic discrimination, has significantly shaped the current state of higher education (Munyoro & Dube, 2020). This historical context is essential for understanding the persistent disparities affecting students today, especially those from marginalized communities. The variety of higher education institutions in South Africa, from research-intensive universities to technical and vocational education and training colleges, creates a complex environment where academic exclusion manifests in different ways (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015). This exclusion involves not only access to education but also the quality, relevance, and inclusivity of the learning experiences offered (Badat, 1999). Additionally, concerns about the global competitiveness of South African qualifications and the alignment of the curriculum with evolving societal and economic needs are central to the higher education landscape (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015). Balancing the pursuit of excellence and academic rigor with the need to foster equity and diversity is a significant challenge for institutions aiming to address academic exclusion effectively (Ellis & Steyn, 2014). Crafting tailored and sustainable remedial measures requires an understanding of the intricacies of the South African higher education landscape. Progress in mitigating entrenched barriers to academic inclusion and success can only be achieved by acknowledging the diverse contexts, stakeholders, and interests within this landscape (Munyoro & Dube, 2020). It becomes clear that a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing academic exclusion is

inadequate. Instead, a nuanced, context-specific strategy that considers the unique dynamics of each institution is essential for fostering a more inclusive and responsive higher education sector (Badat, 1999).

In the realm of higher education, academic exclusion remains a critical challenge, particularly for marginalized students in South Africa. These students, often from diverse racial, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds, face systemic barriers that hinder their academic progress and success (Hazel, Ngirande, & Khashane, 2024). This study aims to explore the interplay of socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional factors contributing to academic exclusion and propose sustainable strategies to address these barriers.

4. Research Question

How do socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional factors contribute to academic exclusion among marginalized students in South African higher education institutions, and what strategies can effectively address these barriers?

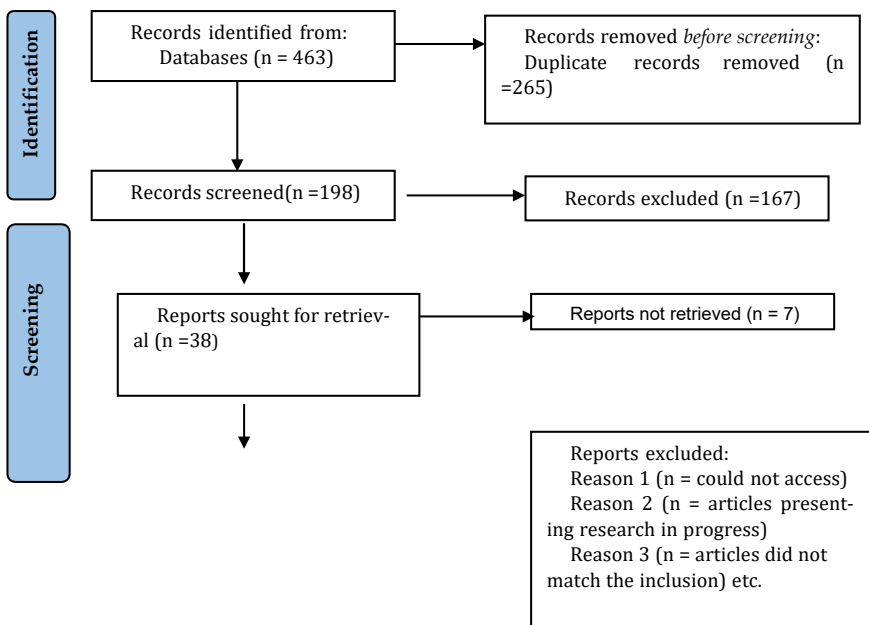
5. Hypothesis

Socioeconomic disadvantages, cultural barriers, and inadequate institutional support significantly contribute to academic exclusion among marginalized students in South African higher education. The implementation of tailored support services, inclusive recruitment policies, and culturally responsive teaching practices will mitigate these barriers, improving retention rates and academic success among marginalized student populations.

6. Methodology

The research involved a systematic review using a qualitative approach aligned with the PRISMA guidelines. The study aimed to identify patterns of academic exclusion in South African higher education institutions by integrating various studies. Sources included journals, with articles sourced from Science Direct, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The objectives were to identify, classify, and summarize research on the causes, consequences, and remedial measures of student academic exclusion. The search strategy resulted in 31 peer-reviewed papers used for analysis. Following the

PRISMA checklist by Page et al. (2020), an extensive search was conducted on Scopus, Google Scholar, and Elsevier (ScienceDirect) using terms like "higher education," "academic," "exclusion," and "students." The initial search yielded 463 articles, with 265 removed due to duplication. After screening 198 abstracts, 167 papers were excluded for not addressing the study's objective. Ultimately, 31 articles were analyzed and included in the study, with details presented in Table 1 and figure 5. Data collection involved recording article details, authors' affiliations, journal names, and publication years in an Excel spreadsheet. Two reviewers assessed the eligibility of the 31 retrieved articles, resolving disagreements through consensus or consulting a third reviewer. Using predefined keywords and refining the checklist based on a preliminary trial, the study evaluated related literature. The checklist was streamlined to 18 key points to suit the educational domain. Data extraction was led by one author and cross-validated by another, with discrepancies resolved through dialogue. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were set based on PRISMA recommendations, excluding non-research articles, works in progress, and those not meeting the inclusion criteria. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English, with Google Scholar and Scopus as the primary databases used. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria are outlined in Figure 1.



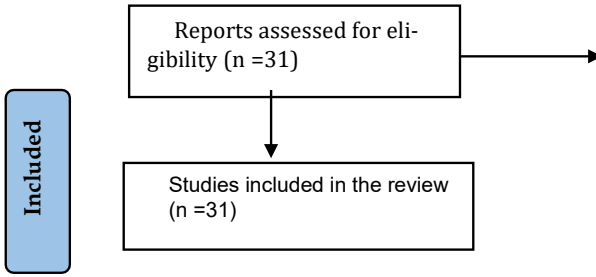


Figure 1: The PRISMA diagram

7. Findings

This section presents the findings derived from the comprehensive literature review. The discussion delves into understanding academic exclusion. The search encompassed various databases using the previously described keywords. Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA diagram, visually representing the article selection process. The selected articles were scrutinized for their general characteristics, and data pertaining to understanding the academic exclusion of students were systematically extracted. Considering all the criteria employed in the Systematic Review of Literature (SRL), the study identified the evolution of studies published in this area from 1990 to 2024. Figure 2 depicts the number of documents published per year during this period. Notably, there is a discernible upward trend in the quantity of published papers over time. A particularly noteworthy surge is observed between 2014 and 2023, underscoring a heightened and growing interest in the topic. This surge in publications suggests an increasing recognition of the importance of addressing students' academic exclusion. The analysis of articles from 1990 to 2024 highlights several important trends. Early studies often focused on the legacy of apartheid and its impact on educational access and equity. Over time, the focus expanded to include various dimensions of academic exclusion, such as financial barriers, institutional culture, and support services. The increasing volume of research in recent years reflects a growing awareness of these multifaceted issues and a commitment to finding comprehensive solutions.

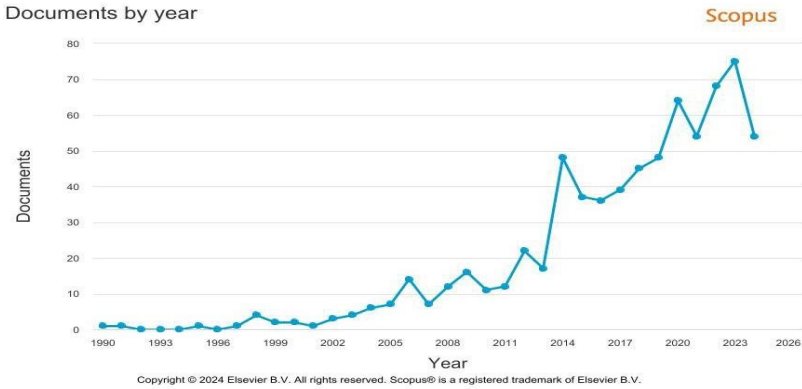


Figure 2: Document published per year

Figure 3 provides a detailed breakdown of the publications from various South African higher education institutions that contributed to the reviewed articles on academic exclusion. The University of South Africa emerged as the predominant contributor, with 84 articles, showcasing substantial research output. The University of Johannesburg followed with 63 documents, while the University of KwaZulu-Natal produced 56 articles. The University of Pretoria published 54 articles, North-West University 53 articles, the University of Cape Town 41 articles, the University of the Free State 38 articles, and both Stellenbosch University and the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg published 37 articles each. This distribution highlights the active engagement of these institutions in researching academic exclusion, reflecting their commitment to understanding and addressing this critical issue. The University of South Africa's leading role in the number of publications emphasizes its significant contribution to the field. This prominence suggests a robust research culture and a focus on inclusivity and equity within its academic community. The contributions from other universities indicate a widespread recognition of the importance of this topic across the country.

The importance of this distribution lies in its illustration of the collaborative effort within the South African higher education landscape to tackle academic exclusion. The varied yet concentrated research efforts across multiple institutions suggest a comprehensive approach to understanding and mitigating the barriers faced by stu-

dents. By analyzing the research outputs from these institutions, stakeholders can gain insights into different strategies and interventions being employed, promoting the sharing of best practices and fostering a more unified response to academic exclusion. Moreover, the significant number of publications from multiple universities underscores the global nature of research on this subject. It indicates that academic exclusion is not an isolated issue but a topic of international relevance, with institutions around the world contributing to the discourse. This global perspective enhances the understanding of academic exclusion, allowing for a more nuanced and effective approach to creating inclusive educational environments.

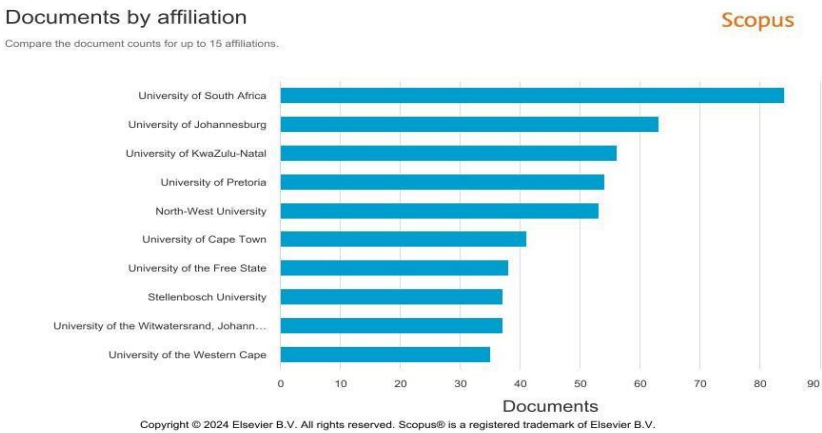


Figure 3: Documents per SA Institution

Figure 4 elucidates the bibliometric connectivity of keywords within the articles, showcasing the interrelation of concepts across different sources and countries. This visualization offers valuable insights into the thematic coherence and collaborative trends in research on the academic exclusion of students. The network of keywords demonstrates the interconnectedness of various research themes, reflecting global collaborative efforts and a shared focus among researchers. The bibliometric analysis highlights how specific concepts are linked, illustrating the multidisciplinary nature of academic exclusion research. For instance, keywords related to financial constraints, institutional support, and inclusivity frequently appear together, indicating that these themes are often explored in tandem to address the multifaceted challenges faced by

tion of the academic exclusion of students, going beyond merely highlighting highly cited documents. By including a wide range of articles, the review offers a nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to academic exclusion and the various approaches proposed to address this issue. Table 1 categorizes the articles by their publication period, code and year. This table shows case the articles that were used for the SRL. Figure 5 visually represents the distribution of articles across different journals, emphasizing the diversity of sources that have contributed to the discussion. This diversity indicates a wide-ranging interest in the topic across various academic fields, suggesting that academic exclusion is a multifaceted issue that intersects with numerous disciplines. The visual representation also makes it easier to identify which journals have been particularly active in publishing research on academic exclusion, providing a reference point for future researchers seeking relevant literature.

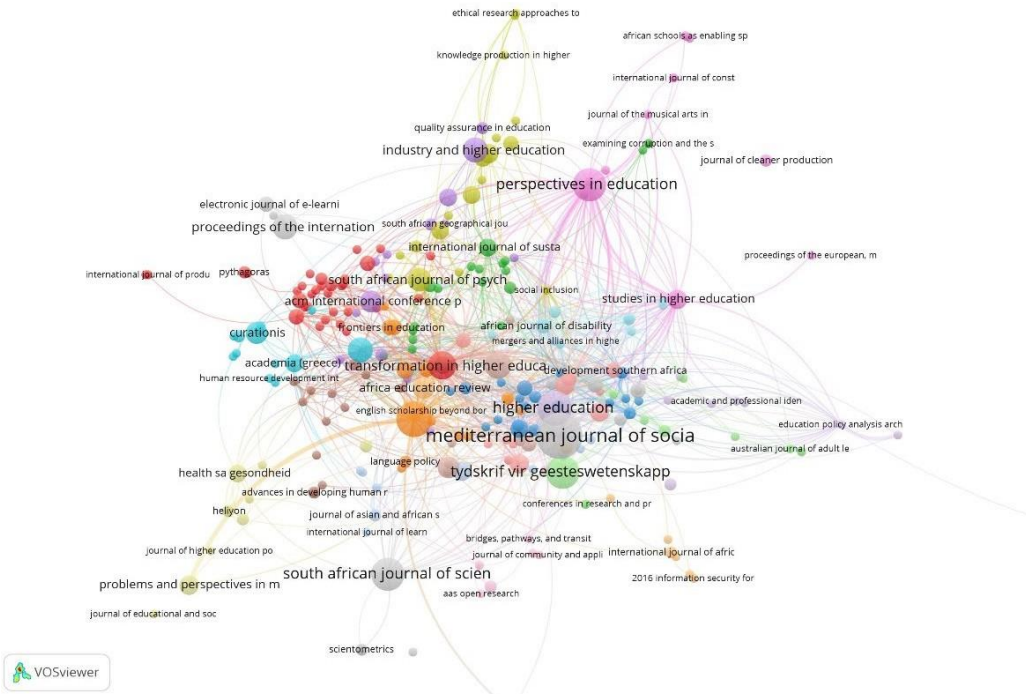


Figure 5: Bibliometric documents per source

Table 1: Journal coding

Item	Title	Year	Code
1	Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment	2020	J1
2	Mediterranean journal of social sciences	2014	J2
3	International Journal of Chinese Education	2018	J3
4	Education Sciences	2024	J4
5	International journal of educational sciences	2015	J5
6	International journal of educational sciences	2016	J6
7	SA Journal of Industrial Psychology	2024	J7
8	International journal of higher education	2020	J8
9	South African journal of higher education	2020	J9
10	Cogent Education	2019	J10
11	African Journal of Disability	2020	J11
12	Mediterranean journal of social sciences	2014	J12
13	Academy of Management Learning and Education	2015	J13
14	Discourse and writing/rédactologie	2022	J14
15	Journal of Student Affairs in Africa	2021	J15
16	Diversity in higher education	2016	J16
17	SA Journal of Industrial Psychology	2024	J17
18	Frontiers in Education	2023	J18
19	South African journal of higher education	2020	J19
20	PubMed	2015	J20
21	Higher Education Research and Development	2018	J21
22	Educational Studies	2018	J22
23	Curationis	2018	J23
24	Curationis	2018	J24
25	Perspectives in Education	2020	J25
26	Social Sciences and Humanities Open	2023	J26
27	International Journal of Disability, Development and Education	2023	J27
28	Education Sciences	2023	J28
29	South African Journal of Psychology	2023	J29
30	Women's Empowerment for a Sustainable Future: Transcultural and Positive Psychology Perspectives	2023	J30
31	Open Education Studies	2024	J31

8. Discussion of findings

8.1 Causes of Academic Exclusion in South Africa

The causes of academic exclusion are intertwined with historical, social, and systemic factors, collectively contributing to the exclusion of many students from the education system (J1). A significant cause of academic exclusion lies in the disparities in secondary education preparation. Students from marginalized communities often face inadequacies in their secondary education due to factors such as under-resourced schools, limited access to quality teaching, and inadequate learning materials (J2). These disparities place these students at a distinct disadvantage when transitioning to higher education, perpetuating a cycle of academic exclusion (J3). Financial constraints further exacerbate academic exclusion, as many South African students encounter significant economic barriers that impede their access to higher education. The unequal distribution of wealth and resources in the country perpetuates inequalities, making it challenging for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue tertiary education (J2).

The lack of support services for students from marginalized backgrounds also contributes to academic exclusion. Without adequate guidance, mentorship, and academic support, these students often encounter significant challenges in navigating the higher education landscape, leading to increased dropout rates and limited academic success (J3). Moreover, the historical legacy of apartheid and systemic discrimination has had a lasting impact on the accessibility of education for marginalized communities. The structural inequalities ingrained within the education system continue to impede the academic progression of many students, particularly those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (J4). In a diverse country like South Africa, the causes of academic exclusion are deeply intertwined with socioeconomic and historical factors, necessitating a comprehensive and nuanced approach to addressing these issues. Understanding these root causes is fundamental in devising effective and sustainable remedial measures that can dismantle the barriers to academic inclusion and create a more equitable higher education environment.

6.2 Consequences of Academic Exclusion for Students and Institutions

The repercussions of academic exclusion resonate deeply within South African higher education institutions, profoundly impacting both students and the institutions themselves. For students, academic exclusion perpetuates a cycle of limited opportunities, hindering socio-economic mobility, and fostering a persistent sense of marginalization (J5). Without access to quality higher education, students from marginalized communities face diminished prospects in the job market and struggle to contribute fully to the country's socioeconomic development. Moreover, the psychological toll of academic exclusion cannot be overstated (J6). Many students grapple with feelings of inadequacy, imposter syndrome, and a lack of belonging within the academic environment, which can have enduring effects on their confidence and mental well-being (J7).

On the institutional level, academic exclusion perpetuates a lack of diversity and representation, thereby impeding the richness of academic discourse and the development of a robust, inclusive learning environment (J8). Furthermore, the failure to address academic exclusion undermines the reputation and global competitiveness of South African higher education institutions, constraining their ability to attract a diverse pool of talent and cultivate meaningful international partnerships and collaborations (J1). It is evident that academic exclusion poses multifaceted challenges with far-reaching impacts. Therefore, a comprehensive approach to addressing academic exclusion in South African higher education is imperative, one that considers not only the immediate barriers to access but also the broader societal and institutional implications of exclusion (J4).

In the pursuit of a more inclusive higher education landscape, it is essential to recognize the interconnectedness of these consequences and strive to implement measures that mitigate these effects while fostering an environment of equity, diversity, and academic excellence. Only through concerted, sustained efforts can South African higher education institutions surmount the pervasive challenges posed by academic exclusion and fully realize their potential as engines of social and economic advancement.

6.3 Recommendation: Exploring Solutions for Academic Exclusion in South African Higher Education

Addressing academic exclusion in South African higher education requires a multi-faceted approach encompassing targeted support programs, financial aid initiatives, robust support services, institutional transformation efforts, and collaborative partnerships.

One key solution is the implementation of targeted support programs to address disparities in secondary education preparation (J9). By providing comprehensive academic support, mentorship, and resources to students from under-resourced schools, higher education institutions can mitigate the impact of inadequate secondary education and foster a more equitable transition to tertiary education (J10). Financial constraints can be alleviated through the expansion of need-based scholarships and financial aid programs (J11). By addressing economic barriers and ensuring equitable access to higher education, institutions can promote a more diverse student body reflective of South Africa's socioeconomic diversity (J12). Establishing robust support services tailored to the needs of marginalized students is crucial for academic inclusion. These services may include academic advising, peer mentorship programs, counseling services, and initiatives fostering a sense of belonging and community for all students (J6).

Addressing the historical legacy of apartheid and systemic discrimination requires promoting institutional transformation and dismantling structural inequalities within the education system (J13). This may involve curriculum reform, diversity initiatives, and targeted outreach programs to promote inclusivity within higher education (J14). Fostering a culture of diversity and inclusion on an institutional level is paramount (J10). By recognizing and valuing the unique perspectives of all students and promoting representation and equity within academic and administrative leadership, institutions can enhance academic discourse and create a more welcoming environment for all students (J8). Collaboration with government agencies, community organizations, and stakeholders is essential for effective implementation (J15). By engaging in part-

nerships that acknowledge the interconnected nature of academic exclusion, institutions can leverage resources and expertise to create sustainable interventions addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by South African higher education (J16).

6.4 Remedial Measures to Combat Academic Exclusion

Remedial measures to combat academic exclusion in South African higher education must address not only individual students and institutions but also broader societal and systemic implications.

Societal Implications

Academic exclusion exacerbates existing societal inequalities, hindering socio-economic development (J10). It amplifies disparities in income, employment opportunities, and social mobility, perpetuating generational disadvantage (J11). Moreover, the lack of diverse representation within institutions limits academic excellence and innovation, hindering meaningful societal transformation (J17).

Systemic Implications

Systemic biases and structural barriers entrench academic exclusion, necessitating institutional transformation (J11). Failure to address exclusion risks diminishing the global competitiveness and reputation of South African higher education institutions, hindering their ability to attract diverse talent and form international partnerships (J18).

Student-Centric Implications

Academic exclusion directly impacts students' well-being, confidence, and future prospects (J19 & J8). Psychological effects such as imposter syndrome and feelings of inadequacy can detrimentally affect academic performance and mental health (J8). Understanding the interconnectedness of these implications is crucial for formulating comprehensive remedial measures (J20). By recognizing the holistic impact of exclu-

sion and integrating this understanding into strategies, institutions can effectively dismantle barriers to academic inclusion (J21). Therefore, collaboration among stakeholders, policymakers, and institutional leaders is essential for developing and implementing remedial measures (J22 & J8). These measures must consider the interconnected nature of academic exclusion, ensuring sustainable interventions that uplift students and institutions alike.

6.5 Sustainable Strategies for Student Support and Retention

Considering the complex web of challenges surrounding academic exclusion in South African higher education, it is imperative to develop comprehensive and sustainable student support and retention strategies. Furthermore, these strategies should address the immediate needs of students from marginalized backgrounds and strive to create an inclusive and empowering academic environment that fosters their holistic development and success.

Tailored Support Services

Robust support services tailored to the specific needs of students from marginalized backgrounds are essential for fostering academic inclusion and retention (J23). Academic advising programs should be personalized to address individual students' unique challenges and goals, providing guidance on course selection, career pathways, and academic skill development (J24). Peer mentorship initiatives can offer invaluable support by connecting marginalized students with experienced peers who can provide guidance, encouragement, and a sense of community (J25). Counselling services should be readily accessible to address the mental health and well-being of students, acknowledging and helping to alleviate the psychological toll of exclusion and imposter syndrome (J22). Additionally, initiatives that foster a sense of belonging and community, such as targeted social and extracurricular programs, are vital for creating a supportive and inclusive campus environment where all students feel valued and empowered to thrive (J24).

Financial Support and Accessibility

Addressing the financial barriers that often contribute to academic exclusion is paramount. Institutions should proactively develop and promote financial aid programs, scholarships, and support for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (J26). These initiatives should also address the broader systemic inequalities that hinder access to higher education, advocating for policies that foster economic accessibility and equitable opportunities for all aspiring students (J27). Furthermore, ensuring physical accessibility and accommodation for students with disabilities is crucial for creating an inclusive and welcoming learning environment. Institutions should prioritize removing physical barriers and providing assistive technologies and supportive resources to enable the full participation of students with diverse abilities (J26).

Academic and Cultural Empowerment

Promoting academic and cultural empowerment among marginalized students is essential for their retention and success. Curricular and co-curricular initiatives should be designed to celebrate and integrate diverse perspectives and experiences, allowing students from historically marginalized groups to see themselves reflected in their educational journey (J28). This may involve the integration of multicultural curricula, the recognition of diverse scholarly contributions, and the promotion of culturally responsive pedagogy (J29). Additionally, providing platforms for students to engage in dialogue, advocacy, and leadership opportunities related to social justice and equity issues can amplify their voices and build a more inclusive academic community (J30). By empowering students to explore and contribute to critical discourse on societal challenges, institutions can cultivate a culture of active citizenship and social responsibility, enhancing the overall academic experience and retention of marginalized students (J31).

Holistic Wellness and Retention Programs

To address the holistic needs of marginalized students, institutions should implement comprehensive wellness and retention programs that prioritize their overall well-being (J31). This may involve the provision of holistic wellness centers that offer mental health support, wellness workshops, and resources for coping with academic and personal challenges (J1). Additionally, mentorship programs connecting students with faculty and staff mentors who can offer guidance and support in navigating higher education's academic and social dimensions are invaluable for fostering a sense of belonging and retention (J1). Furthermore, proactive interventions aimed at identifying and mitigating potential barriers to student retention, such as academic support programs and early alert systems, are essential for fostering a supportive and responsive academic environment that prioritizes the success of every student (J5).

Policy Recommendations for Inclusive Education

In addition to implementing comprehensive strategies for student support and retention, it is imperative for South African higher education institutions to prioritize policy recommendations that promote inclusive education. These policy measures should be designed to address systemic barriers and create a more equitable and accessible educational landscape for all students (J13).

Equity-Centered Admissions and Recruitment Policies

Developing equity-centered admissions and recruitment policies is essential for dismantling systemic barriers to educational access. South African higher education institutions should prioritize recruiting students from diverse backgrounds and provide pathways for admission that consider factors such as socioeconomic status, educational history, and non-traditional learning experiences (J12). By recognizing the potential of students beyond traditional academic metrics, institutions can create a more inclusive and diverse student body that reflects the rich tapestry of South African society (J13). Additionally, outreach programs and partnerships with schools and community organizations can facilitate early engagement with potential students from marginalized backgrounds, providing them with the necessary support and resources

to pursue higher education. These proactive recruitment strategies aim to identify and address the challenges that may hinder marginalized students from considering higher education as a viable option, thereby promoting a more inclusive and representative cohort of learners (J12).

Culturally Responsive Institutional Policies

Incorporating culturally responsive institutional policies is crucial for creating an educational environment that respects and celebrates diverse cultural identities (J3). South African higher education institutions should prioritize including diverse perspectives in curricular and co-curricular activities, fostering an academic environment that values the contributions of historically marginalized groups (J6). This may involve the incorporation of multicultural curricula, the acknowledgement of diverse scholarly contributions, and the establishment of culturally inclusive campus events and initiatives (J4). Moreover, developing inclusive campus policies that address cultural sensitivities and promote an environment free from discrimination and bias is essential. By cultivating a culture of respect and inclusivity, institutions can create a welcoming space where students from all backgrounds feel valued and represented, contributing to their overall sense of belonging and academic success (J3).

Resource Allocation for Inclusivity

Ensuring equitable resource allocation is pivotal in promoting inclusivity within South African higher education institutions (J26). It is imperative for policymakers to prioritize the allocation of resources, including funding, infrastructure, and support services, to address the specific needs of marginalized students. This may involve the establishment of dedicated resource centers, such as multicultural student centers and centers for students with disabilities, providing tailored support and fostering a sense of community and belonging (J3). Furthermore, investments in faculty and staff training programs focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion can enhance the capacity of educators to create inclusive learning environments (J26). By equipping faculty and staff with the necessary tools and knowledge to support diverse student populations,

institutions can enhance the overall educational experience and retention of marginalized students.

Affirmative Action and Supportive Policies

The implementation of affirmative action policies and supportive measures is essential for addressing historical inequities and creating opportunities for underrepresented groups in higher education (J26). South African institutions should actively promote policies that prioritize the recruitment and advancement of faculty and staff from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that the institution's leadership and academic workforce reflect the diversity of the student body (J12). Moreover, the establishment of support structures, such as mentoring programs, professional development initiatives, and cultural competency training, can further empower faculty and staff to support and mentor marginalized students effectively. This multifaceted approach aims to create an environment where students and educators from all backgrounds feel valued, supported, and represented, contributing to a more inclusive and enriching educational experience (J20).

6.6 Future Directions in Preventing Academic Exclusion

As South African higher education institutions continue to strive for inclusivity and equity, it is essential to consider future directions in preventing academic exclusion. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by marginalized students, future initiatives should encompass comprehensive approaches that address not only academic barriers but also socio-economic, cultural, and emotional factors that influence student success and retention.

Holistic Support Programs

Moving forward, the development of holistic support programs that cater to the diverse needs of students is paramount in preventing academic exclusion (J19). These programs should go beyond academic support and encompass initiatives that address mental health, financial literacy, and career development. By providing students with

a comprehensive support system, institutions can empower them to navigate the challenges they may encounter and cultivate a sense of belonging within the academic community (J21). Furthermore, fostering partnerships with community organizations and mental health professionals can enhance the effectiveness of these support programs, ensuring that students have access to a range of resources that promote their overall well-being and success (J16).

Intersectional Research and Analysis

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of academic exclusion, future directions should prioritize intersectional research and analysis (J8). By examining the intersecting factors of race, gender, socio-economic status, and ability, institutions can identify the nuanced challenges faced by different student populations and tailor their interventions accordingly (J3). Engaging in collaborative research endeavors with scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds can enrich the knowledge base regarding academic exclusion, paving the way for evidence-based interventions that address the specific needs of marginalized students (J19).

Student Advocacy and Representation

Empowering students to actively participate in decision-making processes and fostering student advocacy is vital in preventing academic exclusion. Institutions should create platforms for student representation and amplify the voices of marginalized student groups, allowing their perspectives to inform policy development and institutional practice (J23). By centering student voices in the discourse on academic inclusion, institutions can ensure that their interventions are responsive to the needs and aspirations of the student body, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and student-centric educational environment (J3).

Long-term Mentorship and Alumni Engagement

Establishing long-term mentorship programs and nurturing alumni engagement can significantly contribute to the prevention of academic exclusion (J19). Providing stu-

dents with mentorship opportunities that extend beyond their academic journey can offer them ongoing support and guidance as they navigate the challenges of higher education and transition into their professional endeavors (J23). Alumni engagement initiatives can also play a pivotal role in creating a supportive network for current students, offering mentorship, career guidance, and opportunities for professional development. By leveraging the experiences and expertise of alumni, institutions can further enrich the support system available to students from diverse backgrounds (J24).

Community and Government Roles in Addressing Exclusion

In addition to the efforts within higher education institutions, the community and government also play crucial roles in addressing academic exclusion (J19). Collaborative partnerships and policy initiatives can significantly impact the educational landscape, ensuring that marginalized students receive the support and resources they need to thrive (J25).

Community Engagement and Outreach

Community engagement is integral in creating a network of support for students. By fostering partnerships with local community organizations, higher education institutions can expand their reach and provide students with a broader range of resources (J19). These partnerships can offer students mentoring opportunities, access to community-based support services, and connections to potential internship and career opportunities, thereby enriching their overall educational experience (J9)). Additionally, community outreach programs can facilitate the integration of the academic community with local initiatives, promoting a sense of interconnectedness and shared responsibility for the success of all students (J8).

Advocacy for Equitable Policies

Government entities and policymakers play a critical role in enacting and implementing policies that promote equity and inclusivity in higher education (J25). Advo-

cacy for equitable funding allocation, scholarship programs for underrepresented students, and legislative measures that support the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and staff are essential to creating an environment where all students have equal opportunities for success (J13). Furthermore, collaboration between higher education institutions and government agencies can lead to the development of policies that address systemic barriers and promote inclusivity, ultimately enhancing the educational experiences of marginalized students (J8).

Resource Allocation and Support

Government support in resource allocation for higher education institutions is vital in ensuring that they have the necessary means to implement inclusive policies and programs. This includes funding for diversity-focused initiatives, infrastructure improvements, and the provision of financial aid and scholarships for students from marginalized backgrounds (J10). By prioritizing resource allocation for inclusivity, the government can demonstrate its commitment to addressing systemic inequities and fostering an environment where all individuals have access to quality education and support services (J12).

9. Recommendations for Addressing Academic Exclusion

Based on the findings and insights gathered from this study, there are several recommendations for South African higher education institutions to actively address the issue of academic exclusion among marginalized student populations. ***Implement Intersectional Support Programs:*** One crucial recommendation is the development and implementation of intersectional support programs that cater to the diverse needs of marginalized student populations. These programs should consider the intersecting factors of race, gender, socio-economic status, and ability, providing tailored support services that address the unique challenges faced by each group.

Recommendation for policy makers

The study suggests that policymakers should implement equity-centered admissions and Recruitment by developing inclusive recruitment policies that recognize

socioeconomic diversity and non-traditional learning experiences. Additionally, financial aid and economic accessibility must be prioritized, with proactive financial aid programs for disadvantaged students and advocacy for equitable funding and policies. Furthermore, affirmative action and faculty diversity should be promoted to diversify faculty and staff, thereby enhancing support for marginalized students. Culturally Responsive Institutional Policies should be fostered, celebrating cultural diversity and inclusion across the curriculum and campus activities. Finally, Resource Allocation should prioritize equitable distribution of resources, with a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within institutions.

Recommendation for administrators

The study suggests that administrators should focus on personalized academic support services by implementing tailored academic advising, peer mentorship, and counselling to address the specific needs of marginalized students. An inclusive campus culture should be developed through social, extracurricular, and community-building initiatives that foster a strong sense of belonging for all students. Additionally, holistic wellness programs should be established, including wellness centres and early alert systems that provide academic, mental health, and personal support to enhance student retention. Culturally Responsive Teaching is also essential, requiring the training of educators in inclusive pedagogical practices that reflect diverse student backgrounds. Lastly, long-term mentorship and alumni engagement should be expanded to maintain mentorship programs and build alumni networks, offering continued academic and career support for students beyond graduation.

10. Future research

While this study has provided valuable insights into the complex issue of academic exclusion in South African higher education institutions, several avenues for future research warrant exploration. Firstly, further investigation into the specific experiences of intersectional identities within marginalized student populations is vital. Understanding how the overlapping dynamics of race, gender, socio-economic status, and

ability impact academic inclusion and exclusion can inform targeted interventions and support programs.

11. Conclusion

Academic exclusion in South African higher education institutions is rooted in factors such as race, gender, socio-economic status, and ability, leading to limited access to resources and support for marginalized students. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive understanding of these intersecting challenges through intersectional research and analysis. Empowering and involving students in decision-making processes is crucial for developing inclusive policies and practices. By centering student voices, institutions can create a supportive and inclusive educational environment. Promoting inclusivity benefits individual students and contributes to a diverse and cohesive society. Collaborative efforts between higher education institutions, communities, and the government are essential for fostering an inclusive educational landscape. A holistic approach that combines research, student advocacy, and community and government collaboration can help overcome systemic barriers and create a more equitable educational environment for all students in South Africa.

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PRISMA REFERENCE ANNEXURE A

ITEM	PRISMA REFERENCE	CODE
1	Munyoro, A. and Dube, N. "Perceived factors that contribute to Black social work students' failure of courses at university level: A case study of 3rd year social work students at a South African university," <i>Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment</i> , 31(5),p. 564-581. (2020). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2020.1799899 .	J1
2	Kang'ethe, S. and Muhuro, P. "Explore the Role of Cultures in Influencing the Dynamics of Counseling among the First Years in Institutions of Higher Learning. The Case of 2012-2014 Freshmen Study in Two Former Black Universities," <i>Mediterranean journal of social sciences</i> . (2014). Available at: https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n27p1050 .	J2

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