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Social Inclusion in Higher Education

2025



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Foreword

Social inclusion in higher education is a complex concept that encompasses access, participation, and equity for underrepresented groups.¹ Rooted in the constitutional imperatives of equality, human dignity, and non-discrimination², the higher education sector is tasked with dismantling the entrenched inequalities inherited from colonialism and apartheid. Social inclusion entails more than demographic transformation or widening access; it requires the dismantling of systemic barriers, recognition of diverse identities and knowledges, and cultivation of inclusive institutional cultures.³ Walker and Unterhalter (2007) posit that social inclusion in higher education encompasses both distributive justice (fair allocation of resources), and recognitive justice (recognising and respecting the dignity and individuality of all people, particularly marginalised groups).

The Bill of Rights enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa guarantees the rights of all people in our country and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom. The state, the Ministry and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), with its institutions, entities and agencies, must respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights in the Bill of Rights. This means that all institutions in the Post-School Education and Training System (PSET) are entrusted with the responsibility to contribute to building a socially inclusive society across geographical locations as well as racial, ethnic, gender, disability, national and religious identities, towards a united society based on human dignity.

To contribute towards the realisation of these aspirations, the DHET published the *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in the Post-School Education and Training System* in line with the Continuing Education and Training Act, 2006 (Act No. 16 of 2006) and the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act No. 101 of 1997 as amended). The intention of the policy framework is to create an enabling environment for social inclusion in post-school education and training.

This policy framework, developed against the backdrop of South Africa's complex and painful history of exclusion under colonialism and apartheid, recognised social inclusion as a moral, developmental, and democratic imperative. It sought to institutionalise a set of interventions that would redress entrenched inequities while fostering a PSET system that embodies human dignity, justice, and democratic citizenship. It emphasised eight areas of intervention, and these collectively demonstrate the intention to promote

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1. Veidemann, A., Kaiser, F., & Craciun, D. (2021). Inclusive higher education access for underrepresented groups: It matters, but how can universities measure it?. *Social Inclusion*, 9(3), 44-57. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i3.4163>
 2. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. (1996). Government Printers.
 3. Fraser, N. (2008). *Scales of justice: Reimagining political space in a globalizing world*. New York: Columbia University Press. & Walker, M., & Unterhalter, E. (Eds.). (2007). *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

and institutionalise social inclusion within the PSET. Progress in some areas has been notable, for example, expanded access for Black students, increased enrolment of females, and strengthened disability policies. For instance, post-apartheid, South Africa has seen an increase in higher education enrolment among Black African students. As of 2022, 5.5% of Black Africans aged 18 to 29 were enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs), increasing from 2.9% in 2002, indicating a 2.6 percentage point increase over two decades⁴ (Statista, 2023). Yet, access does not automatically translate into genuine participation, success, or belonging.

Unlike other policies that affect higher education, the *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training System* has not generated much debate and discussion nor has it been a popular subject for research, monitoring and evaluation. Yet it is a matter of significant importance in a country with a history of, and ongoing challenges related to colonialism, apartheid, tribalism and patriarchy. This led the Council on Higher Education (CHE) to convene a research colloquium to stimulate national discourse on the matter.

As a sequel to the colloquium, a decision was made to call for papers to be published in the CHE's research journal, *Kagisano*. The papers in this publication were prepared in response to this call, and the result is this volume of *Kagisano* that carries articles that focus on the eight areas of intervention emphasised by the policy framework.

This issue of *Kagisano* themed, *Promoting and Institutionalising Social Inclusion in Higher Education*, is published nearly a decade after the promulgation of the *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training*⁵, an opportune time to take stock and reflect on progress. The papers in this journal issue analyse and evaluate the progress that has been made, as well as the challenges that remain. They highlight the unfinished business in the implementation of the policy and urge renewed commitment to the ideals of equity, access, belonging, and epistemic justice.

The papers also highlight that, despite the progress that has been realised, major challenges persist. For instance, while the gross enrolment ratio of Black students has increased significantly since 1994, epistemic exclusion persists; graduation and success rates continue to reflect stark racialised and socio-economic disparities;⁶ Black African and coloured students remain more likely to drop out or take longer to graduate compared to their white and Indian peers; women, particularly Black women, remain

4. Statista (2023). Digital 2023: Global Overview Report. Datar portal: Retrieved November 01, 2024, from <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report>

5. Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). (2016). *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in the Post-School Education and Training System*. Pretoria: DHET.

6. Essop, A. (2020). *The changing size and shape of the higher education system in South Africa, 2005–2017*. Johannesburg: Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies.

underrepresented in senior academic and leadership positions.⁷ Disabled students continue to face infrastructural and attitudinal barriers despite progressive policies.⁸ Beyond physical accessibility, barriers for students with disabilities include inadequate academic accommodation, insufficient assistive technologies, and a lack of trained staff to address their unique needs.⁹ Such gaps exacerbate feelings of exclusion among students with disabilities, hindering their academic success and overall well-being.¹⁰ In addition, curricula often remain anchored in Eurocentric paradigms, marginalising African knowledge traditions and epistemologies. These forms of exclusion undermine the democratic potential of higher education.¹¹

The CHE encourages institutions, academics, researchers, students and professional support staff to continue developing socially-just policies and practices and fostering dialogue across the sector. The interesting papers in this volume of *Kagisano* can provide much food for thought and serve as a basis for reflecting on institutional policies and practices. As examples, one paper in this volume critically explores how selected theoretical frameworks can be meaningfully translated into context-sensitive, actionable strategies to advance social inclusion, while another addresses the necessity of decolonising higher education curricula and promoting multilingualism within academic literacy modules, arguing that the current curriculum and the institutional culture remain predominantly Eurocentric and marginalise students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

To the authors, peer reviewers, and members of the editorial panel, the CHE sincerely appreciates you for bringing the project of producing this volume to fruition. The coordination role played by the staff in the Research and Monitoring Programme at the CHE in this project is also acknowledged with much gratitude.

Feedback on this volume of *Kagisano* is welcomed and should be sent to research@che.ac.za.

Dr Whitfield J Green

Chief Executive Officer

December 2025

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7. Kiguwa, P. (2019). Black academic voices: Narratives of everyday racism in South African higher education. *African Identities*, 17(1), 9–24.
 8. Howell, C. (2019). Disability inclusion in higher education: Policy, practice and culture. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 33(3), 1–17.
 9. Cloete, N., Bailey, T., & Maassen, P. (2011). Universities and economic development in Africa. *African Minds*.
 10. Morrow, W. (2013). The role of higher education in promoting social inclusion in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 27(4), 761–774.
 11. Mbembe, A. (2016). Decolonising the university: New directions. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 15(1), 29–45.

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Theoretical Foundations for Promoting Social Inclusion in South African Higher Education

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Abstract

Persistent inequalities in South African higher education are sustained by structural barriers such as unequal resource distribution, exclusionary institutional cultures, epistemic injustice, and limited representation in decision-making processes. Although numerous policies, such as the Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training, have been introduced to address these challenges, a recurring gap remains between theoretical commitments and practical implementation. This study addresses that gap by critically exploring how selected theoretical frameworks can be meaningfully translated into context-sensitive, actionable strategies to advance social inclusion. Using a conceptual and theoretical analysis approach, the study integrates Social Justice Theory, Critical Pedagogy, Ubuntu Philosophy, and Intersectionality to construct a model that links structural critique with transformative practices. Drawing on recent peer-reviewed literature, the findings reveal that while these theories offer powerful lenses to understand exclusion, their transformative potential remains underutilised in policy design and implementation. The study proposes an integrated framework that aligns theory with practice, recommending equity-driven policy reform, participatory pedagogies, inclusive governance, and culturally grounded community engagement. By foregrounding historical injustices and practical solutions, the study offers higher education institutions a pathway toward building more equitable, inclusive, and participatory learning environments.

Keywords: Social inclusion, critical pedagogy, social justice, *Ubuntu*, intersectionality

Introduction and background

Social inclusion in higher education is a complex concept that encompasses access, participation, and equity for underrepresented groups (Veidemane, Kaiser and Craciun, 2021). While recognised as a priority, defining and measuring social inclusion remains challenging for policymakers and institutions (Veidemane *et al.*, 2021). Graduate attribute statements often reflect social inclusion through themes of diversity appreciation, global perspectives, and community engagement (Bosanquet, Winchester-Seeto and Rowe, 2012). However, a more robust theorisation of the relationship between social inclusion and higher education is needed to achieve transformative effects beyond surface-level changes (Gale and Hodge, 2014). Affirmative action policies have been implemented

globally to promote equity and access for minority groups, but their effectiveness varies depending on context (Gururaj, Somers, Fry, Watson, Cicero, Morosini and Zamora, 2020). As higher education expands to meet the demands of the global knowledge economy, addressing issues of sustainability, aspiration, and opportunity becomes crucial for creating genuinely inclusive educational environments (Gale and Hodge, 2014).

Systemic exclusions in South African higher education stem from apartheid's legacy and persisting gender inequalities. Historical inequities created systemic barriers, particularly for Black South Africans, who face limited social mobility and financial constraints exacerbated by apartheid and colonialism (Cele and Adewumi, 2024). Gender disparities further compound these challenges, with Black women often encountering discrimination, harassment, and barriers to professional advancement despite higher enrolment rates (Mabokela and Mawila, 2004; Wheeler and Wiese, 2024; Akala and Divala, 2016).

The enduring inequalities in South African higher education are deeply rooted in apartheid-era laws and policies that systemically excluded Black South Africans from quality education and social mobility. One of the most notorious instruments of educational segregation was the Bantu Education Act of 1953, which deliberately curtailed the intellectual development of Black learners. The Act transferred the control of Black education to the apartheid government, enforcing a curriculum designed to limit Black learners to menial labour roles and prevent them from accessing higher-order academic skills (Bunting, 2006; Mckeever, 2017; Mzangwa, 2019). As Verwoerd, the then Minister of Native Affairs, infamously stated, "There is no place for the Bantu in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour" (Mzamane, 1981; Simon, 1986).

Another critical policy, the Group Areas Act of 1950, forcibly removed Black communities from urban centres, relocating them to underdeveloped, peripheral regions far from quality educational institutions (Mabin, 1992; Isaacs-Martin, 2015; Maharaj, 2019). This spatial marginalisation entrenched geographic and infrastructural barriers that still persist, with many universities today continuing to serve socioeconomically segregated populations.

Additionally, apartheid university admission policies imposed racial quotas and restrictions that excluded or severely limited Black student enrolment at historically white institutions. Historically white universities (HWUs) reserved admission predominantly for white students. In contrast, historically Black universities (HBUs) were chronically underfunded and politically surveilled. Funding disparities ensured that Black institutions lacked adequate facilities, research support, and academic staff, resulting in lower graduation and progression rates (Murray, 1990; Lockett, 2024).

These laws did not operate in isolation: they were part of a broader apartheid system that institutionalised economic, political, and social inequality. The effects continue to

reverberate in post-apartheid South Africa, where educational access, success, and employment outcomes remain stratified along racial and socioeconomic lines. Therefore, understanding the historical foundations of exclusion is essential to any effort aimed at fostering social inclusion in higher education today.

Despite post-apartheid reforms, racial segregation entrenched during apartheid continues to hinder access and representation (Maistry and Grange, 2023; Cele and Adewumi, 2024). Many institutions still grapple with racial inequalities, as demonstrated by incidents such as those at the University of the Free State, which highlighted the persistence of racist institutional cultures (Suransky and Van Der Merwe, 2016; Matsau, 2013). Institutional practices and cultural norms perpetuate these gender inequalities, as seen in the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles and the dominance of patriarchal ideologies within academia (Matsau, 2013; Prah and Maggott, 2020).

The intersection of race, gender, and socioeconomic status creates compounded disadvantages, which policies often fail to address effectively, leading to persistent inequities in student experiences and outcomes (Higham, 2012; Gore, 2021). Although equity-promoting policies exist, their implementation is frequently undermined by entrenched institutional cultures and competing interests. Efforts to transform these cultures face significant resistance (Matsau, 2013; Suransky and Van Der Merwe, 2016). Feminist theories are increasingly advocated as frameworks to challenge exclusionary practices and ideologies, addressing gender and racial inequities (Prah and Maggott, 2020).

The introduction of the *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training System* in 2016 (DHET, 2016) marked a critical step in addressing these challenges. This policy provided a roadmap for creating more inclusive institutions by focusing on interventions such as eliminating access barriers, addressing discrimination, and promoting equity across various dimensions. However, despite its progressive intent, the framework has been critiqued for lacking clear implementation mechanisms, measurable outcomes, and accountability structures. Furthermore, it tends to focus predominantly on access without sufficiently addressing the deeper institutional cultures, power dynamics, and pedagogical practices that sustain exclusion. In some cases, inclusion is interpreted in procedural terms, rather than being embedded in the everyday lived experiences of students and staff. Thus, the success of these interventions requires more than policy mandates: it calls for a nuanced understanding of social dynamics and the theoretical foundations that underpin social inclusion. Theoretical frameworks are crucial in addressing social inclusion by offering tools to analyse and address systemic inequities. Additionally, it demands a deeper theoretical engagement with the underlying structures that perpetuate marginalisation, such as critical pedagogy, *Ubuntu*, social justice frameworks, and intersectionality.

These theories serve a dual purpose as analytical lenses and foundational pillars guiding the proposed interventions. Each theoretical perspective informs different aspects of

the research question below and the integrated conceptual framework for achieving social inclusion (see the conceptual and theoretical framework section). By grounding interventions in theory, institutions can move beyond surface-level initiatives to enact systemic changes that promote genuine equity and cohesion. As South Africa continues its transformation journey, integrating these theoretical insights into higher education is imperative to build institutions that reflect the values of democracy, diversity, and inclusion.

Problem statement

Persistent inequalities in higher education continue to challenge policy reforms to foster inclusion. Despite initiatives such as the *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in the Post-School Education and Training System* (DHET, 2016), systemic barriers and inadequate resource distribution undermine progress (Meng, 2024; Mao and Sun, 2023). Educational disparities rooted in socioeconomic and cultural factors disproportionately affect marginalised groups, mainly Black, rural, and disabled students, perpetuating exclusion (Badat, 2010). The visibility of identity dimensions and their intersectionality, such as race, gender, and disability, further complicates inequalities, leaving those with multiple marginalised identities more vulnerable (Essanhaji and van den Brink, 2021).

Current institutional strategies often lack robust theoretical grounding, resulting in inconsistent implementation and limited impact. The absence of comprehensive approaches integrating redistributive, recognition, and participatory justice exacerbates these challenges (Fraser, 2007; Meng, 2024). Theoretical frameworks, such as social justice, *Ubuntu*, and critical pedagogy, offer actionable guidance for addressing structural and systemic exclusion. However, their limited application in practice highlights a significant gap in bridging theory and policy (Mao and Sun, 2023). Collaborative approaches that engage diverse stakeholders are essential to developing effective, adaptable, and inclusive interventions.

The implications of these identified injustices are far-reaching. When exclusion persists, it hampers marginalised students' academic success and well-being and reinforces societal inequalities by limiting their access to economic opportunities, political participation, and social mobility. Institutions that fail to address these issues risk reproducing the disparities they aim to challenge, undermining the transformative role of higher education in building a just and equitable society. Moreover, when the most vulnerable students feel alienated or unsupported, it compromises the integrity and credibility of the education system. Therefore, confronting these injustices is not merely a matter of equity within institutions but a moral, social, and developmental imperative for South Africa and other similarly affected contexts. This study explores how theoretical insights can guide the design and implementation of transformative strategies to advance social inclusion in higher education.

Aim and objectives

The paper aims explore how theoretical insights can guide the design and implementation of transformative strategies to advance social inclusion in higher education. The specific objectives are to (a) critically examine key theories underpinning social inclusion; (b) explore how these theories apply to the South African higher education context; (c) identify gaps and opportunities for theory-informed practices; and (d) recommend a theoretical model to underpin social inclusion in South African higher education.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

This paper is anchored in a multifaceted theoretical framework, drawing on Social Justice Theory, Critical Pedagogy, *Ubuntu* Philosophy, and Intersectionality. The Social Justice Theory is rooted in principles of equity, fairness, and the redistribution of resources and opportunities to create a just society (Prihartono, Muhtar, Kamba, Kasim & Apripari, 2023; Nupur, 2024; Madrid Miranda and Chapman, 2024). The modern interpretation of social justice emerged from scholars such as Rawls (1971), who emphasised distributive justice, and Fraser (2005), who extended the concept to include recognition justice (identity and cultural respect) and participatory justice (inclusion in decision-making). The theory has expanded to address land distribution, housing, and economic policies, reflecting a broader understanding of justice in development contexts (Prihartono *et al.*, 2023). The theory provides a foundation for understanding and dismantling structural barriers to equality in education (Fraser, 2007). It serves as a moral and normative guide for interventions, particularly in addressing the injustices faced by migrant populations, advocating for recognition and participation in society (Prihartono *et al.*, 2023; Nupur, 2024; Madrid Miranda and Chapman, 2024). In higher education, social justice theory offers a framework to interrogate policies and practices perpetuating inequality. It underscores the need for redistributive measures, such as financial aid and academic support, and inclusive curricula that respect diverse identities.

Critical Pedagogy is a theory developed by Freire (1970) and it seeks to promote education to empower individuals to challenge social injustices and inequities. It is rooted in critical theory, which focuses on understanding and changing the societal structures that perpetuate inequalities based on socioeconomic status, gender, race, and other social characteristics (Sandars, 2017). It is essential for understanding how inclusive teaching practices can empower marginalised students in higher education. It emphasises participatory approaches, which align with the study's focus on inclusion and systemic reform.

Ubuntu is a Southern African philosophy that emphasises humanity's interconnectedness, advocating for community-oriented approaches to inclusion that are particularly relevant in the African context (Letseka, 2012). "*I am because we are*," reflects a collective approach to human relations (Ewuoso and Hall, 2019; Chowdhury, Wahab, Saad, Roy, Hamidi and Ahmad, 2021; Lechaba, 2022). While *Ubuntu* is a traditional African

concept, its scholarly exploration has been advanced by thinkers like Tutu (1999) and Mokgoro (1998) in South African legal and educational contexts. The philosophy integrates biological, psychosocial, spiritual, and environmental aspects of life, promoting health, social justice, and human rights. *Ubuntu* can serve as a liberatory praxis, especially for marginalised communities, by affirming critical consciousness and social transformation. It encourages responsible stewardship of the environment, recognising the interdependence between human survival and ecological sustainability (Ewuoso, 2023; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2021; Lechaba, 2022). *Ubuntu* provides a culturally resonant framework for addressing social exclusion in South African higher education. It advocates for inclusive practices honouring the interconnectedness of students, educators, and communities.

Intersectionality highlights the compounded effects of overlapping forms of discrimination, urging institutions to simultaneously address multiple dimensions of exclusion (Crenshaw, 2021). It is a theoretical framework developed by Crenshaw (2021) that explores the interplay of various social categories, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, to understand how they converge in shaping individual experiences and reflecting broader systems of privilege and oppression. It emerged as a response to the unique challenges faced by Black women, who often experience marginalisation due to the combined effects of racial and gender-based discrimination (Crenshaw, 2021). By addressing these layered forms of oppression, Crenshaw sheds light on how identities intersect to produce distinctive lived realities. Central to intersectionality is the recognition that human experiences are shaped by multiple social positions that cannot be fully understood in isolation (Crenshaw, 2021; Carastathis, 2014; Bowleg, 2012; Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher and Nkomo, 2016). For example, the experiences of a Black woman are not simply the sum of her race and gender but are shaped by the specific interplay between these identities within broader societal structures (Carastathis, 2014; Bowleg, 2012; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016). Intersectionality underscores the interconnectedness of systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism, asserting that these systems do not operate independently but rather reinforce one another in multifaceted and dynamic ways (Carastathis, 2014; Bowleg, 2012; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, intersectionality emphasises the inseparability of identities, highlighting the unity of intersecting identities over their components. This perspective shifts the focus from viewing social categories as discrete elements to understanding them as deeply intertwined and mutually constitutive. By adopting this holistic lens, intersectionality provides a comprehensive framework for analysing how systemic inequalities are experienced differently by individuals situated at the crossroads of multiple marginalised identities (Carastathis, 2014; Bowleg, 2012; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016). Intersectionality has become a cornerstone of critical theory. Social categories are interdependent and cannot be examined in isolation. Inequality is multifaceted, requiring nuanced approaches to address overlapping forms of discrimination. Intersectionality is crucial for understanding how diverse identities shape students' experiences in higher education. It highlights the need for policies that address the compounded effects of race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Approach

This study employs a theoretical and conceptual analysis approach to critically examine prominent frameworks and their applicability to addressing inequalities in South African higher education. Theoretical analysis focuses on developing and evaluating theories and assessing their applicability and relevance in explaining phenomena (Koscheev and Isopeskul, 2024). On the other hand, Conceptual Analysis involves clarifying and defining concepts, ensuring that they are well understood and appropriately applied in research contexts (Koscheev and Isopeskul, 2024). This approach is particularly suited to unpacking complex, abstract ideas and exploring their practical relevance to systemic challenges in educational contexts.

The Social Justice Theory offers a critical lens for analysing South African higher education policies, such as the 2016 *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in the Post-School Education and Training System* (DHET, 2016), by highlighting redistribution, recognition, and participation issues. Critical Pedagogy supports this analysis by challenging entrenched power dynamics within educational institutions and advocating for inclusive, transformative teaching and learning practices. *Ubuntu* Philosophy provides a culturally grounded framework to address exclusion, alienation, and inequity by fostering values of humanity, interconnectedness, and communal responsibility. Finally, intersectionality deepens the analysis by revealing how systemic barriers disproportionately affect individuals whose identities intersect across race, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status. These theories form a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing persistent inequalities in South African higher education. This combination allows for a holistic approach to inclusion, integrating policy reform, pedagogical innovation, and community-based interventions to dismantle systemic barriers and foster equitable education environments.

The insights drawn from the analysis are synthesised into a conceptual framework to ensure practical relevance. This framework demonstrates how combining the four theories can provide a holistic approach to fostering inclusion and equity in higher education. Integrating these theories bridges the gap between abstract concepts and actionable strategies, offering a model for policy development and institutional practices.

Analysis and discussion

Application of the Social Justice Theory

The Social Justice Theory (Lessnoff, 1971; Rawls, 2001; Rawls, 2017) has significantly shaped South African education policy since the end of apartheid, inspiring efforts to redress historical inequalities and promote inclusion. Successes include expanded access to education for previously marginalised groups, policy attention to learners with special needs, and the integration of social justice principles into teacher education and curriculum reform, aiming to empower teachers as agents of change and foster a

more equitable society (Adeyemo and Sehoole, 2022). However, persistent challenges undermine these gains: deep disparities remain between urban and rural schools, with rural learners facing limited access to quality resources and higher education opportunities, and historically disadvantaged students still struggling to achieve academic success (Themane, 2021). While policies often reflect Rawlsian ideals, their implementation is inconsistent, sometimes symbolic, and hampered by systemic issues such as underfunding, inadequate support for vulnerable learners, and a lack of genuine curriculum transformation to reflect African knowledge systems (Juan, Harvey and Hannan., 2021; Marakalala, 2025). The discourse also highlights the tension between procedural justice (fair policies) and distributive justice (fair outcomes), noting that while legal and procedural frameworks have improved, actual educational outcomes for many remain unjust (Badat and Sayed, 2014). Furthermore, neoliberal influences and market-driven reforms have sometimes diluted the transformative intent of social justice policies, prioritising economic roles over genuine inclusion and empowerment (Adeyemo and Sehoole, 2022; Marakalala, 2025).

The *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training System* (DHET, 2016) policy was fully implemented in 2017 and indicates that its strategic intent is to:

[A]ffirms the role of the PSET system in contributing to a united and democratic South Africa, narrowing the skills gap and, by implication, redresses the past inequalities in society based on race, gender, class, age, HIV and AIDS status, disability and geography (DHET, 2016: 21).

In addition, the *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training System* (DHET, 2016) policy highlights that:

Through this policy framework, the DHET is creating an empowering environment for social inclusion in the PSET that will ensure that social inclusion-related policies and legislation in the PSET institutions are implemented and monitored. There should be effective instruments of redress (the example is the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding and inclusive admission policies) as well as the improvement of quality education in educational institutions, especially in rural areas (DHET, 2016: 22).

The 2016 Policy Framework explicitly acknowledges the persistent disparities in access, success, and representation within the higher education system, particularly among historically disadvantaged populations, including Black students, women, and individuals from rural areas. Social justice theory informs this framework by highlighting the importance of addressing economic and structural inequalities and cultural and epistemic marginalisation issues. For example, Fraser's (1995) justice dimensions, such as redistribution, recognition, and representation, can serve as a valuable model for understanding the multidimensional approach required to achieve equity in higher

education. Redistributive justice, a key component of social justice theory, is evident in policies aimed at financial aid programs, infrastructure development in underserved areas, and efforts to ensure equitable resource allocation across institutions (Fraser, 2007; 2008). For instance, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) embodies this principle by providing financial support to students from low-income households, thereby reducing economic barriers to access.

The Policy Framework calls for the recognition of justice by ensuring that the policy:

Promote multilingualism and ensure that students are not excluded from teaching and learning on the basis of their language policies. The medium of instruction must be inclusive and cater equally to all students. This should be in line with Section 6 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which provides for 11 official languages of South Africa, recognises the diminished use and status of indigenous languages and the Use of Official Languages Act, 2012 (Act No.12 of 2012) (DHET, 2016: 28).

Recognising justice is fully reflected in including diverse cultural and linguistic perspectives in the curriculum, as mandated by the framework's emphasis on decolonising education. This approach, therefore, seeks to validate and integrate indigenous knowledge systems, thereby challenging the dominance of Eurocentric paradigms in academia. However, most South African higher institutions fall short of recognising justice as the social justice theory calls for. This means that recognising justice is not fully reflected in including diverse cultural and linguistic perspectives in the curriculum, as mandated by the framework's emphasis on decolonising education. Most institutions only accommodate two languages, English and Afrikaans, and neglect another official language. Thus, excluding other students. This approach, therefore, does not seek to validate and integrate indigenous knowledge systems, thereby lacking in challenging the dominance of Eurocentric paradigms in academia. Makhanya and Zibane (2020) attest that Indigenous languages are disfavoured in South African higher education and call for advancing African Indigenous languages in South African universities as part of the transformation agenda.

Moreover, participatory justice is central to the framework's call for inclusive governance structures within higher education institutions. By promoting the active involvement of students, staff, and marginalised communities in decision-making processes, as seen by the call made by the policy to ensure that:

Dialogue forums are a necessity in institutions as they nurture a culture of debate and democratic participation in public affairs. Debates around issues of identity, social inclusion and human rights culture should take place in partnership with other institutions and civil society organisations, and these should be supported and encouraged. (DHET, 2016: 39)

Hence, “*this policy framework asserts that all TVET and CET colleges should at all times observe the rules of democratic engagement of students and staff on matters affecting them*” and further indicates that “*Institutional forums to broaden the participation of stakeholders in the governance of the institutions should be strengthened*” (DHET, 2016: 40). The framework aligns with the participatory dimension of social justice theory. This principle underscores the need to dismantle hierarchical power dynamics and foster collaborative environments where diverse voices can contribute meaningfully to institutional policies and practices. The application of social justice theory to South African higher education policies is further reinforced by the framework’s alignment with Ubuntu, which emphasises interconnectedness, mutual respect, and collective responsibility. The policy notes that:

The policy framework recognises the constitutional values underpinned in the preamble of the Constitution and which are also restated in the Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy³³ as published by the DOE in 2001. These values are democracy, non-racism and non-sexism, (Ubuntu) human dignity and social justice, accountability, respect, reconciliation, and unity in diversity (DHET, 2016: 24).

Ubuntu complements social justice theory by offering a culturally rooted perspective on inclusivity, making it particularly relevant to South Africa. Together, these frameworks advocate for a higher education system that addresses material inequities and fosters a sense of belonging and dignity among all academic community members. Despite these strides, challenges remain in fully realising the ideals of social justice within the South African higher education system. Persistent funding constraints, systemic inefficiencies, and resistance to transformative initiatives often hinder the implementation of the 2016 *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in the Post-School Education and Training System*. Furthermore, the intersectionality of social identities, such as race, gender, and disability, requires more nuanced approaches to addressing inequalities. Social justice theory offers a critical foundation for navigating these complexities, providing actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners.

The Social Justice Theory underpins major funding mechanisms in South African higher education. A clear example is the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which redistributes financial resources to historically disadvantaged students. Informed by the principles of redistribution, NSFAS has been pivotal in enabling access for students from low-income households (Wolhuter, 2023; Cele and Adewumi, 2024). While NSFAS has expanded access for low-income students, persistent challenges such as delayed disbursements and administrative inefficiencies have limited its transformative impact and highlight the gap between policy intent and practical outcomes (Adeyemo and Sehoole, 2022). Thus, to enhance participatory justice, institutions such as the University of the Western Cape have begun involving students in governance discussions around budgeting and student needs, reflecting an attempt to embed student voice into financial justice mechanisms (Mayisela, Govender and Hodgkinson-Williams, 2022).

Therefore, it can be argued that the Social Justice Theory is a valuable tool for analysing and advancing the objectives of South African higher education policies. Its emphasis on redistribution, recognition, and participation offers a comprehensive approach to addressing historical and systemic inequities. However, by integrating the principles of social justice with local philosophies like *Ubuntu*, South Africa can continue to build a higher education system that reflects its commitment to equity, inclusion, and transformation.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu, an African philosophical framework, emphasises the interconnectedness of humanity and the collective responsibility of individuals within a community (Ewuoso and Hall, 2019; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2021; Lechaba, 2022). Apartheid institutionalised historical injustices that have left lasting structural and cultural scars, including stratified access to opportunities, residual institutional racism, and persistent cultural dislocation for students from marginalised communities. In this context, *Ubuntu* offers a powerful counter-narrative and framework for transformation. It challenges higher education's lingering competitive and individualistic ethos by promoting interconnectedness, communal care, and shared humanity. By foregrounding these values, *Ubuntu* helps reimagine institutions as inclusive, nurturing academic communities where students, faculty, and staff feel seen, supported, and valued.

Moreover, *Ubuntu* aligns closely with emerging movements that advocate for Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), decolonisation, and Africanisation of higher education. These movements call for the re-centring of African epistemologies, languages, and worldviews within the academy. *Ubuntu* strengthens this call by legitimising communal knowledge production, relational pedagogy, and holistic well-being, which are often overlooked in Eurocentric education models. For example, integrating *Ubuntu* into curriculum design enables institutions to reflect students' diverse cultural and historical experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and validating lived realities and patterns.

Ubuntu can help dismantle the competitive and individualistic ethos that often characterises higher education by foregrounding interconnectedness and mutual care principles because promotes a collaborative environment where every member of the academic community, students, staff, and faculty, feels valued and supported. Central to *Ubuntu*'s relevance in fostering a sense of belonging is its focus on recognising and affirming the inherent dignity and worth of every individual (Ewuoso, 2023; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2021; Lechaba, 2022). This perspective challenges higher education institutions to move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and toward deeper, systemic changes that address exclusionary practices. For example, curricula can be adapted to reflect students' diverse cultural and historical experiences, ensuring that all students see their identities and contributions reflected in their education.

Initiatives such as culturally responsive teaching, peer mentoring programs, and student

support services rooted in *Ubuntu* principles can create environments where students feel connected and supported both academically and personally. It also calls for an ethic of care in leadership and decision-making processes within higher education (Ewuoso and Hall, 2019; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2021; Lechaba, 2022). Institutional leaders can embody *Ubuntu* by fostering participatory governance structures with diverse voices in shaping policies and practices which build trust and solidarity and align with *Ubuntu's* commitment to shared responsibility and collective flourishing. Similarly, it emphasises relationality highlighting the importance of creating dialogue, reconciliation, and healing spaces within higher education (Ewuoso and Hall, 2019; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2021; Lechaba, 2022).

Ubuntu's potential to foster a culture of belonging in higher education also extends to promoting global citizenship and cross-cultural understanding (Ewuoso and Hall, 2019; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2021; Lechaba, 2022). By embracing *Ubuntu's* values, institutions can prepare students to engage with a diverse and interconnected world, equipping them with the skills and mindset to navigate complex social and cultural landscapes.

It is clear then that *Ubuntu* provides a rich and transformative framework for fostering a culture of belonging and community in higher education. Its principles of interconnectedness, mutual care, and respect challenge institutions to reimagine their roles as inclusive spaces where every individual is valued and supported. By embedding *Ubuntu* into its policies, curricula, and practices, higher education institutions can address systemic inequities, promote relationality, and build communities that reflect the ideals of justice, inclusivity, and collective well-being. In doing so, they not only honour the spirit of *Ubuntu* but also contribute to the broader goal of societal transformation.

Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy prioritises empowering students, particularly those from marginalised or disadvantaged groups, by fostering a critical awareness of systemic inequalities and encouraging collective action for change (Sandars, 2017; Dehler, Welsh and Lewis, 2001). It challenges traditional, hierarchical models of education that often reinforce power disparities, replacing them with dialogical, participatory methods that value diverse voices and experiences (Sandars, 2017; Dehler *et al.*, 2001). It critiques the 'banking model' of education, where teachers are seen as authoritative figures who deposit knowledge into passive students. This model perpetuates existing power structures by positioning students as recipients rather than active contributors to knowledge creation (Sandars, 2017; Dehler *et al.*, 2001). In contrast, critical pedagogy reimagines education as a collaborative process where students and educators co-construct knowledge through dialogue. This approach disrupts the traditional teacher-student hierarchy, creating an environment that promotes mutual respect, critical thinking, and shared agency (Sandars, 2017; Dehler *et al.*, 2001).

In the context of promoting inclusivity, critical pedagogy offers tools to interrogate and

address systemic biases embedded in curricula, teaching practices, and institutional policies. For instance, it encourages educators to critically examine whose knowledge and perspectives are privileged in academic content and whose are excluded. Scholars such as Woods, Anakok, Clinedinst and Lee (2023) attest that critical pedagogy advocates for the decolonisation of curricula, particularly in predominantly white institutions, by integrating multicultural perspectives and challenging Eurocentric narratives. This involves creating inclusive spaces where students can share their diverse knowledge and experiences, thus reshaping knowledge production to include all cultures and knowledge systems by integrating diverse cultural narratives, epistemologies, and experiences into the curriculum; critical pedagogy fosters a more inclusive learning environment that affirms the identities and histories of all students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds (Woods *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, critical pedagogy empowers students to analyse and challenge societal structures perpetuating inequities (Stansberry Brusnahan, Harkins Monaco, Fuller and Dixon, 2023). Critical reflection and dialogue encourage students to connect their lived experiences with broader social, political, and economic systems. This fosters a deeper understanding of how power operates in their lives and communities. This process of conscientisation, as described by Freire, helps students recognise their capacity to act as agents of change within and beyond the educational setting. Critical pedagogy also emphasises the importance of creating equitable classroom dynamics that resist the reproduction of societal hierarchies (Miller-Hargis and Bender-Slack, 2023). Educators practising critical pedagogy intentionally cultivate inclusive spaces where all voices are heard and valued. They employ teaching strategies prioritising active participation, such as collaborative projects, open discussions, and problem-posing methods, inviting students to engage critically with complex issues. This participatory approach enhances learning outcomes and fosters students' sense of belonging and empowerment.

Furthermore, critical pedagogy recognises the intersectionality of identity and its impact on educational experiences (Stansberry Brusnahan *et al.*, 2023). By addressing how race, gender, class, sexuality, and other social categories intersect to shape students' opportunities and challenges, educators can better understand and respond to the diverse needs of their students. This nuanced approach ensures that inclusivity is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a dynamic and context-sensitive process.

In higher education, critical pedagogy can be particularly effective in disrupting entrenched power dynamics that exclude or marginalise certain groups (Goriss-Hunter, 2023; Miller-Hargis and Bender-Slack, 2023). For example, it can inform policies and practices that diversify faculty, decolonise curricula, and support underrepresented students. By embedding critical pedagogy into institutional frameworks, universities can move beyond superficial commitments to equity and inclusion, fostering transformative change that addresses root causes of exclusion and inequality.

While critical pedagogy offers significant tools for addressing systemic biases, it also faces challenges in implementation, such as resistance from traditional educational structures and the need for comprehensive training for educators (Shahjahan, Estera,

Surla and Edwards, 2021). These challenges highlight the ongoing need for dialogue and adaptation in educational practices to fully realise the potential of critical pedagogy in fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments. Therefore, it can be argued that critical pedagogy is a powerful tool for challenging entrenched power dynamics and promoting inclusivity in education. Its emphasis on dialogue, reflection, and collective action empowers students to critically engage with and transform the systems that shape their lives. Educators and institutions can create more equitable and inclusive learning environments by adopting this approach, laying the foundation for broader social change.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality moves beyond single-axis analyses of discrimination to recognise the complexity of lived experiences and the unique challenges individuals face at the intersection of multiple marginalised identities. In addressing compounded forms of exclusion, intersectionality provides a lens to understand how systemic barriers affect individuals differently based on the confluence of their social identities (Stansberry Brusnahan *et al.*, 2023). For instance, a Black woman may face discrimination not solely based on her race or gender but on the intersection of the two, resulting in a unique experience of oppression that is not fully captured by analyses that consider race or gender independently. This compounded exclusion often manifests in ways overlooked or misunderstood by policies or interventions adopting a one-dimensional approach.

Intersectionality is particularly relevant in addressing exclusion within education systems, where students' experiences are shaped by the intersections of their social, cultural, and economic backgrounds (Reggiani, Gagnon and Lunn 2024). Marginalised groups, such as students with disabilities from low-income communities or LGBTQ+ students of colour, encounter multiple reinforcing barriers that limit their access to resources, equitable opportunities, and inclusive learning environments (Reggiani *et al.*, 2024). Traditional educational policies and practices, which often focus on singular dimensions of diversity, fail to account for these compounded exclusions, inadvertently perpetuating inequities. Scheurich and Mason (2024) attest that traditional educational policies often overlook the interconnectedness of race, gender, and class, leading to compounded exclusions (Scheurich and Mason, 2024). Hence, an intersectionality-based framework can reveal how these systemic inequities manifest in educational settings, providing insights into the experiences of marginalised groups (Scheurich and Mason, 2024; Carvalho *et al.*, 2024).

By applying an intersectional lens, educators and policymakers can better understand how exclusion operates and tailor interventions to address the specific needs of diverse student populations (Carvalho *et al.*, 2024). For example, an intersectional approach to addressing gender disparities in STEM education would focus on increasing female participation and examine how race, socioeconomic status, and other factors intersect to shape the experiences of women of colour or women from low-income backgrounds in these fields. This understanding enables the development of more targeted and effective

strategies for fostering inclusivity and equity.

Moreover, intersectionality underscores the importance of amplifying the voices of those at the intersections of multiple marginalised identities (Reggiani *et al.*, 2024; Carvalho, Pradelski, and Williams, 2024). In practice, this involves creating platforms for students, educators, and community members to share their lived experiences, thereby informing policies and practices with insights that reflect the realities of compounded exclusion. This participatory approach ensures that solutions are rooted in the perspectives and needs of those most affected by systemic inequities. It also challenges institutions to evaluate and dismantle structural inequalities that perpetuate compounded exclusions critically (Scheurich and Mason, 2024). This involves addressing explicit forms of discrimination and interrogating implicit biases, institutional norms, and power dynamics that marginalise certain groups. For instance, higher education institutions can use intersectionality to guide efforts to decolonise curricula, diversify faculty, and implement support systems that recognise the intersecting challenges faced by underrepresented students.

Furthermore, it contributes to theoretical advancements by offering a more comprehensive understanding of social justice. It encourages scholars and practitioners to move beyond dichotomous frameworks and adopt holistic approaches that reflect the interconnected nature of social identities and systems of oppression. This theoretical depth enhances the capacity to develop transformative solutions that address the root causes of exclusion rather than merely mitigating its symptoms.

Considering the systemic barriers that persist and the ongoing efforts needed to dismantle the challenges in higher education effectively, such as those mentioned above, it can be argued that intersectionality is indispensable in addressing compounded forms of exclusion because it illuminates the complex ways social identities intersect to shape experiences of inequality. By integrating this framework into educational policies, practices, and research, stakeholders can develop more inclusive, equitable, and effective strategies for fostering diversity and social justice. Through its emphasis on complexity, inclusivity, and empowerment, intersectionality serves as a critical tool for challenging systemic inequities and creating transformative change.

Conceptual framework model

The Integrated Framework for Addressing Inequality in Higher Education (Figure 1) below provides a structured approach to tackling persistent disparities within the sector. The model is presented in a circular form or diagram from the inside (core) to the outside. At its core, the model places the issue of systemic inequalities in higher education as the central focus. These inequalities, deeply rooted in socioeconomic, cultural, and structural factors, require comprehensive and multidimensional strategies to address them effectively. The framework is built on four interconnected theoretical foundations that guide its approach. Social Justice Theory. Critical Pedagogy complemented by Ubuntu Philosophy and Intersectionality. From these theoretical insights, the framework

derives actionable solutions as discussed above.

Integrating the elements presented in the figure above aims to create an inclusive, equitable, and participatory higher education system. By systematically linking theoretical insights to practical solutions, the framework ensures that interventions are holistic, addressing the root causes of inequality while promoting sustainable, inclusive practices across higher education institutions. Through this approach, the framework offers a pathway to transforming higher education into a more equitable and just environment for all.

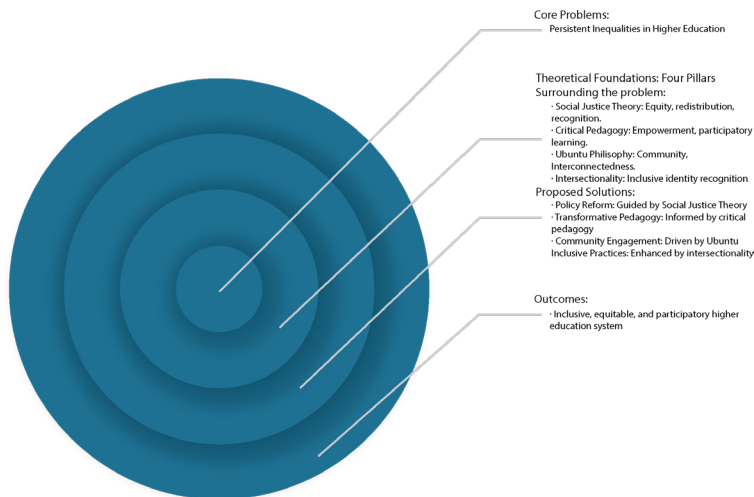


Figure 1: Integrated Framework for Addressing Inequality in Higher Education

Based on Figure 1 of the proposed conceptual framework for addressing inequality in higher education, the example below demonstrates how the Integrated Framework can comprehensively address inequalities in higher education, creating a more inclusive and equitable environment as part of the recommendations of the study.

A step-by-step implementation approach: Using the Integrated Framework for Addressing Inequality in Higher Education

Context

A university or college (Higher education institution) identifies a persistent achievement gap between students from low-income backgrounds and their peers. The institution seeks to reduce this gap and foster inclusivity by applying the Integrated Framework for Addressing Inequality in Higher Education.

Step 1: Understanding the core problem

The university collects and analyses data showing that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face systemic barriers such as inadequate access to resources, limited academic support, and feelings of isolation.

Step 2: Applying theoretical foundations

Social Justice Theory: The university revises its financial aid policy to ensure equitable access to resources for low-income students. Scholarships and grants are redistributed based on need, and underfunded programs receive increased funding.

Critical Pedagogy: Faculty receive training on participatory teaching methods that empower all students to engage critically with course material. Pedagogical strategies like group projects, peer learning, and inclusive curricula are introduced to make learning more collaborative and accessible.

Ubuntu: The institution fosters community by introducing mentorship programs that pair senior students with incoming disadvantaged students. Community-building events, such as cultural celebrations and shared service projects, promote interconnectedness.

Intersectionality: Recognising overlapping barriers (for example gender and socioeconomic status), targeted support programs are developed for female students from low-income households. Workshops address the unique challenges faced by these students, including career planning and personal development.

Step 3: Implementing proposed solutions

Policy Reform: New policies are adopted to reduce structural barriers, such as creating a fund for affordable textbooks and technology access for low-income students.

Transformative Pedagogy: Higher institution academics incorporate real-world, problem-solving activities that reflect diverse perspectives into their courses. Student feedback mechanisms are established to ensure the curriculum remains inclusive and engaging.

Community Engagement: Partnerships with local organisations provide students with internships and service-learning opportunities, fostering practical skills and community involvement.

Inclusive Practices: University programmes incorporate training for staff to recognise and address unconscious biases. Safe spaces are created where students from marginalised groups can share experiences and seek support.

Step 4: Measuring outcomes

The university monitors progress using metrics such as improved retention rates, narrowed achievement gaps, and increased participation in extracurricular activities by previously marginalised students.

Step 5: Iterative refinement

Using ongoing feedback from students and faculty, the university refines its strategies to address emerging challenges, ensuring the framework remains dynamic and effective.

Conclusions and recommendations

Persistent inequalities in higher education remain a significant barrier to fostering inclusivity and equity within educational systems. This paper highlights the urgency of addressing these disparities through a conceptual framework integrating the Social Justice Theory, Critical Pedagogy, *Ubuntu* Philosophy, and Intersectionality. Together, these theoretical underpinnings form a robust foundation for understanding the complexities of inequality and guiding transformative action. The framework proposes actionable strategies to dismantle systemic barriers and promote an equitable, participatory educational environment, including policy reform, transformative pedagogy, community engagement, and inclusive practices. By aligning theoretical insights with practical interventions, the study offers a pathway toward creating an education system that addresses inequality and fosters a culture of inclusion and interconnectedness.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, policy reform must prioritise equitable resource distribution, grounded in the principles of Social Justice Theory. Policymakers should consider redistributive and participatory justice mechanisms to ensure that marginalised groups receive adequate support and representation. Theoretical contributions of this study lie in its application of justice-based frameworks to the context of higher education, particularly in addressing systemic inequalities (Fraser, 2008; Burke *et al.*, 2016). Redistributive justice emphasises equitable allocation of resources to marginalised groups, ensuring that financial, infrastructural, and academic support mechanisms are accessible. Recognitive justice highlights the need for acknowledgement and respect for diverse identities and experiences, urging institutions to create inclusive environments that affirm cultural and social differences. Participatory justice, meanwhile, advocates for the inclusion of marginalised voices in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among all stakeholders (Fraser, 2008; Burke *et al.*, 2016).

From a practical perspective, the study recommends that higher education institutions prioritise these principles in their policies and practices. This can include targeted financial aid programs, mentorship initiatives for underrepresented groups, and training

for educators on inclusive teaching methodologies. Institutions should also engage in regular dialogue with students and communities to ensure that their needs and perspectives are reflected in institutional frameworks. For example, integrating diverse cultural narratives into the curriculum and promoting participatory governance structures can create an environment that values and supports inclusion. Curriculum design must also reflect these principles. Incorporating interdisciplinary courses that address social justice and equity can help students understand the broader societal implications of their education. Additionally, adopting flexible learning pathways and leveraging technology to support personalised learning can further enhance access and inclusion for diverse students.

Practical recommendations for theory-informed approaches to policy and practice are essential for addressing persistent challenges in social inclusion within higher education. Integrating theoretical frameworks such as those mentioned into policy development and implementation ensures that interventions are contextually relevant and impactful. One key recommendation is adopting participatory justice principles in policy design and decision-making processes (Fraser, 2008; Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2016). This approach emphasises the need for equitable representation of diverse stakeholders, including students, educators, and community members, in shaping institutional policies (Fraser, 2008; Burke *et al.*, 2016). For instance, establishing inclusive advisory committees can ensure that marginalised voices actively discuss resource allocation, curriculum development, and institutional priorities. Participatory justice also calls for transparent mechanisms that facilitate the recognition of cultural diversity and address historical inequities, fostering an environment of mutual respect and shared accountability. Institutions should create and nurture networks connecting students from underrepresented groups with mentors, peers, and industry professionals (Beard, 2021; Mishra, 2020). For example, mentorship programs tailored to the needs of first-generation college students or students from low-income backgrounds can bridge the gap in access to knowledge and opportunities. Additionally, fostering peer support networks and alumni engagement initiatives can build a sense of community and belonging, which are critical for retention and success.

While Social Justice Theory and *Ubuntu* have guided previous policies, their transformative potential is hindered when disconnected from institutional practices. This study proposes their integration into a unified, action-driven model. Implementing transformative pedagogy, informed by Critical Pedagogy, is essential for empowering students and fostering participatory learning environments. Teachers and educators should receive training to adopt these approaches, emphasising empowerment and critical thinking skills. Third, integrating *Ubuntu* philosophy into community engagement initiatives can strengthen the sense of interconnectedness and collective responsibility within educational institutions. Universities and colleges should actively involve communities in decision-making, fostering collaboration and mutual respect. Lastly, inclusive practices informed by intersectionality must address the multifaceted nature of identity, ensuring that policies and practices accommodate diverse student experiences and needs. Institutions should conduct regular evaluations to identify and mitigate

intersecting barriers to inclusion.

Intersectionality provides a framework for tailoring policies and practices to address individuals' unique challenges at the intersection of multiple marginalised identities. Institutions must conduct thorough assessments to understand the diverse experiences of their student populations (Crenshaw, 2021; Carastathis, 2014; Bowleg, 2012; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016). For example, a black female student with a disability may encounter unique barriers that differ from those of her peers. Targeted interventions, such as accessible infrastructure, inclusive teaching methods, and culturally responsive support services, can help address these specific needs. Training programs for educators and staff on intersectional approaches to diversity and inclusion are vital for creating a more inclusive campus culture.

To operationalise these theoretical insights, institutions should invest in data-driven strategies. Collecting and analysing data on student demographics, experiences, and outcomes can identify gaps in inclusion efforts and inform evidence-based interventions. Regularly evaluating the impact of policies and practices ensures accountability and continuous improvement. Moreover, fostering cross-sector collaborations with policymakers, community organisations, and industry partners can amplify the reach and effectiveness of inclusion initiatives. Incorporating these theory-informed recommendations into higher education policies and practices offers a pathway to transformative change. By addressing systemic barriers, enhancing relational networks, and recognising the complexities of identity, institutions can create environments where all students have the opportunity to thrive. This approach advances social inclusion and enriches the educational experience for the entire academic community.

Thus, as part of the recommendation, the study recommends a conceptual framework which integrates all three theories rather than implementing one theory on its own.

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A Desktop Evaluation of Plans and Performances of a Sample of Public Universities with Respect to Institutionalising Social Inclusion in Higher Education in South Africa

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Abstract

Social inclusion in higher education is a critical element within the broader national imperative of transforming higher education in South Africa. Its goal is to democratise higher education by making it accessible to all who have interest in it irrespective of race, gender, socio-economic class, ethnicity, hometown or village, and physical conditions – with or without disability. To this end, the government promulgated the *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training System in South Africa* in 2016. Higher Education is an integral part of the post-school education and training system in South Africa. Accordingly, the *Policy Framework* has specific provisions on the programmes that the higher education sector is expected to develop and implement to foster the realisation of social inclusion within the sector. The *Policy Framework* identifies eight priority or focus areas for interventions in this regard. These are governance, democratic representation, access for disadvantaged students, disability inclusion, dialogue forums, gender equity, healthcare and HIV/AIDS, and student accommodation. This paper reviews literature on the situation regarding these eight areas within the higher education sector. It then proceeds to report on a desktop evaluation of the strategic plans and implementation programmes of six sampled universities with respect to the eight priority or focus areas of intervention as stipulated by the *Policy Framework*. The findings indicate that the sampled universities have made commitments and have developed plans to institutionalise some, but not all aspects of social inclusion as identified in the *Policy Framework*. They also indicate that the commitments are not matched by action to develop and implement relevant intervention programmes. The findings suggest that the *Policy Framework* itself is not a point of reference in the plans and actions of the sampled universities, which is a matter of concern.

Keywords: Access, democratic representation, disability inclusion, dialogue forums, gender equity, governance, healthcare, social inclusion

Introduction

The notion of social inclusion in higher education focuses on democratising higher education, making it the business of anyone and everyone who has interest in it. While this notion appeals to people of different ideological leanings in society, different ideologies emphasise varying aspects of it. Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler and Bereded-Samuel (2010) observe that, for example, neoliberal ideology emphasises access; social justice ideology prioritises participation; and human potential ideology emphasises success. Therefore, in its broader sense, the notion of social inclusion encompasses making higher education accessible to diverse population groups, facilitating active participation of students from the diverse population groups, and enabling success of the participating students. From this perspective, social inclusion is a multifaceted notion that goes beyond simply increasing access to higher education for historically disadvantaged groups, to include meaningful engagement and fostering the achievement of empowered success of students from diverse population groups, diverse social economic backgrounds, both abled and disabled.

Worldwide there have been concerns about the lack of meaningful social inclusion in higher education. These concerns have resulted in governments and higher education institutions taking steps towards promoting and advancing social inclusion in higher education. The first documented advocacy to promote social inclusion is believed to have taken place in France in mid-1970s (Rawal, 2008). It later spread to other European countries. However, it is Australia which is believed to have been the first country to formally social inclusion in higher education as a national policy matter aimed at tackling inequality and promoting fairness and equal treatment in higher education (Gidley *et al.*, 2010).

In South Africa, social inclusion in higher education is an integral part of the country's post-apartheid programme of transforming higher education. Before the transition to democracy, South Africa's history was marked by deep racial, social, and economic inequalities. With respect to higher education, the deep racial, social, and economic inequalities were entrenched and enforced by legislation such as the Bantu Education Act of 1953 and the Extension of University Education Act of 1959. Such laws imposed segregated and unequal education and training opportunities for citizens (DHET, 2016). The new democratic dispensation carried with it the responsibility to dismantle the legacy of these inequalities and to build a society founded on equality, democracy, and social cohesion. Higher education, long regarded as one of the central bastions of exclusion, was given a renewed mandate to serve as an engine of transformation, inclusion, and equity (Soudien, 2010; Batisai, Makhafola and Maoba, 2022).

One of the hallmarks of the democratic era has been the promulgation of policies and legislative frameworks focused on transforming the entire education sector (Nieuwenhuis and Sehoole, 2013). A suite of legal and policy frameworks was introduced to embed social inclusion as a core purpose of the higher education system. The *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in the Post-School Education and Training (PSET)*

System (hereinafter simply referred to as the *Policy Framework*) is but one of the critical policy documents promulgated during the second decade of democracy. It and related policy documents indicate the high priority that government accords to dismantling the frameworks that enabled, facilitated, entrenched and reinforced apartheid; and replacing such with policy and legislative frameworks that seek to promote and advance democratic and inclusive higher education environment.

It is important to acknowledge the concerns expressed by many scholars that this commitment to dismantling the frameworks that enabled, facilitated, entrenched and reinforced apartheid; and to replacing such with policy and legislative frameworks that seek to promote and advance democratic and inclusive higher education environment, is not matched equal zeal and commitment to implementing the policies and frameworks. Student movements across South African universities, exemplified by protests such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, were motivated, to a greater extent, by the increasing gaps between policy positions and poor implementation at the ground level (Wolhuter and Langa, 2021; Mabokela and Mlambo, 2017; Mpofu, 2017; Daniel, 2021).

This paper seeks to examine what the *Policy Framework* expects of higher education institutions to have in place to promote and advance the realisation of social inclusion in higher education. It also seeks to assess how public universities have responded to the imperatives articulated in the *Policy Framework*.

An overview of *Policy Framework*'s provisions focused on higher education

The *Policy Framework* is for the post-school education and training system. However, it has sections with specific provisions focused on higher education institutions, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, and other post-school education and training institutions, respectively. The focus in this paper is on provisions in the *Policy Framework* that are focused on higher education institutions.

For higher education institutions in particular, the *Policy Framework* identifies eight focus areas that the institutions should prioritise to address in order to promote the realisation of social inclusion in higher education. The first one is 'governance'. On this, the *Policy Framework* stipulates that university governing bodies should reflect diversity, safeguard constitutional freedoms such as freedom of association and expression, and ensure that council members are trained on social inclusion. These structures play a vital role in developing and implementing progressive institutional policies that promote inclusivity.

The second area is 'democratic representation of staff and students. On this, the *Policy Framework* stipulates that the representation of both staff and students must align with broader debates on access and transformation. It supports interventions such as staff development, mentorship, and programmes like the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP). Institutions are expected to adopt clear transformation policies that guide staff promotion, teaching, and learning, while also monitoring employment equity

in line with relevant national legislation.

The third area is ‘improving access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. On this, the *Policy Framework* observes that expanding access remains a priority, particularly for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. The state has enhanced financial support through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and sought to assist the ‘missing middle’ students who fall outside the funding thresholds, but cannot afford university fees. This acknowledges that most Black students entering higher education come from poor and/or middle-income backgrounds.

The fourth area is ‘addressing the needs of students and staff with disabilities. On this, the *Policy Framework* requires universities to integrate disability considerations into institutional infrastructure and policy initiatives. It urges universities to develop and run disability units, improve facilities that cater for the needs of students and staff with disabilities, and adopt policies aimed at supporting students and staff with disabilities. The framework stresses that inclusion must extend beyond access to ensuring equitable participation.

The fifth area is ‘dialogue forums’. Concerning this area, the *Policy Framework* calls for the establishment of structured dialogue platforms within universities as a way of nurturing debate, fostering democratic participation, and strengthening institutional cultures of inclusivity. Such forums contribute to open communication and the building of socially cohesive communities within higher education.

The sixth area is ‘gender equity’. Regarding this, the *Policy Framework* observes that despite tangible progress in promoting and advancing gender equity, gender disparities remain a persistent challenge. It calls for policies that promote women’s participation not only as students and staff but also as leaders and researchers, particularly in male-dominated fields such as engineering and political science. These measures should be formally integrated into institutional transformation reports.

The seventh area is ‘healthcare and HIV/AIDS’. On this, the *Policy Framework* stipulates that universities should establish health centres and student support services to promote wellness and healthy lifestyles. In particular, HIV and AIDS awareness and education campaigns should be prioritised to address one of South Africa’s most pressing public health challenges within the student population.

The eighth area is ‘student accommodation’. Concerning this, the *Policy Framework* stipulates that student residence policies should be centrally managed, and that student residences should be free from racial segregation or discriminatory practices. It explicitly calls for the banning of harmful initiation practices common in student residences on some university campuses in the country, that may mask discrimination, and for residence staffing policies to reflect employment equity. Student housing is seen as an important space for promoting and advancing social inclusion and cohesion.

Literature-based situational analysis of social inclusion in higher education

This section of the paper reviews literature that depicts the prevailing situation in higher education pertaining to the matter of social inclusion. This literature-based situational analysis focuses on the eight priority areas of social inclusion as articulated the *Policy Framework*.

Governance

Governance is the framework by which organisations or institutions are directed and steered. It identifies who can make decisions, who has the authority to act on behalf of the organisation, and who is accountable for how an organisation and its people behave and perform (Pandey, 2004). Within the South African higher education system, governance has been identified as a key vehicle for promoting the realisation of social inclusion. The Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2002) notes that governance outcomes are shaped not only by formal structures and policies but also by institutional culture and socio-economic realities.

Governance in public universities is typically understood as the collection of councils, senates, institutional forums, and policies that shape institutional priorities. The way institutions are governed has direct consequences for resource distribution and inclusion (Republic of South Africa, 1997; CHE, 2008; Varghese and Michael, 2014). It also influences institutional decisions on whether an institution should embody socially inclusive practices such as a diverse curriculum and participatory decision-making (Subotzky, 2003; Habib, Morrow and Bentley, 2008; Jansen, 2004; Kulati, 2000; Hall and Symes, 2005).

Though a process of negotiation, the higher education sector's role players and government settled on adopting 'cooperative governance'. This is supposed to be manifested at different levels. For example, within an institution, structures such as university councils, senates, institutional forums, and student representative councils are expected to cooperatively govern an institution so as to enable the institution to focus on pursuing the fulfilment of its mission and visions without the instability that could be engendered by irreconcilable different interests of constituencies such as benefactors, management, staff and students. At a national level, cooperative governance is meant to nurture and sustain a climate of cooperation and good co-existence between universities and government, with government focusing on national planning and funding, while institutions focus on delivering quality higher education and conducting high impact research without being dictated to by government (Saidi, 2025). It was believed at the time of adoption that the 'cooperative governance' model would transform higher education into a more democratic, inclusive space. However, its implementation has been fraught with tensions between state control and university autonomy (Sayed, 2000). These tensions have sometimes limited universities' ability to pursue transformation agendas that prioritise social inclusion, leaving questions about whether cooperative governance

has been able to deliver on its promise of aligning equity goals with academic freedom.

The literature further highlights the rise of managerialism, which imports corporate-style controls into higher education. While this may improve efficiency, critics argue that it sidelines academic voices and deemphasises transformation (Ntshoe, 2004; Adams, 2016). When efficiency becomes the dominant logic, inclusion risks being treated as secondary to financial stability. Hybrid governance models now attempt to balance managerial priorities with transformation imperatives, but these tensions often determine how effectively institutions can advance inclusive access, curriculum reform, and student support (Luescher and Lange, 2016).

Although staff and students are formally included in governance structures such as student representative councils and unions, these bodies often lack real influence. Decision-making power remains concentrated at the top, reproducing existing inequalities along race, class, and status lines (Brown, 2024; Luescher, 2009). This undermines the goals of inclusive governance, leading to recurring conflicts and demands for greater transparency and accountability. The failure to distribute power equitably within governance perpetuates exclusion, even in institutions that have diversified their demographics.

The sector has also witnessed instances of breakdown in governance within higher education institutions. Such are often linked to financial mismanagement, leadership crises, and weak accountability, which have led the state to place universities under administration (Mthethwa, 2024). While such interventions aim to restore functionality, they also expose the fragility of governance systems in delivering sustained social inclusion. Persistent inequalities, weak accountability structures, and societal pressures make it difficult for ambitious equity policies to translate into everyday practices of belonging and empowerment.

In the main, the literature underscores the point that social inclusion in South African higher education remains incomplete and contested. While post-apartheid reforms have opened access and introduced policies aimed at equity, governance tensions, between state and institutional authority, between managerialism and collegiality, and between representation and power concentration, continue to undermine meaningful participation. Therefore, the challenge is not only to broaden access but also to create governance cultures and practices that enable all voices to shape the university experience.

Democratic representation of staff and students

While democratic representation in South African universities is framed as a mechanism for advancing social inclusion, research shows that this representation often fails to translate into substantive change. Luescher's (2009) study of the University of Cape Town illustrates that the integration of 'race' into governance can become more symbolic than

transformative, resulting in representative structures that do not dismantle exclusionary practices. Similarly, Van Schalkwyk, Van Lill, and Bailey (2022) highlight that while universities may show surface-level demographic shifts, these seldom correspond with meaningful participation. This disconnect reveals how inclusion is compromised when representation focuses on appearances rather than empowering historically excluded groups to influence decision-making.

Beyond formal structures, student activism has emerged as a critical driver of social inclusion. Movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall exposed the limitations of institutional representation frameworks in addressing systemic inequalities. These campaigns broadened the conversation to include curriculum reform, symbolic transformation, and access to education, issues that directly affect inclusion but were neglected within official channels (Ramoupi, 2022; Daniel, 2021). Yet, while activism amplifies marginalised voices and forces institutional responsiveness, scholars warn that such change is unstable when not embedded into governance processes. This demonstrates that without sustainable mechanisms for absorbing activist demands, inclusion remains partial and reversible.

Some scholars emphasise that representation without substantive voice undermines inclusivity. Banda and Mafofo (2016) note that universities often commodify the language of transformation to project inclusivity while maintaining exclusionary cultures. Similarly, Cornell and Kessi (2017) show that even when the demographics of staff and students shift, exclusion persists if institutional cultures remain embedded in whiteness. This means that numerical presence alone does not equate to inclusion. Genuine inclusion requires cultural transformation that enables historically marginalised groups to feel a sense of belonging and agency on campuses of the universities, particularly on campuses of previously white universities.

Structural and spatial barriers further undermine social inclusion in higher education. Durrheim, Trotter, Piper, and Manicom (2004) argue that the pursuit of representation as a numerical target reduces inclusion to a metric, neglecting deeper issues of integration and equity. Similarly, Higham (2012) and Alexander and Tredoux (2010) show that everyday practices of informal segregation continue to shape who participates and whose voices are sidelined in universities. These findings demonstrate that social inclusion cannot be achieved by policy changes alone. It requires addressing lived experiences of exclusion in classrooms, residences, and campus spaces.

Scholars also propose pathways toward more deliberative and inclusive representation. Mafumo and Divala (2014) advocate for structured racial dialogue that goes beyond token inclusion to confront inequality directly. Luescher (2009) and others stress the need to place race and representation at the centre of representation negotiations, treating them as matters of power redistribution rather than compliance. This approach positions inclusion as a process measured not by numbers but by the transformation of institutional decision-making, accountability, and everyday experiences of belonging. In

this sense, the literature suggests that genuine social inclusion in South African higher education requires moving from symbolic representation to practices that meaningfully reshape governance, culture, and power relations.

Improving access for students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds

Access to higher education for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds remains a cornerstone of South Africa's transformation and social justice policies. Although studies show improved enrolment of students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds since apartheid ended (CHE, 2022), many structural, financial, and cultural barriers still obstruct their meaningful inclusion. The understanding of 'access' has evolved beyond mere entry to also include intellectual inclusion, success, retention, and a sense of belonging.

Among the most frequently cited obstacles to access are financial barriers (Rammbuda, 2023). The NSFAS has been the cornerstone of the government's approach to enable students from poor and working-class families to enrol and study at university. According to a recent qualitative study, the NSFAS funding not only pays for tuition but also helps students acquire soft skills such as time management, budgeting skills, which are important for their journey through higher education (Mokgotho, Njoko and Burman, 2023). The literature also reveals major shortcomings with NSFAS. For example, students repeatedly report delayed payments, inadequate living allowances, confusing eligibility rules, and poor communication. While NSFAS promotes social inclusion by enabling students from poor and working-class backgrounds to access higher education, its administrative failures undermine that inclusion and lead to student anxiety, insecurity, and can result in them dropping out of universities (Noutchie, 2024; De Villiers, 2023).

Another key theme in the literature regarding access is that many first-time entering university students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds are underprepared, not because they lack intelligence, but because they lack specific academic skills and familiarity with higher education's demands. The CHE (2024) shows that poor high school preparation, language challenges, and unfamiliar academic practices are major obstacles that prevent students from fully engaging with the curriculum. The lack of adequate preparation among students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds reflects systemic exclusion.

Access is not merely a matter of preparedness or funding; it is deeply connected to the curriculum, pedagogy, evaluation methods, and institutional environment. Research into the challenges faced by historically disadvantaged students in both Natural Sciences and Humanities has identified significant bottlenecks, such as language barriers, difficulties navigating admissions, and inadequate support upon enrolment. Among the solutions proposed are the adoption of inclusive curricula, clearer assessment criteria, early identification of struggling students, and collaboration between universities and schools (Woldegiorgis and Chiramba 2024; Cross and Atinde, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted enduring inequalities in higher education. With the transition from in-person teaching to remote learning, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those in extended curriculum programmes, faced significant challenges such as inadequate internet connectivity, lack of digital devices, and unsuitable study environments at home. This shift underscored the uneven effects of pedagogical approaches on access and academic success, especially for students already from disadvantaged backgrounds (Menon and Motala, 2022; Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2021).

The literature also reveals that improving access for previously disadvantaged students in South Africa is a multifaceted problem. While formal admission is a crucial first step, it is not enough on its own. Meaningful inclusion is only achieved through a combination of factors, fostering student readiness, providing financial and academic aid, transforming the curriculum and institutional environment and maintaining coherent policies and effective governance.

Addressing the needs of students and staff with disabilities

The landscape of inclusion of students and staff with disabilities in South African higher education reveals a complex interplay between progressive policy frameworks and persistent implementation challenges. Research reveals that one of the themes regarding disability and social inclusion in higher education is the issue of funding mechanisms aimed at providing access to higher education to previously excluded groups. Vincent and Chiwandire (2019) demonstrate that students with disabilities face compounded financial challenges due to additional educational costs beyond those experienced by economically marginalised students generally. A study by Ndlovu and Woldegiorgis (2023) contextualises this further by highlighting how structural underfunding in the Global South not only perpetuates student indebtedness but actively undermines disabled students' ability to participate meaningfully in higher education. This suggests that market-based approaches to higher education may be fundamentally incompatible with meaningful inclusion.

While funding represents a critical barrier, Chiramba and Ndofirepi (2023) argue that the challenges faced by disadvantaged students, including those with disabilities, extend far beyond financial obstacles. The scholars maintain that the emphasis on individual resilience, while celebrating student agency, risks obscuring institutional responsibilities for creating inclusive environments. The burden of inclusion should not rest primarily on students with disabilities themselves. Furthermore, the physical and social challenges identified by Selepe and Moleleman (2022) underscore this point, revealing that students with disabilities face not only financial difficulties but also social stigma, accessibility issues, peer acceptance challenges, language barriers for visually impaired students, and unclear policies on inclusive education. These multifaceted challenges suggest that purely financial solutions, while necessary, are insufficient for achieving meaningful inclusion.

The emergence of digital learning, accelerated by COVID-19 and Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies, has created new dimensions of exclusion for students with disabilities. Technological advancement presents both opportunities and risks for disability inclusion. Without deliberate inclusive design and adequate support systems, digital transformation may exacerbate rather than reduce exclusion (Zongozzi, 2022; Zongozzi and Ngubane, 2025). Despite progressive policy frameworks, significant implementation gaps persist. Munjanja and Hendricks (2024) used selected institutions of higher learning in Raymond Mhlaba in the Eastern Cape as a case study to examine the implementation of the 2015 National Disability Policy in promoting the inclusion and rights of students with disabilities. Their findings reveal persistent barriers including inadequate staff training, insufficient resources, lack of clear policy guidelines, and student hesitation to access support due to stigma. Additionally, the scholars emphasize the need for comprehensive policy reviews, increased budgetary allocations, and enhanced staff training on disability policy and inclusivity practices.

Munjanja and Hendricks (2024) critically examine the implementation of the Disability Policy introduced in 2015 by the South African government to support the inclusion and rights of differently abled students in the Eastern Cape, revealing persistent barriers including inadequate staff training, insufficient resources, lack of clear policy guidelines, and student hesitation to access support due to stigma. Their findings underscore the need for comprehensive policy reviews, increased budget allocations, and enhanced staff training on disability policy and inclusivity practices.

Dialogue forums

Dialogue forums are considered key platforms for promoting inclusion by providing students, staff, and other stakeholders with opportunities to voice concerns, engage in deliberation, and contribute to institutional transformation. The literature points to several types of dialogue forums, including governance structures such as councils and senates, protest-driven gatherings like town halls, institutional listening sessions, and pedagogical spaces such as classroom debates and online discussion boards. While all these formats of dialogue forums can support inclusion, their impact largely depends on the extent to which they authentically incorporate diverse perspectives into decision-making (HSRC, 2022).

The #FeesMustFall movement (2015–2016) illuminated both the strengths and weaknesses of dialogue forums. While protest-driven emergency discussions occasionally secured concessions such as fee freezes, they also exposed how power imbalances shaped results. Institutional leaders and the state frequently controlled the terms of engagement, thus restricting the dialogues' capacity for structural change (Linden, 2017). This raised doubts about whether these dialogues were truly inclusive or merely ritualised consultations to legitimise already made decisions.

Research further indicates that when adequately resourced and designed with transparent

structures, dialogue forums can foster epistemic inclusion and strengthen democratic participation. Studies in pedagogy demonstrate that dialogic teaching methods and online discussion platforms, particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, enabled marginalised students to express themselves and engage more meaningfully in learning (Essa, Andrews, Mendelowitz, Reed and Fouche, 2023; Fataar, 2016). Effective dialogue forums are characterised by clearly defined mandates, genuine engagement with decision-makers, opportunities for building participant capacity, and transparent follow-up processes. In their absence, dialogue can unintentionally reproduce exclusion rather than challenge it.

Gender equity

Gender equity remains a core issue in the transformation of South African higher education. Despite improved access to higher education for women post-apartheid, research points to continued inequalities in leadership, career advancement, and decision-making roles. The literature stresses that true gender equity involves addressing systemic barriers, such as gendered workloads, biased promotions, and exclusionary institutional cultures, rather than just increasing enrolment (Moodly, 2021; Nkosi, 2025). This leads to a 'leaky pipeline' effect, with women being numerous at entry but under-represented at senior academic and leadership levels (Lopez-Inesta, Botella, Rueda, Forte and Marzal, 2020).

Institutional cultures and prevailing working conditions significantly impede the career advancement of women. Female academics frequently bear the brunt of unacknowledged labour, such as extensive teaching and committee responsibilities, which consequently restricts their capacity for research output, a crucial factor for promotion (Moodly and Toni, 2019). Furthermore, informal mentorship networks predominantly consist of men, thereby perpetuating unequal access to vital professional development and career progression opportunities. Gender-based violence (GBV) and concerns about campus safety are also identified as critical impediments to equitable participation, negatively impacting female students and staff by undermining their retention, mental well-being, and academic achievement (Mofokeng and Tlou, 2022).

Although South Africa has established strong policy commitments through frameworks such as the National Development Plan and initiatives led by the Department of Higher Education and Training, significant gaps remain in their implementation. Oversight institutions, including the Commission for Gender Equality, have consistently emphasised the need for stronger accountability measures and the development of institutional transformation strategies, yet progress has been inconsistent (CGE, 2015; De Klerk and Legoabe, 2016).

Healthcare/HIV/AIDS

The literature on healthcare, HIV/AIDS, and social inclusion in South African public

universities reveals a trajectory from early focus on epidemiological studies to more complex examinations of institutional culture and equity. Early research largely assessed knowledge levels and risky sexual behaviours, uncovering a paradox: students demonstrated awareness of HIV transmission yet continued engaging in unsafe practices (Hartell, 2005; Reddy and Frantz, 2011; Mbelle, Setswe, Sifunda, Mabaso and Maduna, 2014; Van Staden and Badenhorst, 2009). This prompted a sector-wide intervention by the organisation originally known as the Higher Education HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS), now operating as Higher Health under the Department of Higher Education and Training, which has broadened its mandate from mainstreaming HIV prevention, care and support in tertiary education to encompass student health, psychosocial wellbeing and holistic youth development, including mental health, sexual and reproductive health (HIV/TB/STI prevention), gender-based violence, substance use, disability and inclusive campus-health access across universities, TVET and community colleges (HESA, 2008; Higher Health, 2023).

These efforts positioned universities not only as educational institutions but as pivotal actors in the broader national health response. Despite these advances, the literature highlights persistent shortcomings in implementation. While HIV/AIDS education is widely acknowledged as vital, its integration into curricula has often been superficial, relegated to extracurricular activities rather than embedded across disciplines. This has been compounded by lecturers' limited expertise, anxieties about diluting disciplinary content, and insufficient training to address sensitive topics (Dasheka, Dube, Baleni, Seekoe, Katurura, Lubisi and Ter Goon, 2021). As a result, institutional responses often reflect a gap between policy rhetoric and lived realities, with students affected by HIV/AIDS continuing to encounter stigma, social exclusion, and disrupted academic trajectories (Tyabazeka, Phiri and Modeste, 2024).

Recent scholarship has shifted focus toward the role of universities in fostering social inclusion through HIV/AIDS education, framing the epidemic as a lens for addressing broader social justice issues such as inequality, gender-based violence, and marginalisation (Wood, Soudien and Reddy, 2016; Dasheka *et al.*, 2021). This approach underscores the potential of higher education moving beyond biomedical responses toward cultivating socially literate graduates capable of engaging with systemic injustice. However, evidence suggests that while support services have expanded, inclusive practices remain uneven and often constrained by entrenched prejudices and institutional inertia (Tyabazeka, Phiri and Modeste, 2024).

Overall, the body of work reveals both progress and limitations: universities have established comprehensive frameworks and policies in response to HIV/AIDS, but their transformative potential is weakened by superficial integration and unaddressed stigma. Future scholarship emphasises the need to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, strengthen evidence-based curriculum integration, and foreground the ethical responsibility of higher education institutions to create supportive environments that advance both public health and social inclusion (Wood *et al.*, 2016; Dasheka *et al.*, 2021; HESA, 2008).

Student Accommodation

The literature on student accommodation and social inclusion in South African public universities exposes the persistence of apartheid-era spatial and social inequalities, despite decades of transformation rhetoric. Post-apartheid policy frameworks positioned transformation as a central mandate, but their implementation has been undermined by vague targets and superficial commitments that mask exclusionary practices (Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2021; Banda and Mafofo, 2016). Universities often commodify transformation discourses to reinforce institutional identities that gesture toward equity without dismantling structural barriers (Banda and Mafofo, 2016). At the same time, student housing has evolved into a strategic tool for student success, offering spaces for peer support and learning communities, yet its potential is constrained by entrenched segregationist patterns (Xulu-Gama, 2019).

Empirical studies consistently show that informal racial segregation continues to shape residence life. Alexander and Tredoux (2010) found that unspoken social rules sustain racially homogenous groupings, while Durrheim *et al.* (2004) observed that transformation efforts often prioritise representation over genuine desegregation. These dynamics are reinforced by institutional cultures that alienate Black students, forcing them into assimilationist frameworks that erode cultural identity and belonging (Bazana and Mogotsi, 2017). At historically white universities, 'whiteness' remains the normative culture, with Black students reporting experiences of marginalisation and the need to adopt coping strategies against exclusion (Cornell and Kessi, 2017). In some cases, transformation policies have reopened historical wounds, as seen at the University of the Free State, where residence integration efforts provoked division rather than cohesion (Githaiga *et al.*, 2018).

The picture emerging from the literature is that of a paradox: while the demographic composition of student bodies has diversified, the lived realities of many students remain shaped by exclusionary spatial, cultural, and economic structures (Higham, 2012; Adebayo, 2021). Housing shortages, neoliberal policy frameworks, and spatial legacies of apartheid cities reinforce inequalities, ensuring that transformation remains incomplete (Okem, Myeni, Mtapuri and Nkambule, 2019; Adebayo, 2021).

Scholars argue that universities need to adopt integrated policies that combine spatial reforms with cultural transformation and evidence-based monitoring to meaningfully advance inclusion (Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2021). Without such comprehensive strategies, student accommodation risks reproducing segregation rather than fostering the social cohesion envisioned in post-apartheid higher education.

Implementation evaluation of the *Policy Framework* based on strategic plans and annual reports

Nine years after the promulgation of the *Policy Framework*, there has not been a

nationwide evaluation of how higher education institutions are putting in place measures and developing and implementing institutional policies or frameworks for promoting the realisation social inclusion on their campuses. The lack of nationwide evaluation studies makes it impossible to gauge precisely the extent to which public universities have implemented the provisions of the *Policy Framework*. For the purpose of this paper, a desktop-based evaluation of how public universities have responded or are still responding to the national imperatives as stipulated in the *Policy Framework*, was undertaken. This involved analysing the strategic plans and annual reports of six South African public universities selected through purposive sampling based on the accessibility of the strategic documents and annual reports on the institutions' official websites. The analysis focused on the 2024 annual reports, while the strategic plans varied in their periods across institutions, reflecting each institution's distinct planning cycles and long-term strategic orientations. The six selected universities included two universities of technology, three traditional research-intensive universities, and one comprehensive university.

The reporting of the findings of the analysis is structured around the eight focus areas for social inclusion identified in the *Policy Framework*.

Governance

By and large, the sampled universities make commitments in the strategic plans to good and representative governance guided by the principles of accountability, ethical leadership, transparency, and inclusivity. It, therefore, appears that there is an across the board commitment for social inclusion in terms of governance. Their annual reports indicate that the institutions have introduced mechanisms such as oversight committees, leadership training programmes, scorecards for performance evaluation, and transformation forums to strengthen governance. However, the annual reports are silent on what is in place, or what is being practiced in relation to the more specific democratic requirements of social inclusion in terms of governance as espoused in the *Policy Framework*. In particular, the strategic plans and annual reports are not very expressive on matters of representative governing structures and the active participation of staff and students in governance, which suggests that these are not always explicitly prioritised within the institutions.

Democratic representation of staff and students

The strategic plans of the sampled universities clearly articulate the institutions' commitment to building inclusive communities and addressing demographic imbalances in staff and student representation. Commitments often focus on employment equity, participatory decision-making, and collaborative institutional culture. While some strategies are articulated in broad philosophical terms, others emphasise structured policies, systems, and frameworks. Still, many lack specific timelines, monitoring

mechanisms, or detailed operational plans. Progress of implementation, as reported in the annual reports, include improvements in equity reporting, stronger employment equity committees, and greater student participation in governance structures. Increasing turnout in elections for representation on the student representative councils, new academic staff initiatives, and gender representation targets are reported in the annual reports, pointing to good progress in terms of implementing this specific directive in the Policy Framework. However, achievements remain uneven among the sample universities, and gaps persist. There is a long way to go to reach the desired level of systematically embedding democratic participation and ensuring measurable social inclusion outcomes.

Improving access for students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds

The strategic plans of the sampled universities indicate that the universities are strongly committed to widening access for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, often positioning this as a strategic priority. Commitments include expanding scholarship opportunities, developing diverse entry pathways, strengthening outreach, and linking access to long-term academic success. On the question of implementation, the annual reports indicate that some of the sampled universities are running ‘access with success’ programmes, that seek to balance expansion of access with increased levels of student success. The institutional annual reports also show remarkable improvements in enrolment demographics, increased provision of financial aid, and strengthened support programmes such as extended curriculum offerings and work-integrated learning placements, across all sampled institutions. Expanded bursary provision and targeted recruitment from disadvantaged schools further support inclusivity, are also reported. Despite these achievements, affordability challenges, particularly for the ‘missing middle’, remain insufficiently addressed across the sampled universities, and indeed, across the sector.

Addressing the needs of students and staff with disabilities

The strategic plans of the sampled universities indicate that there is variation among the institutions regarding the levels of commitment made towards integrating students and staff with disabilities in their respective university communities. While some universities commit to eliminating discrimination against students and staff with disabilities, and expanding accessibility to such groups, others make little or no explicit reference to disability in their strategic plans. Other commitments include plans to develop multi-dimensional support systems, develop and/or acquire assistive technology, and provision of dedicated disability services to staff and students with disabilities. On the ground, the annual reports document achievements that range from providing assistive devices and mobility infrastructure to students and staff with disabilities, to establishing disability units and developing policies to govern the provision of services to staff and student with disabilities. Some institutions report significant growth in enrolments of students

with disabilities, while others struggle to translate commitments into implementation and measurable outcomes. The broader picture reflects progress in certain contexts, but also a lack of institution-wide prioritisation and consistent planning for full inclusion of students and staff with disabilities.

Dialogue forums

The strategic plans of the sampled universities indicate that institutions across the board recognise dialogue as an important vehicle for inclusivity, but the institutional approaches towards the use of this vehicle differ. Some universities embed dialogue within their culture-building strategies, and others frame it in philosophical terms of 'oneness' or inclusivity. Several institutions do not make commitments regarding dialogue forums. By and large, annual reports suggest that there is a wide gap between the interventions that the *Policy Framework* require the universities to undertake regarding dialogue forums, and what the sample universities have undertaken, are undertaking or plan to undertake in the foreseeable future. The few things that some of the sampled universities have in place include structured dialogue programmes, transformation events, commemorative activities, and public lecture series. In some institutions, these initiatives are sustained and well-integrated, while in others they appear more *ad hoc* and of limited in scope. The conclusion reached from the analysis of the annual reports on this matter is that while dialogue is happening, it is not yet consistently institutionalised in and across the universities. Few formal permanent dialogue forums exist.

Gender equity

The strategic plans of all sampled universities indicate that the institutions acknowledge gender equity as central to social inclusion in higher education, often framing it through commitments to combat gender-based violence, sexism, and broader gender-based discrimination. Some institutions emphasise intersectional approaches, while others integrate gender equity into graduate attributes, leadership development, or community-building principles. Despite this, comprehensive and measurable gender equity strategies are not consistently embedded across all institutions. The annual reports indicate an assortment of initiatives being implemented to foster gender equity. They report achievements including the establishment of gender studies centres, leadership programmes, gender equity units, and GBV-focused assemblies. Other notable practices involve commemorations, training sessions, and partnerships with external stakeholders. Institutions also have sexual harassment and prevention of GBV policies. Progress is evident in the annual reports, but inconsistencies remain, particularly in setting targets, monitoring progress, and ensuring that gender equity extends into leadership, postgraduate participation, and traditionally male-dominated fields.

Healthcare and HIV/AIDS

The strategic plans of the sampled universities suggest that, by and large, the universities have not expressively attached much priority to the area of enhancing the health and wellness of students and staff. Few institutions make explicit commitments to holistic well-being and mental health and wellness of staff and students. Most of the sampled universities appear to treat wellness, healthcare and HIV/AIDS as peripheral rather than central to their social inclusion initiatives. Although this is the case, most of the institutions report to be running health service centres, HIV/AIDS and mental health awareness campaigns, mental health support programmes, and, in some instances, teaching hospitals attached to their medical schools are involved in outreach programmes focused on staff and students. HIV testing and counselling services are also implemented in certain institutions. However, many institutions report little or no progress in the general area of health and wellness, reflecting a major policy implementation gap taking into consideration the emphasis placed on this in the *Policy Framework*.

Student Accommodation

All six sampled universities are predominantly residential institutions and are, therefore, expected to pay attention to the accommodation needs of their students. Their strategic plans suggest that they all recognise the need to cater for the accommodation needs of their respective students. However, this recognition does not appear to be anchored in the understanding of the critical role that student accommodation plays and can play in promoting social inclusion. Only a few of the sampled universities integrate residential culture into transformation strategies, framing student residences as spaces for holistic development and inclusion. Others make limited or no explicit commitments to student accommodation as an area for promoting the realisation of social inclusion. They have plans for increasing available student residence spaces; enhancing the hygiene and security conditions in and around student residences; and developing and implementing programmes linking accommodation to sustainability and student well-being. However, specific prescripts of the *Policy Framework*, such as eliminating segregation, addressing harmful initiation practices, and ensuring equity in residence staffing, receive limited attention in most institutions.

Contextualising the findings

The findings presented in the preceding section and its subsections should be placed and be understood in proper context. It is clear that the strategic plans that the universities have in place, and the programmes that have they have been implementing and continue to implement, appear to be anchored in the programme for the transformation of higher education as initially espoused in the *Education White Paper 3* (Department of Education, 1997). None of the institutions explicitly anchor their plans, strategies and ongoing implementation programmes in the *Policy Framework* that sets out the parameters for advancing social inclusion in public universities. This disconnect suggests

that, the commitments to promoting and advancing social inclusion as expressed in the institutional strategic plans, and the implementation programmes and achievements reported in institutional annual plans, are not in the context of the *Policy Framework* as a guiding reference point. Instead, universities tend to frame their commitments in broad, self-defined terms, guided by the broad national transformation agenda but not the *Policy Framework*.

Although the *Policy Framework* was designed to guide higher education institutions in implementing social inclusion, the fact that many do not explicitly link their initiatives to it highlights several possible factors. Firstly, there could be limited knowledge about the *Policy Framework* and the specific requirements for higher education institutions with respect to the eight priority areas. Secondly, it could be that the universities find the provisions of the *Policy Framework* as not that feasible for implementation for various reasons including resource constraints. Thirdly, institutions could be struggling to distinguish the requirements of the *Policy Framework* from the requirements of the broad transformation agenda, and consequently they tend to gravitate towards what they have been familiar with for long, and that which make much headlines in the national media – that is the national transformation agenda. In turn, this could be an indication that the higher education policy environment is so complex with different policies approaching the same matter or similar matters from different angles and with requirements that are similar if not the same. The latter is a policy development challenge that suggests that perhaps the policies are not properly scoped before being developed.

The findings also indicate that, by and large, all of the sampled universities have fairly common aspirations towards social inclusion. The differences appear in the programmes and other interventions developed to give effect to the aspirations and commitments. In this regard, the larger and older universities appear to be doing relatively more than the smaller and newer universities. While some institutions demonstrate commendable efforts and achieve notable successes in specific domains, some institutions are lagging.

The issue of resource and capacity constraints within South African higher education institutions is often cited as a key reason behind gaps in policy implementation, and the inconsistent implementation of national directives. Limited funding, overstretched staff, and competing institutional priorities frequently hinder universities from fully aligning their activities and programmes with government policies (Mutongoza, 2025). In the context of advancing social inclusion, the *Policy Framework* recognises that some of its provisions, such as improving facilities for students and staff with disabilities, are resource-intensive (DHET, 2016). Nonetheless, the lack of resources should not be seen as a justification for inaction. While budget and capacity challenges exist, they are not insurmountable, and institutions can still make meaningful progress by embedding social inclusion within their existing programmes without requiring additional resource injection.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper has looked closely into the notion of social inclusion and the central role it plays in widening access to higher education, enhancing student success, and contributing to building a South African nation united in diversity. The democratic government places much premium on promoting social inclusion in higher education as demonstrated by its promulgation of the *Policy Framework* in 2016 which has specific focus areas for the different components of the post-school education and training system. For higher education, there are eight of such focus areas. The paper has reviewed relevant literature that provide high level situation analysis around the eight focus areas. It has also analysed strategic plans and annual reports of six sampled public universities to evaluate their commitments to developing and implementing interventions aimed at promoting and advancing social inclusion in the eight priority areas; as well as to identify which of those planned interventions have been implemented, at what scale and to what degree of success.

The findings indicate that, by and large, institutions have plans in place on various interventions to promote social inclusion. However, they fall short of explicitly aligning their practices with the *Policy Framework*. In addition, the point of reference for the institutions appears to be, in the main, the programme of transformation of higher education espoused in *Higher Education White Paper 3* and not the *Policy Framework*. This suggests that the *Policy Framework* is not well-known in higher education, perhaps because its title indicates that it is for the post-school education and training system, although higher education is a component of the post-school education and training system. For this reason, the paper recommends that the DHET should make concerted efforts to create an awareness among higher education institutions and stakeholders that the *Policy Framework* has a section that focuses on higher education, with provisions that identify higher education institutions as the implementation agencies. This will help in closing the knowledge gap, and in ensuring that public universities integrate the *Policy Framework* into their strategic and operational plans.

The paper also recommends that public universities should leverage existing facilities and expand on existing social inclusion initiatives and align them to the focus or priority areas articulated in the *Policy Framework* to foster accessible and inclusive campuses. This will allow institutions to repurpose existing facilities and initiatives to promote social inclusion without requiring new funding. A further recommendation is that public universities should collaborate with other institutions and bodies such as Higher Health; the Gender Commission; the National Council of and for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD); the Ministry of Women, Children and People with Disabilities in the Presidency; and relevant civil society organisations to plan and implement social inclusion programmes in higher education. Such partnerships will expand the scale and impact of the initiatives as well as strengthen participation and collaboration across the institutions.

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Advancing Social Inclusion in South African Higher Education: Evaluating Progress and Future Directions

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Abstract

Social inclusion in South African higher education remains critical for achieving equity, national cohesion, and progress. This paper evaluates the implementation and impact of the 2016 Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training. By analysing institutional efforts and challenges, the study highlights progress in priority areas such as access, disability inclusion, and gender equity while identifying gaps and opportunities for improvement. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study synthesises policy documents, institutional reports and interviews to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders. Findings underscore the importance of sustained commitment to fostering an inclusive academic environment.

Keywords: Disability, equity, higher education, social inclusion, higher education, policy framework, South Africa

Introduction and background

The pursuit of social inclusion within South African higher education is crucial in addressing the entrenched inequalities that have persisted since the apartheid era (Badat, 2010). These inequalities have manifested in restricted access to educational opportunities, systemic barriers for marginalised groups, and a lack of equitable representation within academic spaces (Cloete, Bailey a Maassen, 2011). In recognition of these challenges, introducing the 2016 *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training* marked a significant milestone (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2016). This Policy Framework aimed to democratise access to education and create an inclusive academic environment that fosters equity, opportunity, and social cohesion (Maassen, 2014). The Policy Framework identifies eight priority areas for advancing social inclusion, including measures to eliminate access barriers for historically disadvantaged students, promote gender equity, and address the unique needs of students and staff with disabilities (Watermeyer, McKenzie and Swartz, 2019). However, its implementation has faced significant challenges, including inconsistent institutional commitment, limited resources, and a lack of measurable outcomes to gauge progress effectively (McKenna, 2017). Despite notable

advancements, the broader discourse on social inclusion in higher education remains limited (Leibowitz, Swartz, and Bozalek, 2015). There is a pressing need for robust evaluation mechanisms, greater stakeholder engagement, and actionable insights to meet the objectives of the Policy Framework (Morrow, 2013). By systematically analysing the progress made by higher education institutions, this paper seeks to contribute to the national dialogue on fostering equity and cohesion within the sector. It aims to identify gaps, highlight successful interventions, and offer recommendations for strengthening institutional efforts towards creating a more inclusive educational landscape.

Statement of the problem

Although the 2016 Policy Framework provided a foundation for social inclusion, substantial disparities persist within South African higher education (DHET, 2016). Barriers such as inadequate funding mechanisms, limited support for students with disabilities, and entrenched inequities in gender and racial representation hinder the realisation of an inclusive academic environment (Watermeyer *et al.*, 2019). Funding shortfalls often disproportionately impact historically disadvantaged institutions, leading to unequal access to resources and infrastructure (McKenna, 2017). This creates a cycle where underfunded institutions struggle to meet the demands of inclusive education, further marginalising vulnerable groups (Badat, 2010). The limited support for students with disabilities extends beyond physical accessibility; it includes inadequate academic accommodations, insufficient assistive technologies, and a lack of trained staff to address their unique needs (Cloete *et al.*, 2011). Such gaps exacerbate feelings of exclusion among students with disabilities, hindering their academic success and overall well-being (Morrow, 2013). Gender and racial inequities persist, particularly in leadership roles and decision-making positions within higher education institutions (HEIs) (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015). Women and historically marginalised racial groups remain underrepresented, which perpetuates systemic biases and limits diverse perspectives in institutional governance (Maassen, 2014). These inequities undermine inclusivity and affect the broader institutional culture (Morley, 2013). Moreover, the absence of robust evaluation mechanisms makes it challenging to measure progress or identify areas needing intervention (Kotecha, 2017). Institutional efforts towards social inclusion remain hindered without clear benchmarks and consistent monitoring.

Aim and objectives

The aim of the paper is to evaluate the progress of South African higher education institutions in implementing the 2016 Policy Framework and identify opportunities for enhancing its impact. The specific objectives are to (a) assess the effectiveness of interventions to reduce access barriers for historically disadvantaged students; (b) evaluate institutional policies promoting disability inclusion and gender equity; and identify gaps in addressing social inclusion and provide actionable recommendations for improvement.

Conceptual/theoretical framework

This paper is grounded in the social inclusion theory, which emphasises equitable access to resources and opportunities for all members of society (Silver, 2015). Social inclusion theory is particularly pertinent in South Africa, as it addresses the systemic exclusion of marginalised groups and highlights the need for proactive interventions to achieve equity (Badat, 2010). This approach advocates for removing barriers that hinder full participation in education and society while fostering an environment where diversity is valued and respected (UNESCO, 2017).

The Policy Framework also integrates elements of social cohesion theory, which underscores the importance of building harmonious and collaborative relationships within diverse communities (Kivisto, 2017). Social cohesion involves creating a sense of belonging and shared purpose, critical for fostering unity in a historically divided society (Morrow, 2013). By emphasising inclusivity, social cohesion theory provides insights into how higher education institutions can contribute to national unity and collective progress (Maassen, 2014).

These theoretical lenses provide a comprehensive foundation for analysing institutional efforts to promote inclusivity (Singh, 2019). They help identify best practices, assess the effectiveness of current policies, and propose strategies to address gaps (Tilak, 2017). By grounding this study in these theories, it becomes possible to develop a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with achieving social inclusion in South African higher education (Watermeyer *et al.*, 2019).

Literature-based situation analysis

Existing literature underscores the transformative potential of social inclusion in higher education but highlights persistent challenges. Studies on access to higher education for historically disadvantaged groups reveal significant progress while underscoring lingering disparities. Post-apartheid South Africa has seen an increase in higher education enrolment among Black African students. As of 2022, 5.5% of Black Africans aged 18 to 29 were enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs), up from 2.9% in 2002, indicating a 2.6 percentage point rise over two decades (Statista, 2023).

The high drop-out rate of Black Africans

Despite these gains, high dropout rates remain a significant concern. A study by the Council on Higher Education [CHE], (2010) reported that at one university, 6.8% of the 2000 cohort had left by the end of the first year, increasing to 11.8% by the second year and 17.3% by the third year. These attrition rates are often linked to financial hardships and insufficient support systems, which disproportionately affect Black students (CHE, 2010). Financial constraints are also a significant barrier to student retention (Wangenge-

Ouma, 2012). The NSFAS aims to assist needy students financially, but its reach is limited, leaving many without adequate support (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012). This shortfall contributes to higher dropout rates among economically disadvantaged students.

Role of institutional culture in higher education and student success

Institutional cultures can also play a significant role in hindering student success. As Badat (2010) astutely argues, many universities in South Africa maintain practices that inadvertently alienate students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. These practices can manifest in various ways, such as:

- Curricula that neglect the experiences and perspectives of students from diverse backgrounds
- Pedagogies that prioritise individualism over collectivism, which can be alienating for students from communal cultures
- Assessment methods that favour students with privileged backgrounds, thereby disadvantaging those from under-resourced schools
- Campus environments that lack diversity and inclusivity, leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection among students from marginalised groups

These institutional practices can profoundly impact academic performance and the sense of belonging among students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. When students feel disconnected from the educational environment, they are more likely to experience decreased motivation, lower academic achievement, and higher dropout rates (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek, 2006; Tinto, 1993). Therefore, it is essential for universities to examine their institutional cultures and practices critically, and to implement strategies that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Financial barriers remain a critical challenge, and according to Letseka and Breier (2008), the cost of higher education disproportionately affects low-income households, particularly those in rural areas. This aligns with the findings of Wangenge-Ouma (2012), who emphasises that tuition fees and associated costs often lead to exclusionary practices, despite initiatives such as the NSFAS and other scholarships. However, NSFAS's coverage and implementation effectiveness limitations necessitate more comprehensive funding strategies.

Institutional culture also presents significant hurdles to achieving social inclusion. Badat (2010) argues that many universities in South Africa retain structures and practices that perpetuate exclusion, often alienating students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. This is further compounded by the lack of representation in faculty and leadership roles, as highlighted by the CHE (2016), which notes the persistent underrepresentation of women and black academics in decision-making positions.

Disability inclusion in the South African higher education sector

Disability inclusion is another critical area that requires urgent attention in the South African higher education sector. Despite policies promoting accessibility, their implementation remains inconsistent across institutions, as highlighted by Watermeyer *et al.* (2019). This inconsistency has resulted in a lack of adequate support for students with disabilities, perpetuating their marginalisation within the higher education landscape.

The physical infrastructure of numerous institutions remains inaccessible to students with disabilities and is characterised by inadequate ramps, lifts, and accessible toilets (Watermeyer *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, assistive technologies, such as screen readers and braille displays, are frequently in short supply or outdated, hindering students' ability to engage fully with academic materials (McKenzie, 2017). Additionally, tailored academic accommodations, such as extended deadlines, note-takers, and examination accommodations, are often insufficient or unavailable, leaving students with disabilities disadvantaged (Cloete *et al.*, 2011).

The consequences of these inadequacies are far-reaching, leading to feelings of isolation, exclusion, and frustration among students with disabilities (Morrow, 2013). Moreover, the lack of disability inclusion undermines the principles of social justice and equality, which are fundamental to the South African higher education system (Badat, 2010). Therefore, institutions must prioritise disability inclusion, investing in accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and tailored academic accommodations to ensure that students with disabilities have equal opportunities to succeed (DHET, 2016).

Gender equity factors in the South African higher education sector

Gender equity, despite showing some progress, remains a pressing concern in the South African higher education sector. According to Morley (2013), patriarchal norms and biases continue to permeate academia, restricting opportunities for women and perpetuating their underrepresentation, particularly in leadership roles. The persistence of these inequities is evident in the limited number of women in senior academic and administrative positions and the dearth of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Morley, 2013).

Efforts to address the inequities women face in academia, such as targeted recruitment and mentorship programmes, are frequently inadequate and ineffective (Morley, 2013). These initiatives are often underfunded, poorly monitored, and lack clear objectives and outcomes, undermining their potential to provide meaningful support and opportunities for women (Mabokela, 2003). As a result, these initiatives perpetuate the status quo, failing to challenge the existing power dynamics and social norms that perpetuate gender-based inequalities (Kwesiga, 2002).

Furthermore, the lack of gender-sensitive policies and practices within institutions

exacerbates the problem (Mama, 2003). For instance, the absence of flexible working arrangements, parental leave policies, and childcare support can create significant barriers for women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities (Okin, 1989). Similarly, the prevalence of sexist and discriminatory attitudes among some academic staff can create a hostile and unwelcoming environment for women (Benjamin, 2003).

To address these inequities, institutions must prioritise gender equity and develop targeted strategies to promote women's academic participation and advancement (UNESCO, 2019). This requires a multifaceted approach that includes the development of gender-sensitive policies and practices, providing targeted support and resources for women, and promoting a culture of inclusivity and respect (European Commission, 2019). The broader situational analysis reveals a significant gap in the monitoring and evaluation frameworks that track progress on social inclusion in South African higher education institutions. According to Cloete *et al.* (2011), the absence of clear benchmarks and regular assessments hinders institutions' ability to align their practices with policy objectives. This gap is particularly concerning, as it suggests that institutions struggle to implement and evaluate their inclusion initiatives effectively.

Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks

The absence of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework for social inclusion in South African higher education institutions has profound implications (Kotecha, 2017). A monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework refers to a structured approach that outlines how an institution will track, assess, and report on the effectiveness of its policies, programmes, and practices regarding social inclusion. It typically includes predefined indicators, data collection methods, timelines, and responsibilities to ensure systematic assessment and continuous improvement. Firstly, without such a framework, institutions struggle to identify their successes and areas requiring improvement, which is essential for enhancing and consolidating their inclusion efforts (Tilak, 2017). Secondly, this lack of comprehensive monitoring and evaluation restricts institutions' capacity to hold themselves accountable for advancing social inclusion and meeting the diverse needs of their student populations (DHET, 2016). Finally, it impedes the cultivation of an inclusive culture and social responsibility within institutions, which is vital for fostering equitable access to higher education (Morrow, 2013).

To bridge this gap, systemic reforms are crucial to incorporate accountability mechanisms in executing inclusion initiatives (Maassen, 2014). This can involve establishing clear benchmarks and indicators to measure progress in social inclusion, conducting regular evaluations and assessments, and utilising the results to inform policy decisions and practices (Cloete *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, institutions should emphasise transparency and accountability by making their monitoring and evaluation frameworks accessible to the public and issuing regular progress reports to stakeholders (Singh, 2019).

Generally, the situation regarding promoting social inclusion in South African higher

education is characterised by complexities. While there have been significant strides in broadening access to higher education, persistent challenges remain, including deep-rooted inequalities, institutional cultures that exclude, and insufficient support systems (Badat, 2010). These issues continue to marginalise historically disadvantaged groups, such as rural students, students with disabilities, and women (see Mabokela, 2003). The insights from these studies are crucial for this research, which aims to foster more effective and inclusive policies and practices within South African higher education (see Kwesiga, 2002). By examining the existing gaps and challenges in inclusion policies and initiatives, this study aspires to offer actionable recommendations for improving social inclusion and success for diverse student populations (Morley, 2013). Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to building a more equitable and inclusive higher education system in South Africa that recognises and supports the diversity of its students while facilitating their full engagement and success (also see DHET, 2016).

Methodology

This study reported in this paper employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the implementation and impact of the 2016 Policy Framework on social inclusion in South African higher education. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed for an in-depth, philosophical exploration of the complex issues surrounding social inclusion in higher education. This approach also enabled the researcher to gather rich, contextualised data that could provide insights into the experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders in higher education. Thus, the study's methodology consisted of three main components: policy analysis, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews.

Policy Analysis

The study commenced with a detailed examination of the 2016 Policy Framework and other relevant legislation and policies shaping the higher education landscape in South Africa. This included key documents, such as the Higher Education Act, regulatory frameworks for social inclusion, and national development plans tied to education reform. The analysis sought to uncover the policy intent, goals, and objectives underpinning these frameworks, particularly concerning promoting equity, access, and social cohesion. By critically evaluating the alignment between the policy intentions and South Africa's broader socio-economic objectives, the study established a contextual baseline to understand the environment in which these policies are implemented.

Document Analysis

In addition to policy review, the research incorporated a robust document analysis of institutional-level materials. These materials included institutional social inclusion policies, implementation progress reports, diversity audits, and strategic plans. The

documents were sourced from publicly available institutional websites and direct requests to key institutional stakeholders, such as administrators and policy coordinators. This analysis provided granular insights into the mechanisms through which higher education institutions interpreted and operationalised the 2016 Policy Framework. It also revealed practical challenges, resource gaps, and innovative strategies institutions employ to foster inclusion. Importantly, this study phase allowed for comparative analysis across institutions, highlighting variations in success and areas needing targeted support.

Semi-structured Interviews

Stakeholder Group	Number of Participants	Percentage of Total (%)
University Administrators	6	20%
Policymakers	4	13.3%
Academic Staff	8	26.7%
Students (Urban Institutions)	6	20%
Students (Rural Institutions)	6	20%
Total	30	100%

Table I: Stakeholder Representation

Source: Researcher’s initiative

The study’s qualitative component featured semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, representing a diverse cross-section of stakeholders in the higher education sector. Participants included university administrators, policymakers, academic staff, and students from both urban and rural institutions. The selection was guided by purposive sampling (to ensure the inclusion of specific expertise and roles) and snowball sampling (to identify additional participants based on referrals). The interview protocol was designed to elicit detailed, firsthand accounts of how the 2016 Policy Framework influenced institutional practices and the lived experiences of students and staff (see Appendix A). Questions explored themes such as resource allocation, the effectiveness of social inclusion measures, perceptions of equity and access, and recommendations for improvement. This qualitative data enriched the study by capturing diverse perspectives and experiences that could not be discerned from policy documents alone.

Data Analysis

The data from the document review and interviews underwent a rigorous thematic analysis, a systematic qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach enabled the researcher to examine the data in a detailed and structured manner, facilitating a

reflective understanding of the complex issues surrounding social inclusion in higher education.

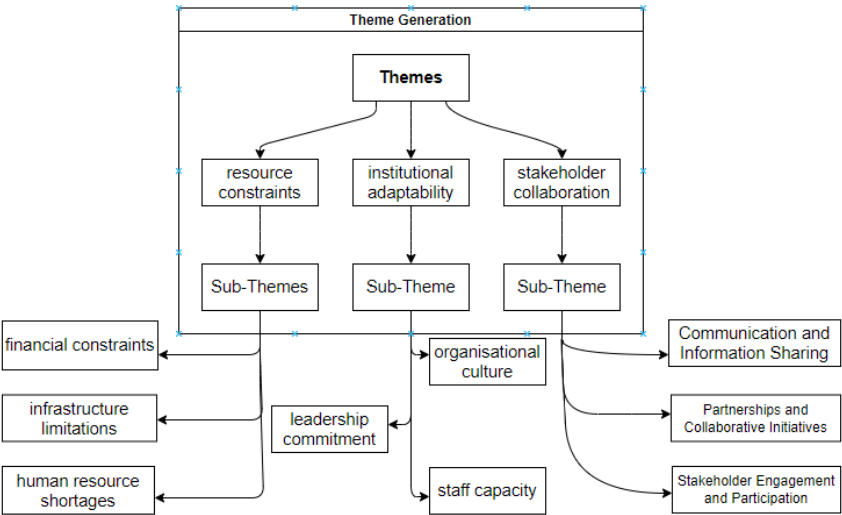


Figure I: Theme generation

Source: Researcher’s initiative

The analysis commenced with an iterative process of coding, where key phrases and concepts were extracted and categorised using NVivo software (QSR International, 2018). These categories were then synthesised into broader themes reflecting the study’s research objectives. For instance, themes such as ‘resource constraints’, ‘institutional adaptability’, and ‘stakeholder collaboration’ emerged as critical factors in the implementation of the 2016 Policy Framework (DHET, 2016). These themes provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with promoting social inclusion in higher education.

Furthermore, the thematic analysis revealed several sub-themes that offered a more detailed understanding of the study’s findings. For example, the theme of “resource constraints” encompassed sub-themes such as ‘financial constraints’, ‘infrastructure limitations’, and ‘human resource shortages’. Similarly, the theme of ‘institutional adaptability’ included sub-themes such as ‘organisational culture’, ‘leadership commitment’, and ‘staff capacity’ Meanwhile, the theme of ‘stakeholder collaboration’ included sub-themes such as ‘Communication and Information Sharing’, ‘Partnerships and Collaborative Initiatives’, and ‘Stakeholder Engagement and Participation’.

This rigorous approach facilitated a reflective understanding of both institutional and stakeholder dynamics, allowing the study to generate actionable insights and targeted recommendations for enhancing social inclusion in higher education. The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge on social inclusion in higher education, highlighting the need for sustained efforts to address the systemic barriers

that hinder the participation and success of historically disadvantaged groups.

Findings and discussion

Progress in priority areas

Democratisation of governance structures

The study found that higher education institutions (HEIs) have made significant progress in diversifying governance structures, and incorporating representation from diverse racial, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds in decision-making processes. This aligns with the broader call for participatory governance in higher education, as proposed by Gumede and Biyase (2016), who emphasise the importance of inclusivity for institutional legitimacy and social justice. However, gaps remain in achieving equitable representation for marginalised groups, including women, individuals from underprivileged backgrounds, and those in rural areas. Despite policy frameworks supporting diversity, their implementation was found to be inconsistent across institutions. This inconsistency perpetuates structural barriers for these groups, echoing Morley's (2018) findings. Participants suggested that targeted leadership training programmes, mentorship initiatives, and developmental opportunities could empower underrepresented groups to participate meaningfully in governance structures, reinforcing recommendations by Cross and Ndofirepi (2015).

Institutional environment

The study revealed that efforts to promote academic freedom and freedom of expression have fostered a more inclusive institutional environment. Academic and administrative staff, as well as students reported increased opportunities for engaging in open debates and critical research without fear of censorship or retaliation. These findings reflect the principles of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which underscores the importance of academic freedom (Fomunyam, 2017). However, the study also identified considerable variation in the enforcement of these freedoms, with some institutions facing resistance due to entrenched hierarchies and conservative organisational cultures, consistent with observations by Badat (2016). Participants emphasised the need for strengthened policy frameworks and robust grievance redress mechanisms to institutionalise these freedoms. Enhanced dialogue between leadership and stakeholders, as suggested by Le Grange (2019), was identified as a critical factor in promoting a transparent and inclusive culture.

Access barriers

The study highlighted innovative programmes, such as extended curriculum initiatives and recognition of prior learning, as effective mechanisms for improving access to

higher education for historically disadvantaged students. These initiatives align with the transformative goals of the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013). However, financial barriers persist as a critical challenge, limiting the reach and effectiveness of these programmes. Participants noted that students from low-income backgrounds struggle to afford tuition fees, accommodation and associated costs, exacerbating existing inequalities. These findings are consistent with Cloete *et al.* (2015), who underscore the financial precarity faced by disadvantaged students. Suggestions from participants included enhanced funding models, such as expanded scholarships, targeted grants, and income-contingent loan schemes, mirroring proposals by Van der Berg and Hofmeyr (2018).

Disability inclusion

Participants acknowledged the existence of policies aimed at including students and staff with disabilities yet emphasised that resource constraints significantly limit their impact. The study identified barriers such as inadequate physical infrastructure, insufficient assistive technologies, and a lack of personnel trained in disability services, findings that align with Howell and Lazarus (2019). These limitations restrict full participation and equality of individuals with disabilities in higher education. To address these challenges, participants recommended prioritising budget allocations for disability services, increasing investments in staff training, and aligning strategies with international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, echoing recommendations by Mutanga (2017).

Engagement platforms

The creation of forums, workshops, and task forces for marginalised groups emerged as a key finding in fostering awareness and advocacy within institutions. Participants observed that these platforms align with Freire's (1970) concept of dialogical action, which advocates for open dialogue as a tool for empowerment. However, the study found out that the effectiveness of these initiatives depends heavily on the degree of institutional support and integration into policymaking processes. This finding supports Jansen's (2017) argument that institutional endorsement is critical for the sustainability of such platforms. Participants recommended increased resources for engagement activities and regular evaluations to enhance their impact and ensure alignment with institutional strategic goals.

Gender equity

Gender equity initiatives were found to have yielded significant progress, particularly in increasing female enrolment and participation in traditionally male-dominated fields such as engineering and science. These developments align with the objectives of the National Development Plan 2030 (South African Government, 2012). However, the

study revealed ongoing disparities in leadership roles and decision-making positions. Participants attributed these disparities to systemic biases and cultural barriers, consistent with findings by Morley (2013). Suggestions included mentorship programmes, affirmative action policies, and efforts to challenge institutional cultures, aligning with strategies proposed by Mahlomaholo (2014). Embedding gender equity principles into organisational frameworks was highlighted as a critical step in sustaining progress.

Healthcare and wellness for disadvantaged groups

The study established that campus healthcare and wellness services have improved significantly, with more institutions offering counselling and mental health support. Participants recognised these services as critical to academic success and well-being, consistent with Bojuwoye (2015). However, resource constraints, such as understaffing and insufficient facilities, were identified as ongoing challenges. Strategic partnerships with external healthcare providers and increased investment in campus health infrastructure were proposed by participants as solutions, aligning with recommendations by Breier and Wildschut (2017). Regular assessments of service effectiveness were also suggested as a means of ensuring continuous improvement.

Residential integration

The study found that significant strides have been made in eliminating racial segregation and discriminatory practices in student residences. Initiatives such as diversity training, inclusive housing policies, and monitoring mechanisms were identified as effective in fostering greater integration, consistent with findings by Sehoole and Adeyemo (2016). However, participants cautioned that sustained vigilance is necessary to address emerging challenges, such as micro-aggressions and covert discrimination. Establishing dedicated offices to oversee residential integration, and ensuring compliance with inclusive housing policies were recommended as strategies to promote a culture of inclusion. These suggestions align with Tladinyane's (2019) call for regular training and awareness campaigns to strengthen residential integration efforts.

Conclusions

Implementation gaps

The study concluded that inadequate funding and limited institutional capacity significantly hinder the successful implementation of inclusion initiatives. Underfunding has led to incomplete or uneven programme execution across institutions, often compelling them to prioritise short-term goals over long-term systemic change. This finding is consistent with Cloete *et al.* (2015), who highlight that financial instability limits institutions' ability to achieve transformative objectives. Addressing these gaps requires innovative funding strategies, such as utilising government grants, forging private-sector partnerships, and

seeking philanthropic support. Additionally, optimising existing resources and investing in capacity-building initiatives, including professional development and infrastructure improvements, emerged as critical steps for effective implementation.

Policy awareness

The study highlighted a notable gap in policy awareness and understanding among stakeholders, including academic and administrative staff and students. Although comprehensive policies exist to guide inclusion efforts, their impact is often diminished by insufficient communication and education. This observation aligns with Jansen (2017), who emphasises that misaligned institutional practices frequently result from inadequate stakeholder engagement. To overcome this challenge, participants recommended regular advocacy and education initiatives, such as targeted training sessions, accessible policy documentation, and awareness campaigns. These actions can enhance stakeholder understanding and foster a unified commitment to achieving inclusion objectives.

Collaboration

Collaboration with external stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profits, and private-sector organisations, was identified as a key opportunity to strengthen inclusion efforts. Such partnerships can provide essential resources, expertise and innovative solutions to address higher education challenges. However, the study found that many institutions face difficulties in initiating and maintaining these collaborations due to misaligned priorities and insufficient coordination mechanisms. This aligns with Sehoole and Adeyemo (2016), who advocate for robust intersectoral partnerships to advance institutional goals. Participants proposed a strategic approach to collaboration, including formal agreements, clearly defined goals, and established communication channels. Multidisciplinary teams were also recommended to ensure that partnerships are aligned with institutional priorities and drive impactful change.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and the recurring themes emanating from the respondents' views, the researcher found it fitting to suggest the following recommendations. These recommendations are designed to address the systemic barriers and challenges that hinder social inclusion in higher education, as identified by the study. By implementing these recommendations, HEIs in South Africa can better promote social inclusion, equity, and redress, ultimately enhancing the academic success and overall well-being of historically disadvantaged students. The recommendations outlined below are grounded in the empirical evidence gathered during the study, and are intended to provide actionable guidance for policymakers, institutional leaders, and practitioners seeking to advance social inclusion in higher education.

Establish standardised monitoring mechanisms

There are several recommendations that can be drawn from the findings and discussion presented earlier. One such recommendation is to develop a standardised framework for monitoring and evaluation of social inclusion initiatives across higher education institutions so as to ensure consistency and accountability in the implementation of social inclusion initiatives, it is essential. This framework should be underpinned by clearly defined metrics, such as enrolment and graduation rates of underrepresented groups, faculty diversity statistics, and accessibility measures. Furthermore, they should be required to submit quarterly or annual progress reports, which are reviewed by a centralised oversight body responsible for ensuring institutional compliance and transparency. The establishment of accountability structures, including independent oversight committees, will allow for performance assessments, identification of gaps, and the formulation of targeted corrective measures. Additionally, regular audits should be conducted to verify adherence to established standards and to reinforce institutional commitment to social inclusion.

Enhance funding models

The advancement of social inclusion efforts is heavily dependent on sustainable financial support. Institutions should advocate for increased government investment in inclusion-oriented initiatives, particularly in areas such as disability support, rural outreach, and gender equity programmes. In addition to public funding, institutions are encouraged to pursue strategic partnerships with the private sector to secure sponsorships for scholarships, internships, and infrastructure development. Collaborations with non-profit organisations and NGOs can also provide co-funding opportunities and support for targeted projects. Furthermore, institutions should leverage internal fundraising mechanisms by organising alumni donation campaigns and institutional giving initiatives to supplement their operational budgets and expand their inclusion programmes.

Increase policy awareness

Raising awareness on social inclusion policies among all institutional stakeholders is critical for their effective implementation. Institutions should launch comprehensive awareness campaigns aimed at educating faculty, staff, and students about the objectives and benefits of these policies, as well as their roles in promoting an inclusive environment. This can be achieved through regular workshops and training sessions tailored for various stakeholder groups. Additionally, institutions should ensure that policy documents are accessible, user-friendly, and widely disseminated through digital platforms to maximize reach. Additionally, social media campaigns, posters, and campus events can further reinforce key messages and cultivate a shared commitment to inclusion across the academic community.

Promote inclusive leadership

Inclusive leadership is a cornerstone of institutional transformation. Higher education institutions should integrate diversity and inclusion goals into leadership development initiatives and performance evaluation criteria. This includes offering targeted diversity and inclusion training programmes for current and aspiring leaders, with a focus on fostering empathy, cultural competence, and equitable decision-making. Mentorship programmes should be established to support individuals from underrepresented groups, pairing them with experienced leaders who can provide guidance and build their leadership capacity. Inclusion-related achievements should be formally recognised and incorporated into performance appraisals, while succession planning processes should be designed to create accessible pathways for diverse leadership candidates to assume influential roles within the institution.

Foster collaborative networks

To scale and strengthen inclusion efforts, institutions should build robust networks with other academic institutions, government bodies, and civil society organisations. Formal partnerships and collaboration agreements can facilitate the sharing of best practices, innovations, and resources aimed at addressing common inclusion challenges. Inter-institutional task forces should be established to design and implement joint initiatives, allowing institutions to pool expertise and scale impactful interventions. Regular knowledge-sharing events such as conferences, webinars, and workshops can provide platforms for disseminating successful strategies and learning from peers. Furthermore, developing shared funding mechanisms and infrastructure resources can help support under-resourced institutions and promote equity across the higher education landscape.

Prioritise resource allocation

A visible and sustained commitment to social inclusion requires that institutions align their budgeting practices with their inclusion objectives. Dedicated budget lines should be established for key initiatives, such as disability support services, gender equity programmes, and financial assistance schemes. Investment in physical infrastructure should focus on ensuring accessibility for all, including the provision of assistive technologies and the construction of inclusive learning and living spaces. Institutions must also allocate sufficient funding for capacity-building efforts, such as ongoing training and development programmes for academic and administrative staff. To promote transparency and accountability, expenditure and impact assessments reports should be regularly published, ensuring that stakeholders are informed of how resources are being utilised to advance inclusion.

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From Exclusion to Inclusion: Making South African Higher Education Institutions Fully Socially Inclusive for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of South African higher education to promote inclusion for students with disabilities. It evaluates current practices, identifies barriers, and proposes practicable recommendations towards fostering a more inclusive higher educational environment.

The study is underpinned by the Critical Disability Theory, Universal Design for Learning, and the Social Model of Disability. These theories have aided the analysis of the selected case studies in exploring how universities can foster more socially inclusive environments. A mixed-methods approach was used, utilising qualitative interview data, literature study, observations, and secondary data from three selected universities. The case studies involved an in-depth analysis of the policies and practices of selected institutions. Results reveal significant gaps in infrastructure, policy implementation, and institutional culture, highlighting the need for systemic change. Recommendations of the study incorporate enhancing physical and digital accessibility, implementing universal design for learning principles, and providing comprehensive faculty training to support diverse learning needs. The conclusion emphasises the importance of shifting from exclusionary practices to inclusive frameworks, advocating for a collaborative approach that involves all stakeholders to ensure that students with disabilities can fully engage and succeed in higher education.

Keywords: Social inclusion, disabilities, universal design for learning, collaborative approach, policy implementation

Introduction

Creating inclusive environments in higher education is a cornerstone of global efforts to promote equal access to opportunities for all individuals, including those with disabilities. This imperative is particularly pressing in South Africa owing to the country's history of inequality and exclusion. Universities should be spaces where students with disabilities can access quality higher education, actively participate, and achieve their full academic potential. However, despite legislative frameworks designed to promote inclusivity, such as the South African Constitution, the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair

Discrimination Act, and the *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in the Post School Education and Training System*, significant barriers remain for students with disabilities. These barriers, from inadequate infrastructure to a lack of assistive technologies and support services, hinder students' educational success and perpetuate broader social and economic inequalities (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2024).

The *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in the Post School Education and Training System* (DHET, 2016) outlines a comprehensive framework to address the exclusion of marginalised groups, including students with disabilities. It calls for implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, emphasising flexibility in teaching methods, accessible infrastructure, and a supportive campus environment. However, research indicates that while universities are increasingly aware of these frameworks, their implementation could be more consistent and cohesive. According to Engelbrecht (2024a), there is a growing recognition of disability rights in South African higher education, but universities continue to struggle with translating this awareness into tangible action. This paper seeks to support this assertion using case studies of the three public universities in South Africa.

The paper notes that there are scholars such as Mabaso, N (2024) who argue that most South African universities have made significant strides in supporting students with disabilities, particularly through policy reforms. While these reforms have laid a crucial foundation, they cannot bring about the required change if not fully and properly implemented. Without adequate financial and institutional resources, many universities fail to provide the necessary infrastructure for students with disabilities to fully participate in academic life. As Mkhize, M (2024) suggests, achieving true inclusivity requires more than policy; it demands a transformative approach that includes faculty training, comprehensive student support systems, and redesigning learning environments to be universally accessible.

The exclusion of people with disabilities within South African universities is not simply a matter of accessibility but reflects systemic gaps in the educational structure. These gaps contribute to high dropout rates, poor workforce preparedness, and the perpetuation of social and economic inequality. In line with the objectives of the Policy Framework and calls from disability advocacy groups, this paper examines the effectiveness of current inclusion strategies and identifies practical interventions for closing the gap between policy and practice in three institutions code-named 01, 02 and 03. Institutions 01 and 02 are situated in the Eastern Cape Province, and institution 03 is situated in the Western Cape Province. The paper aims to contribute to transforming South African universities into truly inclusive spaces where students with disabilities can thrive.

Problem statement

In an inclusive and equitable higher education system, South African universities should be environments where all students, including those with disabilities, have equal access to resources, academic opportunities, and support services. This would mean that universities fully comply with national and international frameworks that advocate for the rights of people with disabilities, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and South Africa's Constitution. However, students with disabilities often face significant barriers that hinder their full participation in academic life. These barriers include inadequate physical infrastructure, insufficient access to assistive technologies, and limited institutional policies that accommodate diverse learning needs (Hammill and Stein, 2022). Furthermore, the social stigma and lack of awareness among staff and students exacerbate these challenges, perpetuating exclusion (Matshediso, 2023). From an equality perspective, the absence of facilities, policies, and practices that should promote access to and full participation of persons with disabilities in higher education infringes on their rights to equality and equal treatment as advocated for in section 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996).

Higher Education institutions often pay lip service to inclusivity within their campuses. At the same time, little action has been taken to fully integrate those with disabilities into the daily academic activities, as far as teaching and learning are concerned. The problem is compounded by the absence of enabling facilities in classrooms and other university spaces, thereby leading to a continued segregation of persons with disabilities. The mentioned facilities include hearing aids, magnifiers, braille, and wheelchair ramps (Gil Jr., 2025; Salles, Banerjee, Cáceres, & Mamas, 2025).

Theoretical framework

The contents of the paper are anchored in the principles of social inclusion and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and critical disability theory which are pivotal for understanding how to transform higher education environments to be more inclusive for students with disabilities. Social inclusion, as articulated in the *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in the Post School Education and Training System* (DHET, 2016), emphasises the right of all individuals to participate fully in society, which, in the context of higher education, translates into the need for equal access to resources, opportunities, and support services for students with disabilities. This framework aligns with South Africa's broader efforts to address historical inequalities and foster social justice in education.

The UDL is a guiding framework for designing inclusive learning environments. This framework advocates flexible teaching methods, adaptable assessments, and accessible educational materials, ensuring that all students, regardless of ability, can engage meaningfully with the curriculum (Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014). Engelbrecht's (2024b) research highlights the importance of UDL in South African universities, particularly as

institutions increasingly recognise the necessity of addressing diverse learning needs.

The critical disability theory shifts the focus from individual impairments to the societal structures that create barriers for people with disabilities. As Oliver (1996) argued, disability is not a problem inherent in the individual but a consequence of societal failure to accommodate diverse needs. This perspective is critical to understanding the exclusionary practices in South African universities, where the lack of accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and disability support services perpetuates exclusion (Hammill and Stein, 2022). Mabaso, N's (2024) analysis of disability policies in South African universities suggests that institutional practices continue to fall short while legislative progress has been made. Mabaso, N (2024)'s findings are contrasted with those of Mkhize, M (2024) who contends that genuine inclusivity in universities requires a holistic, transformative approach beyond policy to include faculty training, comprehensive student support, and a redesign of learning environments. The UDL framework provides a concrete model for this transformation, as it advocates for proactively designing learning spaces and experiences that accommodate all students, including those with disabilities.

Additionally, critical disability theory challenges the traditional deficit-based views of disability and advocate for a more inclusive society that recognises the agency and rights of individuals with disabilities. As Barnes (2019) argues, critical disability theory critiques the social norms that label disability as a problem to be fixed, instead of pushing for systemic changes that enable individuals to thrive in their environments. This theoretical lens is also applied to analyse how the selected universities can move from exclusion to inclusion by dismantling barriers inhibiting participation in learning within higher education.

In terms of applying the theoretical frameworks, the study utilises these theoretical perspectives to analyse the current barriers in South African universities and explore how implementing UDL and social inclusion principles can foster more inclusive environments. By evaluating policies, practices, and institutional cultures through the lens of the social model of disability, UDL, and Critical Disability Theory, this research proposes practical interventions for improving accessibility and support for students with disabilities, through case studies of three selected higher education institutions, which, due to the Protection of Personal Information Act (No. 4 of 2013), considerations are therefore anonymised. The pseudonyms utilised include 'Institution 01 (located in the Eastern Cape Province), Institution 02 (located in the Eastern Cape Province), and Institution 03 (located in the Western Cape Province). Overall, the paper assesses how these institutions implement inclusion frameworks and identify gaps towards creating an inclusive higher education fraternity.

Methodology

This paper is located within the interpretive research paradigm where reality is understood through participants' lived experiences. It is based on a qualitative research involving systematic review of relevant literature, unstructured interviews with key informants, participant observations, and secondary documentary analysis. The documents analysed include the disability inclusion framework of the selected universities. Thematic and narrative/comparative analysis methods were employed to analyse the primary data, information obtained from literature, and secondary data. The key themes of analysis were accessibility, institutional culture, and policy compliance. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of the systemic issues that contribute to the exclusion of students with disabilities in South African universities. A comparative analysis of disability inclusion strategies across the three selected universities was also undertaken. By comparing how the institutions implemented the UDL and other inclusion frameworks, the study identified common barriers to inclusivity and highlighted good practices. This comparative approach also allowed for examining how different institutional contexts (for example, rural versus urban, resource-rich versus resource-constrained) influence the effectiveness of disability inclusion policies.

Findings and discussion

Infrastructure and accessibility

Nasution (2025) argues that disability-friendly infrastructure that is disability inclusive is the starting point for inclusion in learning environments. Primary data reveals that physical accessibility remains a significant barrier for students with disabilities at all the surveyed institutions. For instance, in institution 01, interviewees indicated that outdated infrastructure, including lecture halls and libraries, lack proper accessibility features such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms. The institution has a Policy Framework on Social Inclusion, which urges that persons with disability, lecturers and students, should be catered for. One respondent noted, "*The new building on one of its campuses and other newly constructed buildings do not have ramps to cater to the accessibility of their buildings*". This failure to align with UDL principles, which call for adaptable learning environments, limits the mobility and participation of students with physical disabilities (Lieberman, Grenier, Brian and Arndt, 2020). Similarly, institution 02 has historical buildings that pose challenges to function and serve the contemporary student diversity, including lecturers and administrators with disabilities. One interviewee noted, that "as a historical institution, the buildings here are legacy ones, constructed long before the calls for empowering previously disadvantaged individuals began". Thus, the absence of modern infrastructure affects how much those living with disabilities can be integrated into mainstream activities (Khalid, Ashraf and Aleem, 2022).

Digital accessibility is another critical area of concern. Institution 03 has made strides in creating digital learning platforms, data shows that more needs to be done. Students still fail to incorporate accessibility features such as screen readers, alternative text for

images, and closed video captioning. Institution 03 also has a policy of disability that does not reflect realities on the ground, especially for students with visual and hearing impairments. Rivas *et al.* (2021) caution that policies on disability were inadequate, but enabling implementation and operationalisation are equally important.

The findings reveal that physical accessibility remains one of the most significant barriers for students with disabilities at South African universities. For instance, one interviewee raised various challenges from institution 02. These include the fact that the university struggles with outdated infrastructure that lacks essential accessibility features such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms, directly impeding students with mobility challenges. This is supported by data gathered from interviewees from institution 01, which faces similar challenges, particularly because its historical buildings are difficult to perfectly align with modern accessibility standards. In terms of digital infrastructure, while institution 03 has made progress by developing accessible digital learning platforms, the overall level of digital inclusivity remains insufficient. In an era of blended learning, which infuses physical and virtual teaching and learning, there are issues related to the inclusivity of e-learning, too (Mulenga and Shilongo, 2025). Contemporary virtual platforms should therefore have accessibility features like screen readers for visually impaired students or closed captioning for those with hearing impairments (Morrar, Majeed and Qassrawi, 2024). In this study, data revealed that institutions 01, 02, and 03 lag with respect to creating and sustaining such systems for their learners. This gap in both physical and digital infrastructure contributes to the exclusion of students with disabilities who cannot fully participate in academic activities.

Policy implementation

Fovet (2020) noted that disability inclusion goes beyond merely having policies; and that it is rather anchored in implementing those policies to realise transformation. The study acknowledges the Department of Higher Education and Training's guidance on disability issues as the leading policy position for all tertiary institutions in South Africa. Observably, despite the robust policy frameworks at the national level, empirical data show a gap between policy and practice in most universities. Mabaso, T (2024) argues that while South African universities have adopted policies that align with international standards, their implementation must be consistent. Empirical data show that the surveyed institutions face challenges with policy implementation. An interviewee from institution 01 averred that, *"the university has established disability policies on paper but lacks the administrative capacity to enforce them effectively"*. Although South African universities must adhere to robust national policies and international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the data shows a significant gap between policy and practice. Institution 01, for example, has strong policies on paper but needs more administrative and financial resources to implement them effectively. Interviewee data pointed to instances where students with disabilities at Institution 01 face difficulties accessing accommodations like extended time for exams or note-taking services, which are crucial for academic success. The effect of such a

status quo on inclusion was observed, as the institution suffered from poor financing of policy implementation. Hence, students with disabilities are under-resourced in terms of accessing enabling materials to make them comfortably enjoy their learning.

Salmi and D'Addio (2021) noted that the success of disability inclusion interventions in tertiary education institutions hugely depends on the resourcing of policy implementation. In the same vein, policy implementation with respect to Institution 02 indicates the existence of a structured approach to policy implementation with a dedicated Disability Support Office, as established from one key informant interviewee. However, primary interview data attests to resource limitations hampering the Disability Support Office's ability to meet the growing service demand. Observations by the researchers discovered that institution 03 heavily relied on external funding for assistive technologies and support services, thus making it quite susceptible to poor implementation. This resonates with arguments by Beyene, Mekonnen, and Giannoumis (2023) and Shaw (2024), who underscored the need for adequate financial investment in disability inclusion resources in higher education institutions. These findings highlight that while policies are in place, the implementation needs to be more cohesive and effective with adequate financial and institutional backing.

Social attitudes and institutional culture

The empirical data highlight the pervasive issue of social stigma and lack of awareness or consciousness as major barriers inhibiting the full inclusion of students with disabilities in higher learning spaces. Dompey (2025) argues that African universities are gradually embracing these inclusivity practices and cultures related to persons with disabilities at a slower-than-expected pace. In addition, Matshedisho (2023) points out that many students with disabilities at South African universities experience marginalisation not only because of inadequate infrastructure but also owing to discriminatory attitudes from peers and faculty. In institution 03 faculty members are often unaware of or indifferent to the specific needs of students with disabilities, leading to a lack of accommodation in the classroom. As a result, one respondent said, *"...at times you discover that the administrators in our faculties themselves have no sensitivity to these important issues, thus treating the classroom as having a homogenous kind of student population"*. This is a huge drawback, especially given that academic staff and administrators must champion inclusion and create an inclusive culture and disability consciousness for all stakeholders (French and Schoper, 2021). Social attitudes and institutional culture are pivotal in facilitating or hindering inclusion. At many universities in South Africa, including institution 03, students with disabilities face stigma and discriminatory attitudes from both peers and faculty members, as observed by the researcher during this study. Lopez-Gavira, Morina and Morgado (2021) attribute these negative attitudes to a lack of awareness about how to accommodate students with disabilities effectively. For institution 02, great strides have been made through awareness campaigns. However, these initiatives often need to be more widespread to create a culture of full inclusion. Mkhize, T (2024) argues that institutional culture must undergo a deeper transformation,

and such shifts must be integrated into broader strategic goals to ensure lasting change.

In contrast, an interviewee from institution 02 shared that the university had initiated awareness campaigns and training programmes to educate staff and students about disability issues, showing that institutional culture can shift towards inclusivity with deliberate interventions. However, as Mkhize, Z (2024) suggests, these efforts will only be sufficient if they are integrated into the university's strategic plan and operationalised across all departments. Thus, it is important to ensure that institutions incorporate disability timelines and targets within their visions, missions, and strategic and tactical planning (Chun and Evans, 2023). The findings suggest that awareness programmes must be accompanied by tangible actions, including better training and integrating inclusive principles into everyday practices

Assistive technology

Mwantimwa (2021) posits that the availability and use of assistive technology are critical in promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities. However, there is much variation in terms of how South African universities address this critical inclusivity element in their spaces. Institution 01, for instance, struggles to provide assistive technologies to students living with disabilities due to limited financial resources, resulting in only a few students having access to necessary tools such as screen readers, hearing aids, and mobility devices. The institution does not pay attention to the issues. For example, an interviewee opined that, *“the issues of shortage of assistive technologies are a major blow to inclusivity and the institution has not made bold interventions to create a disability-friendly learning environment by expanding resources on acquiring these useful apparatuses”*.

On the other hand, institution 03 has made notable progress in this area, offering a variety of assistive technologies through its disability support services. An interviewee is quoted below:

“We have to give credit where it is due, my university is trying; at least we have some assistive technologies in use for an inclusive learning experience”. Nonetheless, the prevalence of challenges to having a fully functional and resourced disability resources centre that caters to all in need hampers the inclusivity of this institution's noble interventions. As established in the interviews, the provision of these technologies in institution 03 is often contingent on external funding, and delays in procurement can leave students without necessary support for extended periods. This is not in the spirit of inclusivity; thus, Shaw (2024) advocates for the sustainable resourcing of disability units in institutions of higher learning.

Impact of inclusion strategies in selected institutions

While the foregoing discussion suggests that South African universities are taking some commendable steps toward inclusion, the impact of these strategies remains uneven. Students with disabilities continue to face higher dropout rates and lower academic performance compared to their peers in South African Higher Education. Foreman-Murray, Krowka and Majeika (2022) noted a correlation between these dropouts and how inclusive the learning environment is. Vetoniemi and Karna (2021) related this to the fact that students with disabilities can feel segregated, frustrated, and unable to cope. As indicated earlier, institutions 01 and 02, for example, lack comprehensive disability support systems which has led to students with disabilities often feeling isolated and unsupported, contributing to higher attrition rates. On the other hand, institution 03 appears to be doing better as far as that is concerned, because the training of academic and administrative staff has led to more inclusive classroom practices. At the same time, the faculty's investment in assistive technologies has improved learning outcomes for students with visual and hearing impairments. These examples demonstrate that targeted, well-funded initiatives can significantly impact the academic success and well-being of students with disabilities. Shaw (2024) and Beyene *et al.* (2023) have prescribed such as resourcing of institutions towards disability inclusion.

Students with disabilities at institutions 01 and 02, for example, continue to face higher dropout rates and lower academic performance compared to their peers. This is attributable to the lack of comprehensive disability support systems and inadequate institutional resources to address the needs of students with disabilities (Foreman-Murray *et al.*, 2022). However, there are positives from the study, as seen in institution 03's focus on training of academic and administrative staff, which has led to more inclusive classroom practices, improving learning outcomes for students with disabilities. Additionally, as established through interviews, the institution's investment in assistive technologies positively impacted students with visual and hearing impairments, as noted by Fovet (2022). There are different conditions and forms of disability which should be catered for in social inclusion strategies. Targeted, well-funded initiatives can significantly improve the educational experiences of students with disabilities, offering models for other institutions to follow (Wells, 2025).

The situation in the three institutions is replicated in other public universities across South Africa. While policy frameworks such as ULD for education and social inclusion principles are available, their implementation still must be consistent across institutions. Similarly, while South African universities have taken steps towards promoting disability inclusion, significant gaps remain in areas such as infrastructure, policy implementation, institutional culture, and access to assistive technologies. Key areas for improvement, including infrastructure, policy enforcement, social attitudes, and the provision of assistive technologies. By addressing these gaps, South African universities can move closer to creating truly inclusive environments where all students, regardless of ability, can thrive. More needs to be done towards a more integrated and resource-backed approach to disability inclusion. This should include investing in accessible infrastructure,

ensuring consistent policy enforcement, promoting a culture of inclusivity through awareness programmes, and providing reliable access to assistive technologies. These interventions will be critical in transforming universities into environments where all students, regardless of disability, can succeed academically and socially.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings in the empirical study at the three public universities reveal significant discrepancies between policy intentions and practices. Although at national and international frameworks for fostering inclusion of students with disabilities exist, their implementation varies widely across institutions. Key issues such as inadequate infrastructure, ineffective policy enforcement, negative social attitudes, and insufficient access to assistive technologies, persist as barriers to inclusion. These findings underscore the urgent need for South African universities to bridge the gap between policy and practice to create inclusive educational environments.

Based on the findings and discussion, the paper recommends interventions aimed at addressing the identified gaps. The first recommendation is that universities should prioritise upgrading physical infrastructure to meet accessibility standards and ensure that all physical and digital facilities are universally designed through targeted funding and strategic partnerships with organizations focused on disability inclusion. The second recommendation is that there should be consistent and effective implementation of disability policies must be enforced, including establishing resolute teams responsible for monitoring compliance and providing support services. The third recommendation is that universities should actively work to change social attitudes through comprehensive awareness and training programs for faculty and students, fostering a culture of inclusivity. The fourth recommendation is that access to assistive technologies should be expanded, with universities ensuring that all students have reliable access to necessary tools and resources.

It is clear from the recommendations that the social inclusion of students with disabilities requires a comprehensive, integrated approach to disability inclusion that combines infrastructure improvements, policy enforcement, social change, and technology access.

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Fostering Social Inclusion in South African Higher Education: Students' Experiences and Challenges

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Abstract

This paper explores the notion of social inclusion in South African higher education, highlighting the opportunities and challenges that exist; and examining ways for promoting inclusive higher education learning environments. Based on the review of literature, the paper employs a historical approach to examine the ways in which social inclusion has manifested in higher education institutions. It also discusses various approaches for promoting and advancing social inclusion in higher education including curriculum transformation, diversity and equity initiatives, and support services for students from previously marginalised backgrounds. It concludes that fostering social inclusion in South African higher education is a complex process which offers both opportunities and challenges. It is important that higher education institutions understanding the opportunities and challenges so that they can work towards creating a more inclusive higher education learning environment that promotes academic success and social cohesion.

Keywords: Challenges, diversity, equity, higher education, social inclusion, transformation challenges,

Introduction

The notion of social inclusion has gained significant attention particularly in South African where the legacy of apartheid continues to shape the experience of students in higher education institutions (Batisai, Makhafola and Moaba 2022). Social inclusion in higher education results from the creation of learning environments that recognise and value diversity, promote equity, and address the needs of students from previously marginalised communities (Soudien, 2019). The importance of social inclusion in higher education in the South African context cannot be overemphasised, because it plays a critical role in shaping the academic outcomes and overall well-being of students from diverse backgrounds (Letseka and Maile, 2008). The higher education sector has undergone significant transformation since the advent of democracy in 1994. However, despite this progress, many barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education still exist. These include financial constraints, inadequate academic preparation and lack of support services, still exist (Cloete, 2022). These constraints are particularly pronounced for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, and students with disabilities

who often face intersecting forms of marginalisation and exclusion (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2022).

The notion of social inclusion is closely related to the opportunities for social justice, which puts emphasis on the need to address systemic inequalities and injustices that shape the experiences of students from previously marginalised communities (Fraser, 1997). Social justice is of particular importance in South Africa considering the legacy of apartheid and ongoing struggles with inequality and exclusion (Rotar, 2022). Social inclusion is key to addressing inequalities and to providing opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to move towards more equitable study outcomes.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of social inclusion in higher education, both locally and at the global stage. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 is on equality in education, SDG 5 is on gender equity, and SDG 10 is on reduction of inequalities. These three SDGs emphasise the need to promote opportunities for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations, 2020).

Promoting social inclusion in higher education remains a complex matter. However, there are opportunities that can be harnessed to promote it. Many institutions struggle to create inclusive learning environments that recognise and value diversity, and address the needs of students from previously marginalised communities (Batasai, Makhafola and Moaba 2022).

This paper seeks to contribute to ongoing discourse on promoting a more inclusive and equitable learning environment in South African higher education institutions. It examines social inclusion in South African higher education, including opportunities for social justice (Kim and Rocco, 2018). The focus is on exploring the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds. It also highlights the importance of creating an inclusive learning environment that recognises and values diversity (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

Conceptual and theoretical framework

Social inclusion in higher education is shaped by a range of factors, including institutional policies, practices and cultures (Batasai, Mokhafola and Moaba, 2022). These factors either promote or hinder social inclusion depending on how they are designed and implemented (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2022). The theoretical framework for this paper is drawn from the work of critical theorist, Nancy Fraser, who argues that "social justice requires the redistribution of resources and the recognition of diverse identities" (Frazier, 1997; Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez and Cady, 2018). In the context of higher education, this means creating learning environments that are inclusive and equitable, and that recognise and value diversity (Soudien, 2019). The theoretical framework also draws from the idea of intersectionality

which recognises that individuals have multiple identities and experiences that intersect and shape their experience of inclusion and exclusion (Crenshaw, 1991). In the context of higher education, intersectionality is particularly relevant, given the diversity of students' experiences and identities (Letseka, 2020). It recognises that individuals are defined by multiple identities or experiences that intersect and interact in the context of justice. It promotes a better understanding of complex experiences that underpins complex social issues (Mutanga, 2018).

Social inclusion in context

Social inclusion in higher education is a critical matter that has attracted significant attention. As higher education institutions strive to create diverse, equitable and inclusive learning environments, it is essential to understand the complexities of social inclusion and its impact on students' success. According to Kahu and Nelson (2020), social inclusion in higher education institutions has numerous benefits for students, faculty, and the broader community. The findings of research conducted by Tinto (2017), shows that an inclusive learning environment can promote improved academic outcomes, wider students' engagement and enhanced well-being. According to the author, it promotes benefits that people in a community can relate to socially. It can also foster a sense of belonging and community cohesion, critical for students' success and the promotion of social justice (Habib, 2020).

There are various opportunities for promoting social inclusion in higher education in South Africa. Kahu and Nelson (2020) posit that if higher education institutions implement inclusive curriculum design and pedagogy, and provide targeted support services, these can foster social inclusion and a sense of belonging in a community. A curriculum design and pedagogy that involve creating a structured and student-centred learning approach that incorporates clear learning objectives, relevant contents, and effective teaching strategies that promote engagement, critical thinking and meaningful learning outcomes, are fundamental for social inclusion. That faculty staff can play critical roles in promoting social inclusion by creating inclusive learning environments and social cohesion as well as engagement in responsive teaching practices that prioritises, diversity, and equity as a means of promoting social inclusion for all students. This includes providing support and training interventions for faculty officials and academic staff to promote social inclusion opportunities (Thomas, 2012).

Many higher education institutions face significant challenges in promoting social inclusion. Systematic barriers such as inadequate support services and lack of students' representation in curriculum and pedagogy planning can hinder students' success if the contents, structure, sequence of learning experiences as well as methods and approaches used by educators to teach and facilitate learning do not involve students (Ladson-Billings, 2020). In addition, cultural and social norms can perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation, particularly for students with disabilities and those from poor and diverse backgrounds if such norms do not accommodate and resolve the unique

challenges of the individuals with disability (Hurtado and Guillermo-Wann, 2020). It is in this context that Hooks (2022) avers that institutions must navigate complex power dynamics and address issues of privilege and oppression in higher education institutions in South Africa.

Students' experience with social inclusion and exclusion

Social inclusion and exclusion in higher education are complex and multifaceted issues that have been extensively studied in the South African context. Research by Letseka (2020), shows that students from diverse backgrounds and those with disabilities often experience varying levels of social inclusion, with some feeling included and others excluded. According to Letseka (2020), approximately 70% of students from different backgrounds reported feeling included in their institutions while 30% reported feeling excluded within their learning environments.

Language barriers are a significant contributor to social exclusion because, as Makhafole (2019) indicated, 55% of students who spoke English as a second language experienced difficulties in academic communication and writing. Cultural differences also play a role, with Bangeni and Kapp (2019), noting that students from diverse background often felt like outsiders in their institutions. Furthermore, the socio-economic status of the students' guardians can impact on their social inclusion, with Van der Berg (2020) finding that students from low-income backgrounds were more likely to experience financial difficulties and dropout of university education. The study by Van de Bergs (2020) revealed that 40% of students from the low-income bracket reported experiencing financial difficulties which impacted on their participation in various academic activities.

The impact of social exclusion on students can be significant, leading to decreased motivation, low academic achievement and poor overall well-being. Walker (2020), found out that social exclusion can lead to decreased motivation and academic achievement, while Sheard (2019) noted that social exclusion led to anxiety and depression in approximately 75% of students who experience social exclusion. To promote opportunities for social inclusion in higher education institutions, various strategies, such as inclusive curriculum design, support services, diversity and inclusive training programmes are required. Leibowitz (2020) highlights the importance of inclusive curriculum design in promoting diversity and inclusion to achieve social justice. Troskie-de-Bruin (2019), emphasises the role of support services with the necessary resources to students that report exclusion to enable them to succeed academically as well as for their personal upward mobility. Soudien (2019) notes diversity and inclusion training can help in promoting awareness and understanding of diversity and inclusion issues among staff and students. According to Soudien (2019) 55% of South African universities offer diversity and inclusion training for staff and students. This training helps to create a more inclusive and welcoming campus environment.

South African higher education institutions have implemented various practices to promote

social inclusion, diversity, and student success. According to a study by the Council on Higher Education (2020), 75% of South African universities have implemented diversity and inclusion policies, while 65% have established dedicated offices for diversity and inclusion in various ways. The most common way is to provide student support services such as academic support and counselling which are essential in promoting students' success among those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A study by Troskie-de Bruin (2019) found that 80% of South African universities offer student counselling services. These services help students overcome academic and personal challenges, thereby enhancing their overall well-being.

Another approach for promoting success and social inclusion is student engagement. In research by Letseka (2020), it was reported that 70% of South African universities have implemented students' leadership programmes and community engagement projects. These initiatives help to foster a sense of belonging and community among students in a university environment (Gay, 2020; Thomas, 2020).

The role of staff in higher education is crucial for promoting social justice and inclusion in academia. Recruiting and training diverse academic staff is a significant challenge for South African universities with the national growth projection for student numbers pointing to the need for rapid up-scaling of academic staff recruitment of previously disadvantaged persons such as Blacks, Coloureds, Indians and other disadvantaged ethnic groups (CHE, 2007). According to Gay (2020), diverse staff can play various roles, including teaching and learning, research and innovation and community engagement that favours social inclusion. The implementation of the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework can address these challenges and present opportunities for growth, innovation and transformation (CHE, 2007). According to Letseka (2020) academic staff can play a critical role in promoting students' engagement and social cohesion if they practice the required attitude for mentoring of students. A study by Probyn (2015) found that staff-student relationships and mentorship can play a significant role in motivating students to succeed in their studies.

A study by Naidoo (2021) revealed that almost 30% of international students at the University of Cape Town reported feeling excluded due to institutional power dynamics and cultural differences. In addition, to this Mamiseili and Rosser (2010), noted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face various funding challenges and this explains why Naidoo (2021) noted that over 70% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds reported difficulties in accessing additional financial resources for higher education studies particularly for study fields that require adequate funding.

Institutional policies and practices play a crucial role in promoting inclusion. In a study by Walker and Mathebula (2020) it was highlighted that students from low-income rural areas migrating to urban universities face inequalities, with approximately 25% of students reporting difficulties in adapting to urban university environments. To promote inclusion, Walker and Mathebula (2019) aver that relevant national institutions and

university authorities should prioritise the implementation of policies already developed to address the needs of diverse student population, by providing and incorporating student voices in debates on higher education policy decisions (Strydom, Ment and Kuh, 2017; Crossman, 2019).

Batasai, Makhafola, and Maoba (2022), identified financial and digital exclusion as significant barriers to academic success for students from poor socio-economic background. Furthermore, financial exclusion makes students in South African higher education institutions to struggle with financial constraints, leading to high dropout rates and low graduation rates. In addition to this, a report by Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016), revealed that 72% of students funded by the NSFAS between 1999 and 2008, dropped out of studies. Scholars such as Boughey (2010) and Kraak (2018) argue that the shift to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities with some students lacking access to necessary technology and internet connectivity which excluded them from having access to teaching and learning in real time. Researchers like Walker (2020) and Probyn (2015) draw on the work of Walker to support digital, demographic and socio-cultural integrations as opportunities for active inclusion strategies in an interactive environment to promote student engagements and inclusion.

Statistical figures highlight the need for continued efforts in promoting social inclusion in South African higher education. For examples, in a study by Chiramba and Ndofirepi (2023), it was discovered that approximately 55% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities reported experiencing financial difficulties, while 30% reported experiencing academic difficulties. Chiramba and Ndofirepi (2023), also highlighted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face various funding challenges, with over 70% of them reporting difficulties in accessing additional financial resources for studies that require more funds. However, with the introduction of the NSFAS in 1999, many students from poor backgrounds have access to financial aids.

To promote social inclusion, Walker and Mathebula (2020) and Chiramba and Ndofirepi (2023) express the view that it is essential and an opportunity for higher education institutions and the Department of Higher Education to implement adequately policies and practices that address the needs of diverse student population. These include providing targeted support to students with disabilities, as well as academic support and mentoring services to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed. In addition to this, institutions can put more efforts in promoting cross-cultural awareness and empathy among students, and staff through diversity awareness campaigns and inclusion training programmes.

Challenges that constrain efforts to engender social inclusion

Despite efforts by institutions and the Department of Higher Education towards addressing historical injustices, challenges still exist, particularly for persons with disabilities and those from previously disadvantaged communities. One of the constraints is language

since the medium of instructions in most higher education institutions is English which can be a barrier for students for whom English is not their mother tongue. The inference that a students' home language determines his or her ability to integrate better into higher education cannot be overemphasised (Van der Berg, 2020). Research by Walker and Mathebula (2020) shows that 30% of students reported difficulties if the language of instruction is not their mother tongue. For example, language barriers can impact negatively on the academic performance and overall communication in class in the English language if it is not the mother tongue (Naidoo, 2021). In addition to this, students from diverse cultural backgrounds often feel like outsiders in their institutions if they cannot integrate socially, and this can impact on their sense of belonging and academic performance in an academic environment (Walker and Mathebula 2020).

Another factor is institutional power dynamics. Literature has shown that institutional power dynamics can perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation particularly for students from poor backgrounds. A study by Council on Higher Education (2020) revealed that 60% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds reported feeling excluded or marginalised in their institutions. A further 45% of the students reported experiencing discriminatory treatments which impacted on their sense of belonging and academic performance and social inclusion (Walker and Mathebula, 2020).

According to Dailing-Harmond (2017) institutional power dynamics has also impacted on ways in which students are treated by staff and faculty members. In a study by Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016), it was found that 55% of students reported feeling uncomfortable to approach staff members for support due to perceived power dynamics which do not favour some students because some staff did not make themselves available when students need them. Soudien (2019) and Seale (2013), further postulate that some higher education institutions lack diversity among staff and faculty members and this impacts on the representation of diverse perspectives and opinions.

The impact of institutional power dynamics on student experiences can be significant. This was corroborated by Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2019) that, students who experienced marginalisation or exclusion were more likely to drop out of university or experience academic difficulties. Furthermore, in a study by Soudien (2019), it was reported that institutional power dynamics can perpetuate, systemic inequalities and limit opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Walker and Mathebula, 2020).

Upon entering the university space, students who have different high school experiences are faced with the reality that the university environment differs from one discipline to the other. However, there are opportunities for them to integrate with their peers if social inclusion engagement forums are put in place (Badat, 2010; Chiramba and Ndofirepi, 2023). Programmes such as the foundation year, can be an opportunity for those who find it difficult to integrate and adapt to the academic environment in higher education. The foundation year can help them to engage with others in their learning spaces where they can acquire the mainstream literacy necessary to integrate in higher education

institutions (Gay, 2020; Crossman, 2019; Cloete, 2022). They will discover that an additional foundation year can assist them understand how to relate with their peers in their fields of studies (Habib, 2020).

In addition to the foregoing, it is reality that while exploring different layers and pockets of exclusion that negatively impact on how students experience the university space, it is pertinent to unpack micro-macro level of opportunities and interventions that bridge the gap and shift the narrative towards rethinking inclusion in higher education in a positive manner. Interventions such as curriculum design that propagate inclusion is an opportunity that can enhance academic mentoring of at-risk students as well as layers of exclusion that influence students' negative experience at the university environment (Kahu and Nelson 2020). According to Hook (2022) of the students who enrolled for three or four-year degrees in 2005 in South African Universities, excluding UNISA, about 46% had dropped out by the year 2010 because of inadequate support opportunities for them to succeed. It was reported that if there were opportunities for them to access academic counselling and support services in dealing with pressures from their families and peers, would enable them to integrate much better (Kayi-Adar, 2015). The involvement of members of the academic staff in promoting students' engagement forums can play a vital role in a student's life because such interactions can serve as a role model for counselling and friendliness to help students improve their self-esteem in a university space thus, promoting inclusive interactions (Hook, 2022).

One other opportunity is that academic staff who specialise in gender may also bring certain gender values to the department, such as equality, empowerment, and reciprocity which can be reflected in the departmental programmes if it prioritises the development of a peer-mentoring environment towards contributing to personal development and building relationships with their peers as a means of social inclusion (Goldrick, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez and Cady, 2015). Those who engage in mentoring at risk students can provide opportunities for such students to broaden their network and feel comfortable in sharing their experiences because they are with peers and not with those more senior to them (Hall, 2017). Some students face gender exclusion but formal gender to gender mentoring is particularly valuable for women because it enables them to have access to spheres of influence they were previously excluded from. This can help them overcome gender discrimination in academic disciplines (Sheard, 2019). The implementation of gender focused mentoring policies can create a peer-mentoring environment and establishment of collaborative peer relationships can be an opportunity through which those concerned can work towards meeting their learning needs and achieving their academic attainment goals in an inclusive environment (Walker, 2020).

The inclusion of digital software such as the Learning Management Systems, Interactive Whiteboard Software, Virtual Learning Environment and Assessment and feedback Tools can promote an inclusive teaching and learning environment and increased equality of access to educational opportunities (Badat, 2010; Boughey, 2010). Such digital tools can be an opportunity for students and staff to interact and access lecture materials and tutorial notes especially for first year students (United Nations, 2020).

Strategies for promoting opportunities for social inclusion

A few strategies required for promoting opportunities for social inclusion in higher education institutions in South Africa are briefly discussed. The first one involves implementing diverse teaching methods at the institutional level which can cater for different learning opportunities. Literature has shown that students from different backgrounds can benefit from diverse perspectives and experiences if they are acquainted with the appropriate and diverse teaching methods (Mamiseili and Rosser 2010). For instance, using problem-based solving and learning approaches can help students with learning disabilities to develop critical thinking skills to apply theoretical knowledge to real world problems to enable them to feel, secure, and inclusive on issues relating to university teaching and learning.

A second strategy involves creating a supportive classroom environment. This can be achieved by encouraging open discussions, fostering a sense of community and promoting respect for individual differences during classroom engagements with lectures and staff. In a study by Tinto (2017), it was indicated that students who felt a sense of belonging are more likely to persist in their studies and achieve academic success and the 'institutional level strategies' discussions below outline various improvement strategies for fostering social inclusion at the institutional level as follows:

The third strategy involves ongoing training of academic staff on inclusion. Providing academic staff training is essential for promoting social inclusion for students from disparaged groups in higher education institutions in South Africa. Academic staff need to be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to address diverse needs of students. This is because academic staff training programmes that promote inclusion can improve learning effectiveness and students' performance outcome from diverse backgrounds (Darling-Hammond, 2017). For example, training programmes that focus on cultural understanding of inclusion can assist staff to address the needs of students from different cultural backgrounds.

The fourth strategy involves ensuring access to materials for promoting inclusion and participation in decision making processes of, for example, persons with disabilities in higher education institutions. This can be achieved by providing materials on decisions and support that affects students in various formats such as braille, large prints, or digital formats. A study by Seale (2013) and Alexander (2013), revealed that students with disabilities can benefit from relevant materials and decisions that concerns them.

The fifth strategy involves addressing language barrier. Higher education institutions can provide and implement language support services, such as language improvement classes or tutorials via foundation programmes can assist students with communication difficulties in the institutions language of instruction to improve their language skills and proficiency. In a study by Kayi-Aydar (2015) and Thomas (2012), it was revealed that language support services to students that have difficulties with writing and comprehension, can improve their language proficiency and promote a more social

inclusion on university campuses.

The sixth strategy involves fostering community engagement. Institutions can partner with relevant organizations and local communities to provide opportunities for students to engage in university community service, volunteer work, or work integrated learning to enable them to integrate socially. In a study conducted by Strydom, Menzt and Kuh (2017), it was indicated that involvement in community engagement services by students from diverse socio-economic, cultural, racial and language backgrounds can foster students' social inclusion in higher education institutions.

The seventh involves implementing national social inclusion policies effectively. Policies on the promotion of social inclusion in higher education institutions are important. According to Hall (2017), the effective implementation of inclusion policies is crucial for promoting social justice inclusion in higher education. This is because the proper implementation of such policies can address systemic barriers, ensure equal access to education, and foster a culture of diversity and equity (Leibowitz and Bozalek; 2016; Probyn, 2015; Kraak, 2018; Hall, 2017). The effective implementation of inclusive policies developed at the national level will ensure that all institutions respond to diverse needs of students, staff, and the broader university community (Kayi-Aydar, 2015).

There is need to implement effectively existing social inclusion policies already developed at the national level to address the needs of financially disadvantaged students who find it difficult to operate and undertake their studies and integrate socially in the university environment. Institutions should not return funds meant for students from disadvantaged groups to the National Treasury while the needs to support those with financial difficulties exist. This is because such funds if properly disbursed will provide support services, such as academic learning supports and, counselling to overcome socio-economic challenges (Hall, 2017).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the critical importance of promoting social inclusion in South African higher education institutions, where systemic barriers pose significant challenges for fostering social inclusion. The key findings and discussions underscore the need for the proper implementation of existing policies and practices that address inclusion challenges, including developing curricula that reflect diverse perspectives and experiences, providing support services that cater for diverse students' needs, and equipping staff with the necessary skills and knowledge to support diverse student populations through ongoing training and development. Furthermore, the paper emphasises the importance of community engagement and partnerships in promoting social responsibility and practical application for social inclusion as well as the need for regular monitoring and evaluation of policy framework implementations to achieve the goal of social inclusion in higher education in South Africa.

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Determinants of Socioeconomic Inequality and Social Inclusion in South Africa: An Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis

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Abstract

The paper examines determinants of socioeconomic inequality in South Africa, focusing on the interconnections between socioeconomic factors, gender disparities, and social inclusion. Its aim is illuminated on the multifaceted nature of inequality in South Africa, where significant disparities persist despite advancements in development indicators like education and income. The Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis is employed to quantitatively assess the relationships between educational inequality, income distribution, and gender inequality. The findings reveal that while formal access to education has improved for historically marginalised groups, epistemic access, defined as the ability to engage meaningfully with academic content, is yet to be realised. The analysis indicates that educational disparities are closely linked to income inequality, with women disproportionately affected by limited access to quality education and employment opportunities. Furthermore, the study highlights that systemic barriers hinder social mobility, reinforcing cycles of exclusion for marginalised populations. The results underscore the necessity of addressing financial constraints and structural inequalities to foster an inclusive society. The paper concludes that comprehensive strategies are essential for promoting equity and social cohesion in South Africa.

Keywords: Socio-economic factors, South Africa, gender disparities, social inclusion, educational inequality

Introduction

South Africa's socio-economic landscape is deeply rooted in its colonial and apartheid history, which institutionalised racial segregation and economic disenfranchisement. During apartheid (1948–1994), laws systematically restricted non-white South Africans' access to quality education, economic opportunities, and social mobility, creating entrenched inequalities across both racial and geographic lines (Makhanya, 2024; Moyo and Munoriyarwa, 2021). Even after the transition to democracy in 1994, the legacy of apartheid continues to manifest in disparities in wealth, income, and access to essential services (Baraka, 2024; Bundy, 2020). Social inclusion remains critical to equitable development, particularly in societies characterised by stark inequalities (Robinson, 2020). Achieving inclusive development poses significant challenges. Among these, the interplay between socioeconomic factors and gender inequality is a crucial area of inquiry (Woldegiorgis, 2022). Understanding how these dynamics shape social inclusion offers

valuable insights into addressing systemic barriers that impede equitable access to resources, opportunities, and participation in social, economic, and political spheres.

Despite progress in increasing life expectancy and access to education, significant gaps persist in the distribution of resources and opportunities. Socioeconomic factors such as income inequality, unemployment, and educational disparities significantly influence social inclusion. Although substantial progress has been made in policy reforms, the nation remains one of the most unequal societies globally, with income distribution heavily skewed (Burzynski, Deuster and Docquier, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). These disparities perpetuate cycles of exclusion, particularly for marginalised groups such as women, rural populations, and individuals in lower income brackets. Gender inequality further exacerbates this exclusion, with women disproportionately affected by limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities (Plagerson, Patel, Hochfeld and Ulriksen, 2019).

This paper reports about a study undertaken to examine how these dynamics operate in South Africa, a context that reflects both historical and contemporary challenges. The study was guided by two research questions: (a) How do socioeconomic factors and gender inequality influence social inclusion in South Africa? (b) What is the relationship between human development indicators and educational inequality in South Africa? The objectives were to analyse the correlation between human development indicators and educational inequality using regression analysis; and investigate the impact of socioeconomic factors on social inclusion in South Africa using statistical modelling.

By exploring the intersections of income, gender, and access to resources, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on creating inclusive societies and identifying targeted strategies for fostering equity and social cohesion. There are few reports on using statistical tools to assess the multifaceted socioeconomic disparities amid economic advancement in South Africa.

Overview of socioeconomic inequality

The deepening global inequality presents critical challenges worldwide, with pronounced disparities in wealth and opportunity across regions. In the Global South, countries such as India and South Africa face complex inequalities shaped by historical, social and economic factors. India's wealth disparities are intensified by caste and rural-urban divides, limiting resource access for a significant population segment (Kunnath and Mathew, 2019; Roy, Majumder, Bose and Chowdhury, 2024). South Africa's socioeconomic disparities are deeply rooted in colonial and apartheid legacies, which enforced racial and economic segregation, imposing enduring exclusion (Anwar, 2022; Francis et al., 2020; Woldegiorgis, 2022). Despite post-apartheid policies, inequality persists, with wealth concentrated among elites, perpetuating unequal access to education, healthcare, and housing (Mhlanga and

Moloi, 2020). South Africa's income inequality is extreme, marked by a wealthy minority and millions in poverty (Woldegiorgis, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed these vulnerabilities, disproportionately impacting informal workers and lower-income groups lacking job security.

Gender inequality exacerbates these challenges, especially in South Africa, where gender disparities in education, employment, and social inclusion intersect with socioeconomic inequality to perpetuate disadvantage, particularly for women (Francis, Valodia and Webster, 2020; Thornton, Bhorat, Lilenstein, Monnakgotla and Van Der Zee, 2023). For example, South Africa's poorest 20% of households face stark income and employment deficits amplified by the pandemic, while the wealthiest 20% enjoy significantly higher incomes and employment security (Francis et al., 2020).

South Africa's informal sector predominantly employs women in precarious, low-skilled jobs such as domestic work, which lack legal protection and are prone to exploitation. Attempts at sectoral regulation have faltered due to power imbalances between workers and employers (Baraka, 2024; Bundy, 2020; Francis et al., 2020). The Gender Inequality Index highlights persistent disparities in education, employment, and political participation, worsened by limited access to digital technologies (Khumalo and Saroumbe, 2023; DAKA Advisory AB, 2023).

Education remains a critical but paradoxical domain. While access to higher education expanded considerably post-apartheid, meaningful epistemic access and academic success remain limited for many historically disadvantaged students due to insufficient support, entrenched institutional barriers, and economic hardship (Boughey and McKenna, 2021; Cross and Govender, 2022; Olaitan and Mavuso, 2022). This systemic exclusion is reflected in poor graduation and high dropout rates, undermining social mobility (CHE, 2023).

Further, disparities in health outcomes and access to care compound social exclusion, especially among rural women who face intersecting challenges of illiteracy, unemployment, and poverty. Informal urban settlements worsen vulnerability to violence and economic insecurity, deepening exclusion (Turok and Borel-Saladin, 2018). Policies addressing these intersectional inequalities must integrate socioeconomic, educational, and health interventions with gender-sensitive approaches to foster genuine social inclusion.

Exploring the relationship between socioeconomic factors and social inclusion

Understanding South Africa's social inclusion requires analysing how socioeconomic factors interact with systemic inequalities. The legacy of apartheid has embedded unequal power structures affecting race, gender, and class (Bernstein, 2005). Current international models often overlook South Africa's unique socio-political context, necessitating decolonial and epistemic justice approaches that centre lived experiences in providing solutions to societal problems (Cross and Govender, 2022). Human development indicators such as the Human Development Index (HDI), Gross National

Income per Capita (GNIPC), life expectancy, and education metrics reveal paradoxes; while national indicators show improvement, disparities across racial, regional, and economic groups remain profound. South Africa's GNIPC of \$13,418 belies stark income inequality, concentrated among elites with limited trickle-down, reflected in one of the world's highest Gini coefficients and entrenched socioeconomic barriers for marginalised populations (Anwar, 2022). This economic dualism creates a disconnect between national growth and equitable opportunity, reinforced by disparities in educational access linked to income and geography (Baraka, 2024; Lambrechts and Sinha, 2019). Educational inequality remains critical, shaped by apartheid's legacy of under-resourced rural and township schools versus better-funded urban institutions. Disparities between expected and mean years of schooling illustrate gaps between aspirations and realities (Baraka, 2024; Spaull and Jansen, 2019). These inequalities are intertwined with human development challenges, where higher income and life expectancy do not uniformly translate to equitable educational outcomes (Gillwald, Mothobi and Rademan, 2018). Access to quality healthcare is similarly stratified, increasing social exclusion among vulnerable groups (Francis et al., 2020).

Theoretical frameworks such as Sen's Capability Approach (1980) underscore education as a fundamental capability crucial for well-being and agency. South Africa's persistent unequal access to quality education constrains this capability among disadvantaged groups, perpetuating poverty and exclusion (Nchake and Shuaibu, 2022). Education and human development indicators are bidirectionally linked, with systemic inequalities driven by intersecting factors such as race, gender, and location, further extending disparities.

In sum, social inclusion in South Africa demands integrative, context-specific strategies addressing historical legacies and multifaceted inequalities. Efforts must involve economic reforms, education system transformation, gender equity, healthcare access, and digital inclusion to dismantle structural barriers and foster inclusive development. This literature synthesis informs such approaches by illustrating complex interplays shaping inequality and social exclusion nationally and globally.

Methodology

Data on the Human Development Index (HDI), life expectancy (LEXP), Gender Inequality Index (GII), mean years of schooling (MYS), expected years of schooling (EYS), and gross national income per capita (GNIPC), were used in regression analysis to explore how these factors influence inequality in education (INEQ_EDU) and income (COEF_INEQ). The data on country indicators was extracted from the UNDP's open-source database. The link to the data page is supplied, and the data disaggregation spreadsheet is attached to the paper as Appendix 1.

The results of the analysis provide insights into the drivers of inequality in South Africa, and contribute to a deeper understanding of how development policies can be targeted to reduce disparities and foster equitable growth across the nation. Parameters such as Human Development Index (HDI), Gender Inequality Index (GII), Life Expectancy

(LEXP), Expected Years of Schooling (EYS), Mean Years of Schooling (MYS), Gross National Income Per Capita (GNIPC), and Gender Development Index (GDI) reflect key socioeconomic dimensions such as health, education, income distribution, and gender equality, which are essential in evaluating disparities and inclusion at individual and societal levels.

The HDI and GII serve as comprehensive measures of development and gender inequality, allowing for cross-comparison across regions. Parameters like LEXP, EYS, and MYS are directly tied to educational access and outcomes, integral to enhancing social mobility and reducing exclusion. GNIPC reflects economic opportunities, while the GDI highlights gender disparities in development. Together, these indicators provide a holistic view of the factors influencing inclusion, enabling the identification of key areas requiring intervention. The findings are presented in Section.

Results of data analysis and discussion

The results of the analysis of data generated in this study are shown in the following Tables and Figures followed by their respective discussion.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the parameters

Parameters	Mean	Std	Min	25%	50%	75%	Max
HDI	0.720	0.011	0.696	0.713	0.720	0.727	0.741
LEXP	64.081	1.531	61.217	62.791	64.196	65.500	66.179
GII	0.418	0.015	0.401	0.406	0.414	0.438	0.439
EYS	14.182	0.223	13.543	14.080	14.206	14.306	14.608
MYS	10.512	0.721	9.269	10.040	10.328	11.045	12.056
GNIPC	13418.193	318.455	12571.256	13331.890	13558.567	13626.819	13688.130
GDI	0.418	0.015	0.401	0.406	0.414	0.438	0.439
COEF_INEQ	32.066	0.390	31.238	31.827	32.096	32.342	32.775
INEQ_EDU	16.522	1.185	13.799	16.034	17.288	17.295	17.607

Source: From This Study

Table 1 summarises key parameters used to evaluate social inclusion in education in South Africa. Each variable is summarised with its count, mean, standard deviation, and specific quantiles, offering insights into their distribution and variability over 132 observations.

The Human Development Index (HDI) demonstrates a high level of consistency with a mean of 0.72 and a relatively low standard deviation of 0.011. This suggests that South Africa maintains a relatively stable level of human development over time, with values ranging from 0.696 to 0.741. Similarly, the life expectancy (LEXP) variable averages 64.08 years, with moderate variability (standard deviation of 1.53) and a range from 61.22 to 66.18 years, indicating significant improvements over specific periods.

Educational indicators, including Expected Years of Schooling (EYS) and Mean Years of Schooling (MYS), are crucial for assessing educational access and achievement. EYS has a mean of 14.18 years, suggesting that individuals in South Africa are expected to complete nearly 14 years of education on average. Conversely, MYS has a mean of 10.51 years, indicating some disparity between expected and actual educational attainment, with values ranging from 9.27 to 12.05 years.

Economic and gender-related parameters provide further context for social inclusion. Gross National Income per Capita (GNIPC) has an average value of \$13,418, with relatively low variability, highlighting economic stability. Gender-related indices, such as GII (mean of 0.418) and GDI (mean of 0.418), show similar distributions, with low variability and values suggesting areas for potential improvement in gender equality and development.

Finally, inequality measures such as the Coefficient of Inequality (COEF_INEQ) and Inequality in Education (INEQ_EDU) emphasise disparities within the system. COEF_INEQ averages 32.07, while INEQ_EDU averages 16.52, suggesting notable differences in access and outcomes in education. These metrics underline the need for targeted policies to address inequalities and enhance social inclusion in education across South Africa.

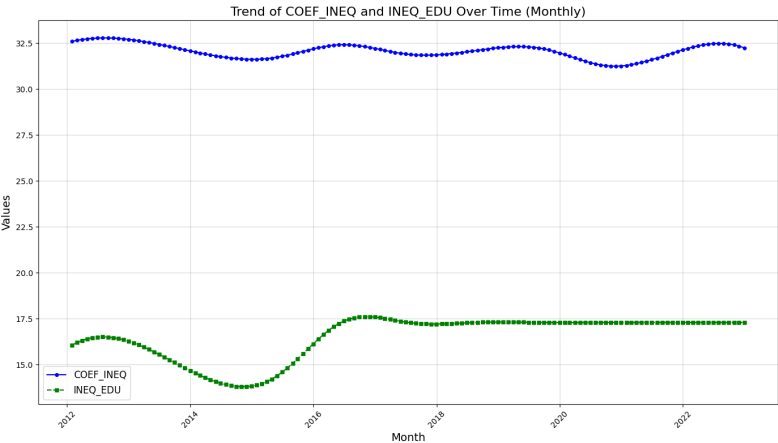


Figure 1: Monthly trends of the Coefficient of Inequality for COEF_INEQ and INEQ_EDU

Source: Authors

The graph in Figure 1 displays the monthly trends of the Coefficient of Inequality (COEF_INEQ) and Inequality in Education (INEQ_EDU) over time. COEF_INEQ, represented by the blue line, exhibits minor fluctuations around a consistent average of approximately 32. This stability indicates that inequality, as measured by the coefficient, has remained relatively constant, with only minor periodic variations throughout the observed period.

In contrast, the trend for INEQ_EDU, depicted by the green line, reveals more noticeable changes. Starting from a value near 15 in the earlier part of the time series, INEQ_EDU shows gradual but distinct fluctuations, peaking around 2016 before stabilizing at higher

values near 17. This pattern suggests evolving disparities in education inequality, likely influenced by policy changes, economic shifts, or societal factors over time.

The graph also highlights contrasting dynamics between general inequality (COEF_INEQ) and education-specific inequality (INEQ_EDU). While COEF_INEQ remains stable, INEQ_EDU's fluctuations point to varying conditions in educational equity, which may require targeted interventions to effectively address disparities in access and outcomes.

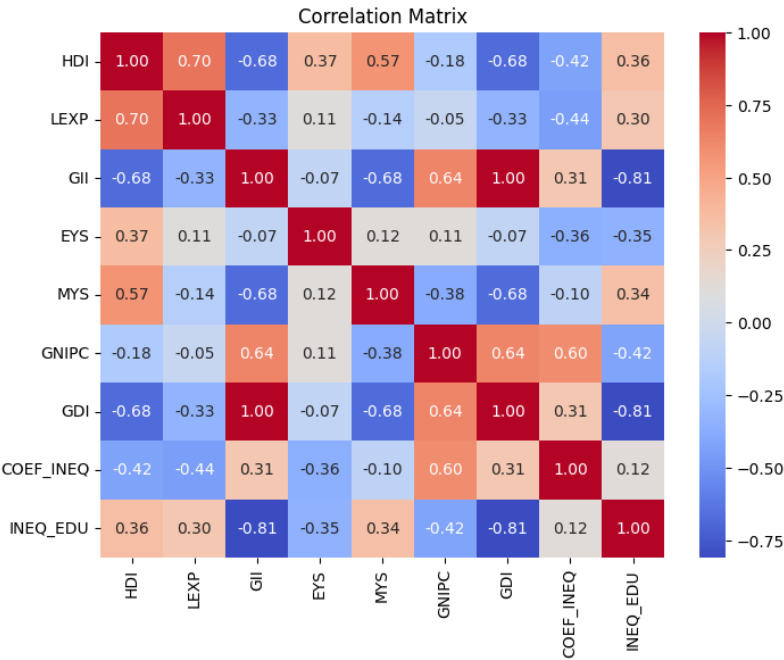


Figure 2: Correlation matrix for the variables

Source: Authors

The correlation matrix (Figure 2) visually represents the relationships between various indicators such as the Human Development Index (HDI), Life Expectancy (LEXP), Gender Inequality Index (GII), and others. Strong positive correlations are shown in deep red, while strong negative correlations are in deep blue, with weaker correlations in lighter shades. The diagonal (1.00) highlights perfect correlations of each variable with itself.

Key observations include the strong positive correlation between HDI and LEXP (0.70), suggesting that life expectancy is critical to human development. Conversely, HDI has a strong negative correlation with GII (-0.68), indicating that higher gender inequality is associated with lower human development. Similarly, INEQ_EDU and GII exhibit a strong negative relationship (-0.81), reflecting the significant impact of education inequality on gender inequality.

Other noteworthy relationships include COEF_INEQ's moderate negative correlations with HDI (-0.42) and LEXP (-0.44), suggesting that overall inequality negatively affects these indicators. Meanwhile, GNIPC (Gross National Income Per Capita) shows moderate positive correlations with GDI (Gender Development Index) and HDI, indicating economic wealth's influence on development and equality. These patterns highlight the interconnected nature of these variables and provide insights into socio-economic disparities.

Implications of the findings

The correlation matrix (Figure 2) reveals critical insights into the relationships between key human development indicators, such as the Human Development Index (HDI), Life Expectancy (LEXP), and the Gender Inequality Index (GII). Correlation values illustrate how changes in one indicator align with changes in another. Positive correlations suggest that as one variable increases, so does the other, while negative correlations indicate an inverse relationship.

The data highlights a strong positive correlation between HDI and LEXP, showing that improvements in life expectancy are closely tied to higher levels of human development. In contrast, the strong negative correlation between HDI and GII suggests that gender inequality significantly hinders human development. Similarly, the strong negative relationship between education inequality (INEQ_EDU) and GII demonstrates that disparities in education exacerbate gender inequality, notably by limiting opportunities for women and marginalised groups. These findings reveal how deeply intertwined education and gender are in shaping broader development outcomes. Overall inequality, measured by COEF_INEQ, has a moderate negative impact on HDI and LEXP, underscoring how systemic disparities undermine human development and life expectancy. Economic wealth, represented by Gross National Income per Capita (GNIPC), is moderately positively correlated with the Gender Development Index (GDI) and HDI. This suggests that when equitably distributed, economic resources can improve gender equity and promote overall human development.

These findings have significant implications for the South African government, which faces the challenge of addressing inequality in all its forms. The strong link between life expectancy and human development emphasizes the need for more significant investment in public healthcare, especially in underserved areas, to enhance the population's well-being. The negative impact of gender inequality on human development further highlights the importance of gender-sensitive policies that expand access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for women and marginalised groups. Addressing these inequalities is essential to fostering a more inclusive society. The relationship between income inequality and human development underscores the urgency of reducing economic disparities. Policies aimed at more equitable wealth distribution, such as progressive taxation and robust social protection systems, can mitigate the adverse effects of income inequality on life expectancy and overall development. Tackling these

systemic inequalities will require coordinated, long-term interventions across multiple sectors.

Higher education is also crucial in promoting social inclusion and addressing inequality. The link between education and gender inequality demonstrates the need for universities to actively close the gaps in access and success for disadvantaged groups. This requires targeted reforms, such as providing financial aid, mentorship programmes, and academic support tailored to meet the specific needs of marginalised students. Universities must also foster gender equity through inclusive curricula, encouraging women to pursue fields like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and creating environments that support their academic and personal development. Without these efforts, higher education will continue perpetuating existing inequalities rather than serving as a pathway to upward mobility. For policymakers, these correlations offer clear direction on how to design effective interventions. The negative relationship between overall inequality and human development highlights the necessity of prioritising equity in policy frameworks. Investments in education and health are particularly crucial, as they address root causes of inequality and foster long-term social and economic inclusion. Policies that improve access to quality education for marginalised groups will reduce education and gender inequality, producing broad societal benefits.

The findings reveal a critical paradox: while South Africa’s economy grows, as GNIPC indicates, it also has the potential to foster development, and the uneven distribution of wealth that limits its transformative impact. Economic progress alone cannot achieve social inclusion without addressing the structural barriers perpetuating inequality. A coordinated, multi-sectoral approach is essential to dismantle these barriers and ensure that development benefits are equitably shared across all segments of society. These interconnected challenges demand urgent attention to create a more inclusive and equitable South Africa.

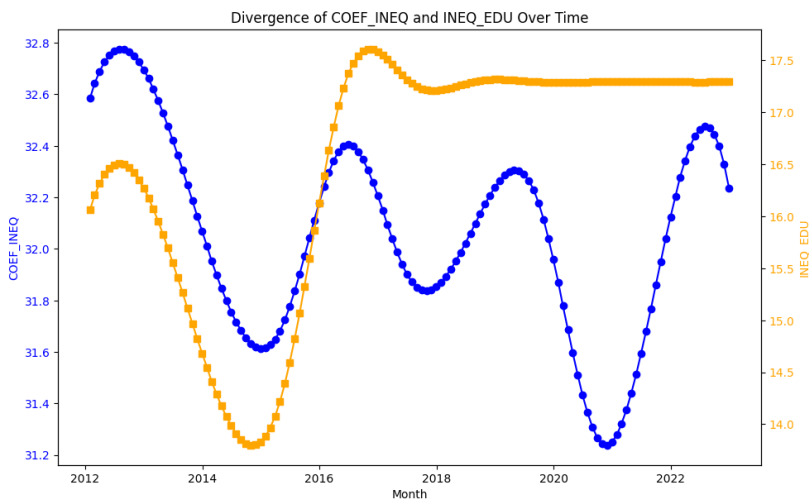


Figure 3:Divergence between COEF_INEQ and INEQ_EDU

Source: Authors

Figure 3 shows the visualisation which illustrates the divergence between COEF_INEQ (Coefficient of Inequality) and INEQ_EDU (Education Inequality) over time. COEF_INEQ is in blue on the left y-axis, while INEQ_EDU is plotted on the right y-axis in orange. The x-axis corresponds to the timeline spanning from 2012 to 2022. The COEF_INEQ curve shows periodic fluctuations, indicating oscillations in overall inequality. Peaks and troughs suggest alternating phases of rising and declining inequality within the observed period. The downward dips, especially noticeable around 2016 and 2020, may correspond to economic or social policy changes impacting inequality. INEQ_EDU follows a smoother trend, experiencing a gradual rise in earlier years and stabilizing after 2017. This suggests that educational inequality experienced less volatility compared to overall inequality.

The divergence between the two curves highlights differing trends in inequality types. While COEF_INEQ exhibits cyclical variability, INEQ_EDU's steadiness suggests sustained policy interventions or structural factors in education mitigating fluctuations. Understanding the divergence is crucial for policymakers aiming to address disparities holistically across different sectors.

Implication of findings

The visualisation (Figure 3) of COEF_INEQ (overall inequality) and INEQ_EDU (educational inequality) over time highlights important trends in South Africa's inequality landscape. COEF_INEQ shows significant ups and downs, indicating that overall inequality fluctuates due to factors like economic or policy changes. For example, dips in 2016 and 2020 could reflect the impact of specific government interventions or broader socio-economic shifts. In contrast, INEQ_EDU follows a steadier pattern, gradually increasing in the early years and stabilizing after 2017. This divergence suggests that, while overall inequality is more susceptible to short-term changes, educational inequality remains relatively stable, possibly due to long-term policy measures or structural factors in the education system.

These findings have far-reaching implications. For the government, the contrasting patterns highlight the need to address inequality comprehensively. While some policies may temporarily reduce overall inequality, their effects may not extend to education, where disparities persist over time. This suggests that policies targeting educational access and quality must be consistently reinforced and complemented by broader socio-economic interventions. Higher education institutions have a critical role to play in mitigating educational inequality. The stability of INEQ_EDU after 2017 may indicate the impact of initiatives such as free higher education for low-income students or efforts to improve access for marginalised communities. However, to close the gap further, universities must ensure that access translates into success by addressing barriers like under-resourced schools, financial difficulties, and academic under-preparedness. This requires sustained efforts to provide tailored support, such as mentorship, academic tutoring, and financial assistance.

For policymakers, the divergence between COEF_INEQ and INEQ_EDU emphasizes the importance of integrated approaches. Addressing inequality holistically means recognizing that economic and educational disparities are deeply interconnected. While economic policies can reduce income inequality, they must be designed to support long-term improvements in educational outcomes. For example, investing in early childhood education, teacher training, and infrastructure in disadvantaged areas can have a lasting impact on reducing INEQ_EDU. Ultimately, the divergence between COEF_INEQ and INEQ_EDU demonstrates the complexity of inequality in South Africa. While some progress has been made in stabilizing educational disparities, persistent gaps in overall inequality point to the need for coordinated, multi-sectoral strategies. Tackling these issues requires sustained investment and a nuanced understanding of how different types of inequality interact and evolve over time. This is essential to fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

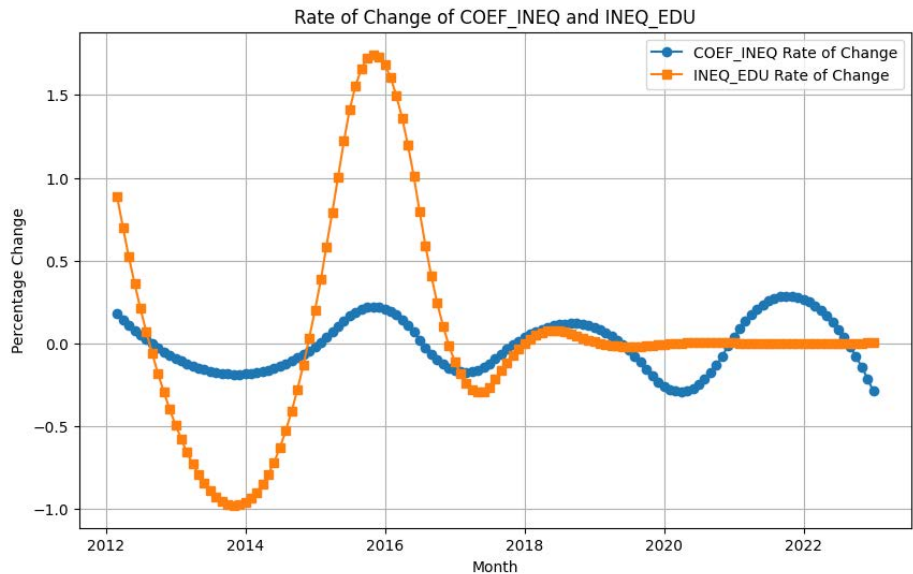


Figure 4: Rate of change for COEF_INEQ and INEQ_EDU

Source: Authors

The graph in Figure 4 shows the rate of change (percentage change) for COEF_INEQ (Coefficient of Inequality) and INEQ_EDU (Education Inequality) over time. The percentage changes provide insights into the dynamics of both inequalities over the years.

Blue Line (COEF_INEQ Rate of Change): The rate of change for COEF_INEQ demonstrates oscillations with distinct peaks and troughs, reflecting periods of rapid increases and decreases in overall inequality. Notable peaks occur around 2016 and 2022, indicating sharp increases in inequality, while downward trends (dips) suggest reductions or slowing rates of inequality change.

Orange Line (INEQ_EDU Rate of Change): The rate of change for INEQ_EDU is

smoother compared to COEF_INEQ, with smaller fluctuations. The largest positive spike occurred in 2016, indicating a significant increase in the rate of change for educational inequality. Following this, the rate stabilizes, suggesting relatively steady progress or stagnation in educational inequality dynamics.

Observations:

Volatility in COEF_INEQ: COEF_INEQ exhibits more pronounced oscillations, indicative of broader inequality measures being more sensitive to socio-economic or policy shifts.

Stability in INEQ_EDU: Educational inequality shows smaller, more contained variations over time, suggesting sustained efforts or slower-moving structural factors influencing education.

Understanding these patterns can help policymakers target interventions more effectively, addressing volatile inequalities while maintaining consistent progress in education equity.

Implication of findings

The graph (Figure 4) on the rate of change for COEF_INEQ (overall inequality) and INEQ_EDU (educational inequality) provides valuable insights into how these two dimensions of inequality have evolved over time in South Africa. The blue line, representing COEF_INEQ, fluctuates significantly, with noticeable peaks in 2016 and 2022, indicating periods of sharp increases in overall inequality. These oscillations reflect the sensitivity of broader inequality to changes in socioeconomic conditions or policy shifts. In contrast, the orange line for INEQ_EDU shows a steadier trend, with smaller fluctuations and a single notable spike in 2016, signalling a temporary rise in educational inequality before stabilizing in subsequent years. The volatility of COEF_INEQ highlights the dynamic nature of overall inequality, which can rapidly respond to factors such as economic downturns, shifts in labour markets, or uneven policy implementation. On the other hand, the relative stability of INEQ_EDU suggests that structural factors and long-term educational policies may be more effective in sustaining progress, even if they do not eliminate disparities entirely. This divergence between the two measures underscores the different mechanisms driving overall and educational inequality, revealing the complexity of addressing these issues holistically.

For the government, these findings emphasise the need to develop targeted policies that respond to both short-term economic shocks and long-term structural challenges. The peaks in COEF_INEQ suggest that socio-economic disruptions, such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or global economic shifts, can rapidly exacerbate inequality. To protect vulnerable populations, addressing these fluctuations requires robust social safety nets, such as unemployment benefits and income support programmes. However, the relative steadiness of INEQ_EDU highlights the importance of sustained investments in education, including improving access to quality schooling, particularly in

underprivileged areas.

Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in mitigating educational inequality. While progress has been made in expanding access to higher education for disadvantaged groups, more must be done to ensure that access translates into success. The stabilization of INEQ_EDU post-2016 may reflect the impact of policies like free higher education for low-income students, but challenges such as high dropout rates and insufficient academic support persist. Universities must prioritise inclusive teaching practices, provide financial and academic support, and create environments where all students can thrive, regardless of their socio-economic background. For policy makers, the contrasting trends in COEF_INEQ and INEQ_EDU highlight the importance of a dual focus. Economic policies that stabilize income inequality must be coupled with educational reforms that address long-term disparities in access and quality. Furthermore, the spike in educational inequality in 2016 suggests that even structural factors in education are vulnerable to external pressures. This underscores the need for resilience-building measures, such as teacher training and investment in digital learning infrastructure, to safeguard against future disruptions.

In sum, the rate of change in COEF_INEQ and INEQ_EDU provides a clear picture of the interplay between broader socio-economic inequality and educational disparities. While educational inequality appears more stable, it remains a critical area for sustained policy attention. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires a comprehensive approach that combines immediate economic interventions with long-term strategies to promote educational equity, ultimately fostering a more inclusive society.

Table 2: OLS regression results

Dep. Variable:	INEQ_EDU	R-squared:	0.954
Model:	OLS	Adj. R-squared:	0.951
Method:	Least Squares	F-statistic:	429
No. Observations:	132	Prob (F-statistic):	7.56E-81
Df Residuals:	125	Log-Likelihood:	-6.4689
Df Model:	6	AIC:	26.94
		BIC:	47.12

Parameters	Coef	std err	T	P> t	[0.025	0.975]
Const	117.9277	9.808	12.024	0.000	98.517	137.339
HDI	-309.716	135.432	-2.287	0.024	-577.752	-41.679
LEXP	1.5753	0.753	2.092	0.038	0.085	3.066
GII	-56.8287	1.727	-32.902	0.000	-60.247	-53.41
EYS	0.6154	1.25	0.492	0.623	-1.859	3.089
MYS	2.4815	1.434	1.731	0.086	-0.356	5.319

GNIPC	0.0025	0.001	4.96	0.000	0.001	0.003
GDI	-56.8287	1.727	-32.902	0.000	-60.247	-53.41

Source: Authors

The Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression results as presented in Table 2 reveal a strong model fit with an **R-squared of 0.954** and an **adjusted R-squared of 0.951**, indicating that 95.1% of the variability in the dependent variable, **INEQ_EDU** (educational inequality), is explained by the independent variables. The model is statistically significant overall, as evidenced by the high **F-statistic of 429** and its corresponding p-value (**Prob(F-statistic) = 7.56E-81**). These results suggest that the chosen predictors collectively explain educational inequality effectively.

Among the predictors, **HDI (Human Development Index)** has a statistically significant negative effect on educational inequality (coef: -309.716, $p = 0.024$), implying that higher human development is associated with reduced educational inequality. Similarly, **GII (Gender Inequality Index)** and **GDI (Gender Development Index)** have strong negative coefficients (-56.8287 each, $p < 0.001$), highlighting their critical role in decreasing inequality. On the other hand, **GNIPC (Gross National Income Per Capita)** positively influences educational inequality (coef: 0.0025, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that income factors contribute positively to inequality changes. **LEXP (Life Expectancy)** also exhibits a modest positive relationship with inequality (coef: 1.5753, $p = 0.038$).

Variables like **EYS (Expected Years of Schooling)** and **MYS (Mean Years of Schooling)** are not statistically significant predictors at the 5% significance level, with p-values of 0.623 and 0.086, respectively. These results indicate that while these educational metrics may correlate with inequality, their effects are less robust when controlling for other factors. The model's intercept (**const**) is significant (coef: 117.9277, $p < 0.001$), providing the baseline educational inequality level when all predictors are zero. The overall results underscore the importance of socio-economic and gender-related variables in shaping educational inequality.

Table 3: OLS regression results continued

	C O E F _		
Dep. Variable:	INEQ	R-squared:	0.918
Model:	OLS	Adj. R-squared:	0.914
No. Observations:	132	F-statistic:	233.2
Df Residuals:	125	Prob (F-statistic):	2.24E-65
Df Model:	6	Log-Likelihood:	102.44
		AIC:	-190.9
		BIC:	-170.7

Parameter	Coef	std err	T	P> t	[0.025	0.975]
Const	94.5923	4.298	22.01	0.000	86.086	103.098
HDI	-692.4739	59.346	-11.668	0.000	-809.927	-575.021
LEXP	3.6877	0.33	11.175	0.000	3.035	4.341
GII	-13.431	1.514	-8.873	0.000	-16.427	-10.435
EYS	5.6236	0.548	10.266	0.000	4.539	6.708
MYS	7.1817	0.628	11.431	0.000	5.938	8.425
GNIPC	0.0037	0.000	16.986	0.000	0.003	0.004

Source: Authors

The Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression results (Table 3) for **COEF_INEQ** show that the model provides an excellent fit, with an **R-squared of 0.918** and an **adjusted R-squared of 0.914**, indicating that approximately 91.4% of the variation in **COEF_INEQ** (inequality coefficient) is explained by the independent variables. The model is highly statistically significant, supported by the **F-statistic of 233.2** and its corresponding p-value (**Prob(F-statistic) = 2.24E-65**). These metrics confirm that the predictors jointly have a strong relationship with the dependent variable.

All the predictors in the model are statistically significant at the 5% significance level. **HDI (Human Development Index)** has a substantial negative impact on inequality (coef: -692.4739, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher human development significantly reduces inequality. **LEXP (Life Expectancy)**, **EYS (Expected Years of Schooling)**, and **MYS (Mean Years of Schooling)** all positively influence the inequality coefficient with significant coefficients (3.6877, 5.6236, and 7.1817, respectively, all $p < 0.001$), suggesting that increases in these variables are associated with higher inequality coefficients. **GII (Gender Inequality Index)** also has a negative impact (coef: -13.431, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing the idea that reducing gender inequality is crucial for mitigating broader inequality. Additionally, **GNIPC (Gross National Income Per Capita)** positively impacts inequality (coef: 0.0037, $p < 0.001$), implying that economic factors play a notable role.

The model intercept (**const**) is statistically significant (coef: 94.5923, $p < 0.001$), representing the baseline inequality coefficient when all predictors are zero. The results highlight the importance of both socio-economic and education-related factors, such as human development and income, in shaping inequality. This model underscores how demographic and development variables collectively explain changes in inequality, providing valuable insights for policymakers aiming to address inequality.

Implications of the findings

The Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis reveals significant insights

into the factors influencing educational inequality (INEQ_EDU) and overall inequality (COEF_INEQ) in South Africa. Both models demonstrate a strong fit, explaining 95.1% of the variability in educational inequality and 91.4% of the variation in overall inequality. These results indicate that the chosen predictors—such as the Human Development Index (HDI), Gender Inequality Index (GII), Gross National Income per Capita (GNIPC), and others—are effective in explaining how inequalities arise and persist.

The analysis shows that higher human development, as measured by HDI, has a strong negative impact on both educational and overall inequality. This means that as human development improves, inequality tends to decrease, underscoring the importance of broad-based development initiatives. Gender inequality, measured by GII, also has a significant negative effect on both forms of inequality. This indicates that reducing gender disparities is crucial for fostering social equity and inclusion. On the other hand, GNIPC has a positive relationship with inequality, suggesting that economic growth, if not equitably distributed, may exacerbate disparities rather than reduce them. Life expectancy (LEXP) and educational indicators like Expected Years of Schooling (EYS) and Mean Years of Schooling (MYS) were found to positively influence overall inequality. This suggests that while these indicators reflect progress in human development, they may also reveal gaps in how resources and opportunities are distributed, particularly among marginalised groups. These findings highlight the complex interplay between socio-economic and educational factors in shaping inequality.

For the government, these results point to the need for integrated policies that address the structural roots of inequality. Improving human development through investments in healthcare, housing, and public services can help reduce disparities. However, the positive relationship between GNIPC and inequality suggests that economic growth alone is insufficient. Policies must prioritise equitable wealth distribution through progressive taxation and social welfare programmes to ensure that the benefits of growth reach all segments of society. In higher education, the findings emphasize the critical role of universities in promoting equity. While access to higher education has expanded, disparities in academic success remain. Institutions must actively address these gaps by providing financial support, mentorship, and targeted academic programmes for disadvantaged students. Furthermore, the negative impact of gender inequality highlights the importance of creating inclusive environments where women, particularly those from underrepresented groups, can thrive academically and professionally.

For policymakers, the results underscore the importance of holistic and targeted approaches. Tackling educational inequality requires sustained investment in early childhood education, school infrastructure, and teacher training. Meanwhile, the strong link between gender inequality and overall disparities demands gender-sensitive policies that empower women in education and the workforce. Economic policies must also focus on reducing income inequality by supporting job creation, particularly in underdeveloped areas, and promoting skills development to enhance social mobility.

The OLS regression findings reveal that a complex web of socio-economic and educational factors shapes inequality in South Africa. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted strategy that combines efforts to improve human development, reduce gender disparities, and ensure equitable access to resources. These insights provide a robust foundation for designing policies to foster social inclusion and reduce inequality across all societal sectors.

Summary

The analysis of socioeconomic inequality in South Africa, conducted through Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, provides a comprehensive understanding of how key development indicators influence two critical dimensions of inequality: educational inequality (INEQ_EDU) and income inequality (COEF_INEQ). The models reveal strong explanatory power, accounting for 95.4% and 91.8% of educational and income inequality variation, respectively. This underscores the reliability of the selected predictors in capturing the factors driving disparities.

The analysis identifies several significant predictors, including the Human Development Index (HDI), life expectancy (LEXP), Gender Inequality Index (GII), mean years of schooling (MYS), expected years of schooling (EYS), and Gross National Income per Capita (GNIPC). For educational inequality, the findings indicate that higher human development (HDI) and reduced gender inequality (GII) are strongly associated with lower levels of educational inequality. This suggests that when societal well-being improves, and gender gaps are addressed, education access and outcomes become more equitable. Conversely, GNIPC and LEXP positively correlate with educational inequality, highlighting a more complex dynamic. While higher national income and improved life expectancy generally signify development, these factors can also expose disparities in how educational resources are distributed, often favouring wealthier or urban populations. This reflects the unequal allocation of opportunities, which continues to disadvantage marginalised groups.

The analysis of income inequality mirrors these trends: Higher HDI and lower GII consistently reduce income disparities, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive development strategies and gender equity in achieving economic fairness. However, GNIPC demonstrates a strong positive association with income inequality, suggesting that economic growth alone, without mechanisms for equitable distribution, may widen the gap between the rich and the poor. This is particularly concerning in South Africa, where wealth remains concentrated among a small elite group, perpetuating systemic exclusion. Similarly, both MYS and EYS positively correlate with income inequality, indicating that disparities in educational attainment translate into unequal income distribution, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds often remaining locked out of higher-paying job opportunities. The findings reveal that addressing inequality in South Africa requires more than improving aggregate development indicators. While progress in human development and gender equality reduces disparities, the benefits of economic

growth must be distributed more equitably. Educational and income inequalities are deeply intertwined, highlighting the need for coordinated efforts across multiple sectors to foster a more inclusive society.

A call to action

One of the most critical steps that the South African government must take to address inequality is implementing policies aimed at equitable economic redistribution. Progressive taxation is a proven tool for reducing income inequality by requiring higher contributions from the wealthiest individuals and corporations, generating funds to support the nation's poorest citizens. These funds can be channelled into essential social programmes, such as expanded social grants, which provide financial assistance to vulnerable households. Brazil's Bolsa Família programme offers a compelling example of how conditional cash transfers can reduce poverty and improve school attendance, demonstrating the potential for such initiatives to break South Africa's poverty cycle.

Addressing educational inequality requires targeted investments in rural and township schools, which remain severely under-resourced. Improving school infrastructure in these areas can create safe and conducive learning environments. At the same time, specialised teacher training programmes can equip educators with the skills needed to address the unique challenges rural learners face. India's District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) have shown that localised teacher training can significantly improve student outcomes. Moreover, expanding access to digital tools and internet connectivity in rural schools is essential for bridging the digital divide. Rwanda's One Laptop per Child initiative provides a helpful model for integrating technology into education in underserved regions.

Healthcare is another crucial area where government intervention is needed. Given the strong link between life expectancy and inequality, expanding the National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme to ensure universal healthcare access is vital. Additionally, mobile clinics can be deployed to remote areas, bringing essential health services to communities that currently lack adequate healthcare infrastructure. By improving access to healthcare, the government can help reduce disparities in life expectancy and overall well-being, key components of human development.

Call to action for researchers

South African researchers play a vital role in addressing inequality by developing context-specific theoretical frameworks that reflect the nation's unique socio-economic realities. Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is an approach that involves collaborating with marginalised communities to ensure that their lived experiences inform research outcomes. This method, which has proven effective in other parts of the Global South, enhances the relevance and impact of research findings, leading to more

practical and actionable solutions.

Another important area for researchers is the investigation of intersectional inequalities. By examining how race, gender, and geography intersect to perpetuate disparities in education and income, researchers can provide a more nuanced understanding of inequality. Longitudinal studies, which track the impact of interventions over time, are particularly valuable for assessing the effectiveness of policies and programmes. Additionally, focused research on the barriers faced by women in rural areas can help identify targeted strategies to reduce gender disparities in education and employment. Researchers must also measure the impact of policy interventions to ensure that efforts to reduce inequality are achieving their intended outcomes. Policy impact assessments, which use tools like cost-benefit analysis and randomised controlled trials, provide evidence-based recommendations for refining and improving existing initiatives. These assessments ensure that resources are allocated efficiently and that interventions are making a tangible difference in the lives of South Africans.

Call to action for policy makers

Policymakers must adopt an integrated approach to development, recognising that education, healthcare, and economic policies are deeply interconnected. For example, aligning educational curricula with labour market needs can help ensure that students graduate with skills relevant to the economy, improving their employability and reducing income disparities. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are a powerful tool, enabling collaboration between government and industry to fund scholarships, internships, and training programmes for disadvantaged students. Germany's dual-education model, which combines classroom learning with workplace training, provides a successful example of how such partnerships can bridge the skills gap and promote economic inclusion. Promoting gender equity in education and employment is another critical priority. Campaigns to encourage girls to pursue science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields can help break down traditional gender barriers and open up new opportunities for women. Enforcing equal pay legislation ensures that women receive fair compensation for their work, reducing income disparities between genders.

Effective policy implementation also requires robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms. A centralised database that tracks progress on inequality reduction can provide real-time data to inform decision-making and enable timely interventions. Additionally, creating platforms for citizen feedback ensures that policymakers remain responsive to the needs of the public, improving transparency and trust in government initiatives.

Finally, investing in early childhood development (ECD) is crucial for addressing inequality at its roots. Ensuring universal access to quality ECD services can equally give children from disadvantaged backgrounds a strong foundation for future learning and development.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusion

The paper underscores the multifaceted nature of socioeconomic inequality in South Africa and the critical role of development indicators in shaping disparities. The findings highlight the importance of addressing gender inequality and promoting inclusive human development as key strategies to reduce both educational and income inequality. The analysis presented in the article underscores the importance of human development indicators, such as the Human Development Index (HDI) and Gender Inequality Index (GII), in understanding educational and income disparities. The findings indicate that regions with higher levels of gender inequality often correlate with poorer educational outcomes and greater income inequality. This relationship suggests that addressing gender disparities is crucial for improving overall socioeconomic conditions and achieving social inclusion. The authors advocate for targeted interventions to promote gender equity in education and employment, emphasizing that such measures are essential for breaking the cycle of poverty and inequality.

While economic growth, as measured by GNIPC, is important, the results suggest that growth must be accompanied by targeted interventions to ensure that resources are equitably distributed across different population groups. Furthermore, policies aimed at enhancing access to education and improving the quality of schooling are essential for mitigating inequality and fostering long-term societal transformation. By identifying the key drivers of inequality, this study provides a foundation for policymakers to design targeted interventions that address the unique challenges faced by South Africa. Ultimately, a comprehensive approach that integrates economic, educational, and gender-focused initiatives will be crucial for achieving equitable development in the nation.

The action steps outlined above provide a comprehensive framework for addressing inequality in South Africa. The government, academic researchers, and policymakers can collectively tackle the systemic barriers perpetuating inequality by implementing equitable economic policies, investing in under-resourced schools and healthcare systems, and fostering inclusive research and policymaking. These strategies, informed by global best practices and tailored to South Africa's unique context, offer a pathway to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Recommendations

Achieving social inclusion in South Africa requires an integrated approach that combines theoretical inquiry, empirical analysis, and practical applications. Future research must explore the dynamics of inequality in greater depth, focusing on the interconnected roles of education, income, and gender disparities. These studies should identify systemic barriers and evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed action steps in addressing these barriers.

Future research should prioritise developing theoretical models that reflect South Africa's unique socio-economic and political history; and conducting their long-term impact on social inclusion requires empirical validation. Further areas of research should include investigating the impact of digital access initiatives, such as providing laptops and internet connectivity, on learning outcomes; examining the effectiveness of programmes that increase female participation in STEM fields, such as mentorship initiatives, scholarships, and targeted recruitment campaigns; assessing the long-term impact of early childhood development interventions on educational and socio-economic outcomes; and examining how integrated policies that link education, healthcare, and economic development affect social inclusion. Future research should also focus on designing robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems to ensure that the proposed interventions lead to meaningful progress. These systems would track the implementation of policies and programmes in real-time, providing actionable feedback to policymakers and stakeholders.

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Realising Social Inclusion by Empowering Marginalised Students in Rural Communities with Technology Solutions

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Abstract

This paper explores how technology can empower marginalised students in rural communities to achieve social inclusion. Drawing on Social Capital Theory, the study investigates how digital tools, including e-learning platforms, mobile devices, and community hubs, can bridge educational disparities caused by systemic socio-economic, infrastructural and cultural barriers. It highlights the potential of technology to promote equitable access to quality education, foster personalised learning, and build social networks. The research emphasises the integration of trust, reciprocity, and community cohesion to ensure the sustainability of technology-based interventions. A comprehensive review of extant literature focusing on the Global South, particularly South Africa, reveals that inclusive policies, scalable technological solutions, and multi-stakeholder collaborations are essential for addressing the digital divide. The study contributes to the discourse on educational equity and underscores the role of technology in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 4 and 10, in rural contexts.

Keywords: Social inclusion, marginalised students, digital divide, Social Capital Theory, technology in education

Introduction

Realising social inclusion through empowering marginalised students in rural communities is a pressing issue that requires innovative solutions, particularly in leveraging technology. In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid has left many rural areas grappling with systemic inequalities that hinder access to quality education and opportunities. This paper focuses on the critical role that technology can play in addressing these inequalities. The paper utilises constructs from social capital theory to frame the discussion. Social capital theory posits that individuals and communities can benefit from networks, relationships, and trust, which facilitate access to resources and opportunities. By applying this framework, a better understanding of how technology can enhance social inclusion for marginalised students can be deduced.

The challenges faced by students in rural communities are multifaceted. Limited access

to educational resources, inadequate infrastructure and socio-economic barriers constrain student success. The students frequently lack the necessary support systems their urban counterparts may take for granted. However, technology offers a pathway to change this narrative. With the rise of digital learning platforms, online resources and mobile connectivity, there is potential for rural students to access high-quality educational materials and engage with broader learning communities beyond their immediate environments. This aligns with the argument that no student must be left behind due to historical inequalities in South African society, while taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by digital technologies. By focusing on technological solutions within the framework of social capital theory, pathways that lead to more significant equity and opportunity in education and, by extension, social inclusion can be explored for students in rural areas.

Problem statement

The paper addresses the inadequate understanding of how technological solutions can empower marginalised students in rural communities, thereby facilitating their social inclusion. While existing literature has examined the digital divide and its ramifications for educational access, there remains a significant deficiency in studies that explicitly link technology interventions through the lens of the social capital theory to measurable outcomes in social inclusion for these vulnerable populations.

Prior investigations have predominantly concentrated on identifying the obstacles marginalised students face, including limited access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), socioeconomic hardships, and insufficient educational resources. However, there is a notable scarcity of exhaustive analyses that explore how targeted technology solutions can effectively mitigate these barriers and promote social inclusion. Additionally, although social capital theory has been extensively applied across various contexts, its relevance in investigating the role of technology in enhancing educational empowerment and fostering social networks among marginalised students in rural settings remains underexplored.

This paper examines the efficacy of various technological interventions to provide insights into best practices that facilitate equitable educational opportunities and enhance social inclusion for marginalised groups. It also examines the interplay between technology solutions and social capital constructs such as trust, reciprocity and community cohesion in promoting social inclusion for marginalised students; and provides valuable insights into how technology can enhance educational opportunities and strengthen community ties and support systems crucial for students' success. In the final analysis, it contributes to the broader discourse on social inclusion through technology affordances by offering a conceptual framework that outlines practical strategies for integrating technology into educational settings in rural communities. This framework will guide policymakers and educators seeking to implement targeted interventions that leverage technology to empower marginalised students, ultimately contributing to achieving social inclusion

goals in line with contemporary policy objectives.

The scope of the paper is summarised diagrammatically in Figure 1 below:

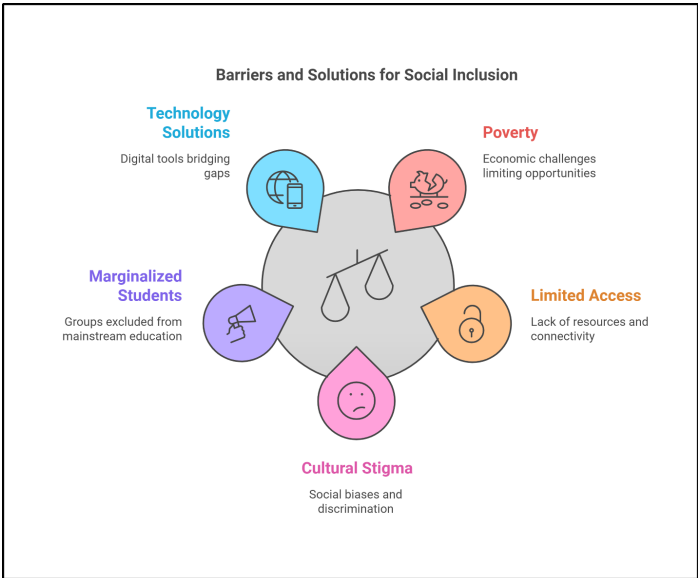


Figure 1: Barriers and Solutions for Social Inclusion (Olaitan and Onwuegbuzie, 2025)

The objectives of the study are aligned with global efforts such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Anser, Godil, Aderounmu, Onabote, Osabohien, Ashraf, and Pengl, 2021; Sparks, 2016; Walsh, Banerjee and Murphy, 2022), particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) (Zickafoose, Ilesanmi, Diaz-Manrique, Adeyemi, Walumbe, Strong, Wingenbach, Rodriguez and Dooley, 2024) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) (Ufomba, 2020), emphasising the need for inclusive and equitable education systems and opportunities for a better quality of life worldwide.

Background regarding social inclusion in education

Giving every student, regardless of their background the chance to fully participate in learning and society is the goal of social inclusion in education beyond simply guaranteeing enrolment (Anser, Godil, Aderounmu, Onabote, Osabohien, Ashraf, and Pengl, 2021; Ozili, 2020). The potential of social inclusion is frequently not realised for marginalised students, particularly those who reside in rural areas. They are excluded from the regular educational experience by obstacles like poverty, subpar schools, and cultural stigmas.

Millions of disadvantaged young people are forced to travel long distances to attend schools lacking basic global facilities. According to Martin and Cobigo (2011) and Ozili (2020), the social exclusion of these students entails being denied the opportunity to

acquire an education and the potential for a better life. Beyond affecting people, the impact of this exclusion affects entire communities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. The problem is not just an educational problem; it is also a socioeconomic problem that profoundly impacts societal hegemony and human dignity (Heeks, 2022).

The path to social inclusion for students in rural areas is fraught with challenges. Accessing learning resources and physical access to schools in rural areas are daily struggles due to infrastructure issues, including a lack of roads, electricity and/or internet (Noventi, 2021; Schwartz, Parnes, Browne, Austin, Carreiro, Rhodes, Kupersmidt, and Kanchewa, 2023). Additionally, gender and disability contribute to layers of disadvantage, as students with disabilities and girls are frequently the first to be excluded (Noventi, 2021). Empowering marginalised student groups through technology solutions is increasingly vital for communities worldwide, particularly in the context of higher education. As universities evolve from traditional educational institutions to active participants in societal development, they are uniquely positioned to address social inequalities and promote social justice (Lo Presti, Maggiore, Marino and Resciniti, 2024). This transformation aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), which emphasise the need for inclusive and equitable quality education (Korovkin, Park and Kaganer, 2023). Social inclusion in education is a moral requirement and a step toward sustainable and fair development.

Methodology

The paper is based on systematic literature review using three primary databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The combination of these resources ensured diverse perspectives, minimised publication bias, and enhanced the comprehensiveness of the review. No restrictions were imposed on publication years or the number of studies included, reflecting the historical significance of social inclusion in South Africa, particularly during and after apartheid. The exclusion criterion focused solely on literature lacking academic merit, such as newspaper articles and opinion pieces. Inclusion criteria prioritised scholarly publications and policy documents from credible government entities and international organisations with recognised research capabilities. This methodological approach bolsters the reliability and relevance of the findings while aligning with the study's objective to synthesise data from local and international contexts.

A targeted keyword strategy was employed to review pertinent literature thoroughly. Combinations of terms such as 'social inclusion', 'digital divide', 'rural education', 'marginalised students', 'social capital theory', 'technology in education' and 'social capital in education' were used. Filters were applied to prioritise recent research within the past decade, while seminal works older than ten years were included where critically relevant. This approach ensured that the findings reflected foundational and contemporary developments in the application of technology in education. Data extraction focused on identifying key themes and trends, with findings organised through thematic analysis.

Emphasis was placed on case studies from rural regions in the Global South, including Africa and South America. This comprehensive approach provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators and stakeholders seeking to promote technological social inclusion. The methodological approach is detailed in Figure 2.

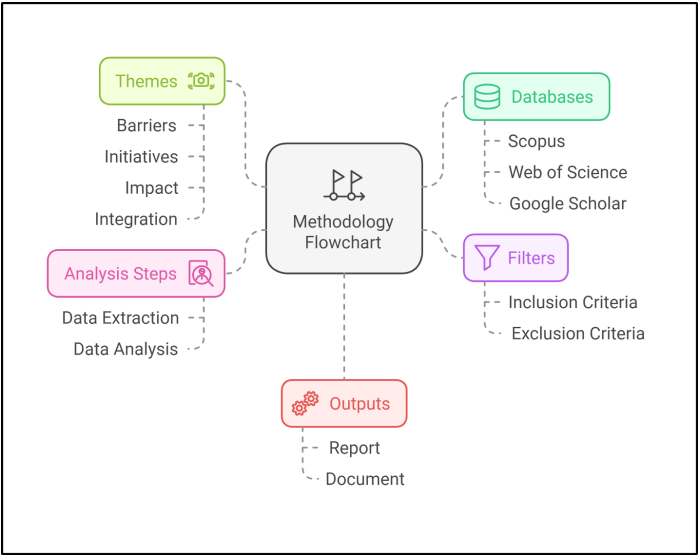


Figure 2: Research Methodological Approach (Olaitan and Onwuegbuzie, 2025)

Social inclusion in higher education in South Africa

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 serves as a strategic framework for addressing poverty and inequality in South Africa (Thusi, 2023). Grounded in social capital theory, which underscores the importance of social networks for accessing resources, the NDP emphasises social inclusion and equality. It envisions a nation in which all citizens can achieve a decent standard of living by eradicating poverty and fostering an inclusive economy that leverages the potential of all South Africans (Kajiita and Kang’ethe, 2024; Plantinga and Adams, 2021). Key priorities include boosting employment through economic growth, enhancing education and skills development, and strengthening the state’s capacity for development (Naidoo and Maré, 2015). However, significant challenges remain. Socio-economic inequalities undermine these efforts, with high unemployment rates among youth and women, which has eventually been worsened by barriers such as inadequate education and limited access to resources (Fouche and Andrews, 2022; Murriss, Scott, Stjerne Thomsen, Dixon, Giorza, Peers and Lawrence, 2023). Many marginalised communities struggle to access credit and markets, hindering their economic participation (Mkhwanazi, 2024).

The government has initiated various programmes to bridge the digital divide by improving connectivity through free Wi-Fi in public spaces and expanding mobile networks in rural areas (Mthombeni, 2024). While these initiatives became crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic for online vaccination registration (see Aruleba and Jere, 2022; Nchake

and Shuaibu, 2022), the outcomes have been mixed due to persistent inequalities in the digital access spaces. Advocates argue that addressing systemic inequalities aggravated by the digital divide is essential for promoting social equity. They emphasise the need to empower marginalised communities with opportunities for education and employment (Aruleba and Jere, 2022; Reynolds, 2021). Critics also express concerns about the sustainability of these initiatives and highlight that merely providing technology does not address deeper socio-economic issues (Aruleba and Jere, 2022; Moyo and Munoriyarwa, 2021).

The establishment of Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) was to enhance skills development and digital literacy among citizens (Motsie, 2023). However, challenges such as poor governance have hindered their effectiveness. During the pandemic, the Electronic Vaccination Data System (EVDS) also highlighted the necessity of the internet in accessing health services. However, it revealed critical gaps in service reliability and digital literacy among rural populations (Moyo and Munoriyarwa, 2021).

Role of technology in promoting the realisation of social inclusion

Many issues marginalised students confront, especially in rural areas, may be resolved by technology. Promoting social inclusion, improving learning opportunities, and fostering fair access to schools are all made feasible by cutting-edge educational technologies. Technology plays a vital role in empowering these students by filling in resource access gaps, facilitating individualised learning, and fostering the growth of social capital within educational networks. The various ways technology is essential to fostering social inclusion are examined in the following sections.

Overview of educational technologies

Technology can significantly enhance educational access for marginalised students in rural areas (Boughey and McKenna, 2021). Mobile devices facilitate access to instructional materials and enable participation in virtual classrooms. Community hubs have also offered digital resources and learning spaces that foster collaboration among students lacking personal devices or reliable internet (Aruleba and Jere, 2022). For technology to be effective in rural settings, it must be accessible, scalable and adaptable. Accessibility ensures usability for individuals with disabilities; scalability allows broad application without significant cost increases, while adaptability tailors solutions to meet local needs. Technology also enhances social capital by fostering communication among community members (Maja, 2023). By integrating social capital into educational initiatives, technology can create more inclusive learning environments that empower communities (Alabdali, Pileggi and Cetindamar, 2023; Dehart et al., 2022).

Various educational technologies have been developed to meet the requirements of underserved students in rural areas, providing fresh approaches to learning. No matter

where they live, students from rural areas may now access high-quality education thanks to e-learning platforms like Khan Academy, Coursera, and local online platforms, which offer a multitude of remotely accessible education resources (Alabdali et al., 2023). These systems frequently offer interactive tests, video lectures, and discussion boards to facilitate self-paced learning. One clear benefit of e-learning is its flexibility, which gives students access to resources outside the traditional classrooms and allows them to study at their own pace.

Additionally, mobile gadgets are essential for closing the gap in schooling. With the widespread use of smartphones and inexpensive tablets, mobile technology presents an economical way to distribute instructional materials, particularly in places with inadequate infrastructure. Students can interact with instructional materials, access tutorials and even participate in live virtual classrooms with mobile-based learning applications. Since mobile learning allows students to download resources and access them offline when needed, it is especially crucial in rural areas where connectivity might be spotty.

The creation of community hubs is another important technological advancement. These hubs offer access to digital gadgets, internet connectivity, and learning spaces and are frequently established in partnership with local governments, non-governmental organisations, or educational institutions (see Kamat & Nasnodkar, 2019; Maja, 2023). They also act as hubs where students can participate in online courses, collaborate with others, or even get career counselling. Community hubs, which provide a common area for learning and fostering relationships with peers and teachers, might be beneficial where students lack personal access to devices or dependable internet at home.

These technologies need to be accessible, scalable, and adaptable in order to be successful in rural settings. People with different abilities, including those with disabilities, can then use the technology, thanks to accessibility. Scalable solutions are viable for broad use because they can also be applied in many situations without experiencing appreciable increases in cost or complexity. Technology's ability should also be tailored to meet the unique requirements of various communities, including language, curriculum and local infrastructural limitations, also known as adaptability. These three qualities are necessary for technology solutions to be successfully incorporated into rural education systems.

Technology and social capital integration

Technology also contributes significantly towards the development of social capital, which is essential for strengthening community ties and extending the viability of educational programmes. The networks, trust, and reciprocity norms that exist within a society and can be used to enhance educational achievements are referred to as social capital. By creating social networks between communities, instructors and students, technology can improve the development of social capital. Thanks to educational technologies, teachers, students and other community members can now communicate and work together more

efficiently (Maja, 2023). Students can also communicate by sharing information, asking questions and participating in group conversations through online platforms, social media and messaging applications. By fostering relationships and promoting teamwork, these platforms can ensure that students are not alone in their educational processes. Moreover, technology can be used to promote reciprocity norms, which include resource sharing and mutual assistance (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019; Pearce & Wood, 2019). Technology platforms, for instance, can allow students to work together on projects, exchange educational resources, and encourage one another while they study. These exchanges foster community involvement and a sense of shared responsibility, both of which are crucial for promoting social inclusion.

Technology also fosters collaboration and trust throughout the educational system. Technology initiatives may, for example, foster trust among communities, educators and students by offering continuous and dependable access to resources (Alabdali *et al.*, 2023; Dehart, King, Iachini, Browne and Reitmeier, 2022). These stakeholders are more inclined to collaborate and contribute to the initiative’s long-term success when they can clearly understand the advantages of technology for education. Trust is crucial for digital solutions to be sustainable and for communities to be empowered to take charge of educational initiatives.

Technology can further play a significant role in helping underprivileged students in rural areas become more socially included. It also provides more access to education, individualised learning experiences, and chances for skill development through e-learning platforms, mobile devices, and community centres (Alabdali *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, by encouraging cooperation, reciprocity and trust between students, teachers and communities, technology can facilitate the integration of social capital and build a more welcoming and encouraging learning environment.

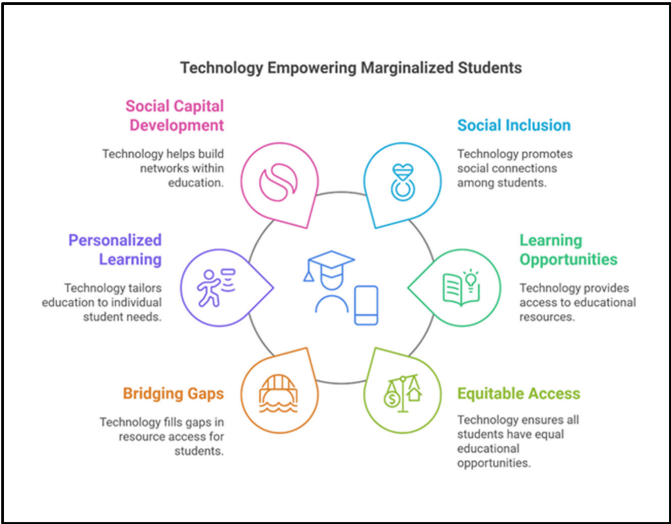


Figure 3: Roles of Technology in Empowering Marginalised Students (Olaitan and Onwuegbuzie, 2025)

Findings and discussion

Despite significant strides towards bridging the digital divide and promoting social inclusion in higher education, numerous challenges persist. These constraints hinder technology-driven initiatives, particularly in rural and marginalised communities. The constraints include funding constraints. A significant challenge to policy effectiveness is the inconsistent and inadequate funding for initiatives to reduce the digital divide. Many programmes rely on temporary funding sources or external donors, which limits their sustainability and long-term impact. For instance, device-sharing schemes often overlook recurring costs such as maintenance, upgrades, and replacements (Justino, 2014). Furthermore, the financial resources allocated for infrastructure development in rural areas, including broadband networks and energy supply, are insufficient, exacerbating the digital divide.

There are also scalability and sustainability challenges. While some initiatives have succeeded in urban or semi-urban settings, scaling these programmes to rural areas presents unique logistical and infrastructural challenges. The lack of robust infrastructure in rural regions hinders the replication of successful urban programmes. For example, students in rural areas with limited internet connectivity or inadequate access to devices often cannot utilise digital learning resources designed for urban contexts (Zickafoose *et al.*, 2024) which can advance the economic growth of a country. Yet for many children in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This disparity highlights the need for adaptable policies that address local circumstances. Sustainability remains a critical gap in many policy initiatives. Programmes are frequently designed as short-term solutions without considering the long-term resources and capacity required for maintaining effectiveness. For example, teacher training programmes often consist of one-off workshops without establishing mechanisms for continuous professional development and support. As a result, these initiatives lose momentum over time, diminishing their overall impact (Justino, 2014). Addressing sustainability requires integrated strategies that include consistent monitoring, evaluation and resource allocation.

A key challenge to the adoption of technology relate to infrastructure deficiencies. The absence of critical infrastructure such as reliable internet connectivity, digital devices, and consistent energy supply remains a significant obstacle in many rural communities. Schools in remote areas often experience frequent power outages and weak internet signals, disrupting the integration of e-learning systems (Yeboah *et al.*, 2023). This challenge is particularly acute in low-income areas with minimal investment in rural infrastructure.

Cultural resistance and socioeconomic inequalities are the other set of challenges that militate against the adoption of technology. Cultural norms that favour traditional teaching methods often create resistance to adopting digital tools in education. In some communities, digital learning resources are viewed with scepticism and perceived as distractions or threats to conventional teaching practices (Yeboah, Aloka and Charamba, 2023). Teachers unfamiliar with technology may resist its integration due to concerns

about job security or significant changes to their teaching approaches. Socioeconomic disparities further hinder equitable technology adoption. Low-income students often lack the devices, internet access, and other resources necessary for digital learning. Additionally, social stigmas and gender-based disparities disproportionately affect girls and women, limiting their participation in technology-driven educational programmes (Mncube, Tanner and Chigona, 2021). Similarly, students with disabilities face unique challenges due to the lack of accessible digital tools tailored to their needs.

Conclusion and recommendations

The integration of technology in higher education has demonstrated the potential to empower underprivileged students in rural areas and foster social inclusion. Digital tools, including e-learning platforms, mobile devices, and community hubs, can enhance access to quality education, foster critical thinking skills, and enable personalised learning experiences. It has been established that when ICTs are effectively implemented, they can help close the achievement gap and provide historically underrepresented students with opportunities to engage in mainstream political and economic spheres. However, persistent obstacles must be addressed to realise this potential. Socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and the high costs of devices and internet access, often limit technology access. Infrastructure issues, including unreliable electricity and internet connectivity, particularly in rural areas, further complicate matters. Additionally, gender and disability disparities exacerbate exclusion for certain groups, while cultural resistance, outdated educational methodologies, and low levels of digital literacy hinder technology adoption.

However, practical recommendations to policymakers and technology developers are essential to optimise its effects and address persistent challenges. The policy recommendations are that government programmes should be refined; the local context should foreground all policies; public-private partnerships should be promoted; and inclusivity should be prioritised. The recommendations with respect to technology are that technological solutions must prioritise scalability and affordability; developers should focus on creating inclusive technologies that meet the specific needs of underrepresented groups; emerging technologies like augmented reality (AR) and artificial intelligence (AI) should be leveraged; investment in digital infrastructure should be increased; and alliances, collaboration, partnerships and community engagement should be strengthened.

In summary, technology integration is crucial in promoting social inclusion among marginalised students in rural areas by providing equitable access to education while fostering collaboration within educational networks (Alabdali *et al.*, 2023). By addressing funding constraints, scalability challenges, sustainability issues, infrastructural deficiencies, cultural resistance, and socioeconomic inequalities and leveraging social capital constructs through strategic policies and innovative technological solutions, we can create a more inclusive educational environment that empowers all learners. The recommendations of the study are pictorially summarised in Figure 4.

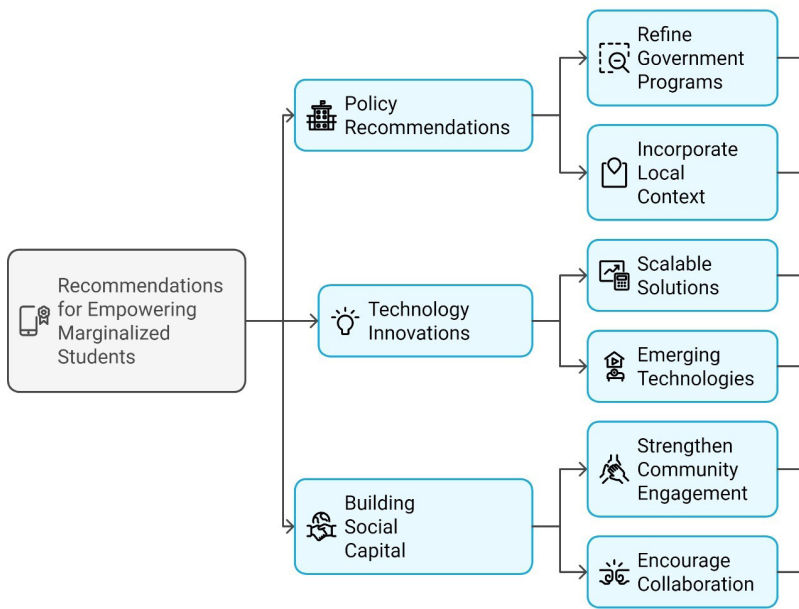


Figure 4: Recommendations for improving social inclusion in South African Higher Education (Olaitan and Onwuegbuzie, 2025).

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Navigating University Life Through *Ubuntu*: Cohesion and Challenges in a South African University Student Residence

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Abstract

Transitioning from secondary to higher education presents significant challenges for students, particularly as they navigate unfamiliar social environments. For many, university residences become critical spaces for social integration and adaptation. However, these spaces are increasingly becoming unsafe owing to recurring incidents of violence, which undermine the sense of communal cohesion. Drawing on a broader study for master's degree which explored the role of *Ubuntu* in fostering cohesive living among students in a university residence in South Africa, this paper reports on students' understanding and practice of *Ubuntu*, as well as the challenges and opportunities they encounter in promoting cohesion within residences. The study adopted a qualitative approach rooted in the Afrocentric paradigm and *Ubuntu* philosophy. Fifteen students were purposively sampled and participated in in-depth interviews. Participants demonstrated a strong understanding of *Ubuntu* values, such as respect, humanity, sharing, and harmony, but often struggled to practice these principles. The study found that socio-economic challenges and the dominance of Eurocentric values within the university hindered students' ability to fully embrace *Ubuntu* in daily interactions. This article underscores the need to reinvigorate *Ubuntu* as a guiding framework for social relationships within residences and across African society. It calls for future research on preserving and adapting *Ubuntu* for younger generations in an evolving global landscape.

Keywords: Ubuntu, Afrocentricity, university residences, students, social cohesion

Introduction

The transition to university life presents unique academic, social, and emotional challenges for students. Beyond meeting academic demands, students must manage and negotiate newfound independence while navigating unfamiliar social and cultural contexts (Lei, Calley, Brosnan, Ashwin and Russell, 2018). This transition often involves leaving home, family, and friends, which can be a significant adjustment, especially during the first year of higher education. University residences play a critical role in this process. They are not only places to live but also environments where students forge relationships, build support networks, and adapt to their new surroundings. Ideally, they should be safe and inclusive spaces that promote social integration and mutual support.

Lately, university residences, intended as safe spaces for communal living, have been generally reported as sites of violence, poverty, and crime (Phoswa, 2024). In 2018, for example, 47 rapes were reported on university campuses nationwide, mostly occurring in residences (Naidu, 2018). Financial hardships have also led some students to engage in sex work (Miri, 2022), adding to the social and moral challenges in these environments. Several violent incidents have taken place in student residences across the country, including fatal stabbings between roommates and shootings near student accommodation (African News Agency, 2018), revealing the fragility of social relations within these spaces.

These realities highlight an urgent need for approaches that foster trust, respect, and harmony in student residences. This paper examines how the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* can serve as a framework, offering pathways for promoting social cohesion while addressing the challenges that undermine communal life in South African university residences. According to Dragolov, Ignácz, Lorenz, Delhey and Boehnke (2013, 15), “social cohesion is a quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviours of its members. A cohesive society is characterised by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good”.

Background and problem statement

University residences in South Africa reflect the country’s broader social and cultural diversity, bringing together students from varied ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. While this diversity has the potential to enrich student life, it can also create tensions if not managed within a framework that values cooperation, mutual respect, and shared responsibility.

Residences are intended to provide safe, inclusive environments that support students’ social and academic well-being, yet they are increasingly marked by violence, socio-economic hardship, and the erosion of communal values (Agherdien and Petersen, 2016). These conditions weaken trust, strain peer relationships, and undermine the sense of belonging essential to student life. University residences are intended to provide safe, inclusive environments that support students’ social and academic well-being, yet they are increasingly marked by incidents of violence, socio-economic hardship, and the erosion of communal values (Agherdien and Petersen, 2016). These conditions weaken trust, strain peer relationships, and undermine the sense of belonging that is essential to student life.

Ubuntu, often captured in the isiZulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (“I am because we are”), offers a culturally grounded framework for restoring cohesion. As a social philosophy, *Ubuntu* emphasises care, community, harmony, hospitality, respect, reciprocity, and collective well-being (Nabudere, 2005; Higgs, 2012; Letseka, 2012; Ramose, 2022; Waghid, 2022). Scholars highlight its value in fostering communal ethics

and sustaining social harmony, making it highly relevant for addressing contemporary challenges in student residences. However, its practical application in modern university residences remains underexplored, especially in contexts where Western individualistic values dominate (Phoswa, 2024).

Institutional structures such as the Department of Student Residence Affairs (DSRA) and student organisations have attempted to promote cohesion through community events, workshops, and support programmes. Although these initiatives are important, their impact is often limited and constrained by inconsistent implementation and the influence of competing cultural values.

This paper, therefore, investigates how students understand and apply *Ubuntu* in their residence life, and the challenges they encounter in embodying its principles. It seeks to reimagine *Ubuntu* as a practical framework for fostering inclusive, cohesive, and safe residence communities in higher education. To achieve this, the discussions in this paper examine how students conceptualise *Ubuntu* within the residence context, paying attention to the meanings they attach to it and the cultural resources they draw upon. It further explores the ways in which Ubuntu values are enacted in residence life, particularly in promoting unity, cooperation, and mutual support among students. Finally, the paper identifies the barriers that hinder the everyday practice of *Ubuntu*, highlighting the structural, cultural, and interpersonal challenges students face. By addressing these objectives, the paper not only deepens understanding of *Ubuntu* as lived experience in student residences, but also contributes to broader debates on how African philosophies can inform responses to contemporary social challenges in higher education.

Theoretical framework

The study reported in this paper was guided by an Afrocentric theoretical framework. In this paper, the terms Afrocentricity, African-centred Worldview, and Afrocentric paradigm are used interchangeably. According to Asante (1998), Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values and perspectives predominate. Thus, it is a philosophical perspective associated with the discovery, location and actualisation of African agency within the context of history and culture (ibid). Theoretically, it is the placing of the African people at the centre of any analysis of African phenomena (Zibane, Phoswa and Zondi, 2025). Afrocentricity emphasises the critical need for African people to be repositioned and relocated historically, economically, socially, politically, and philosophically (Engelbrecht, 2019). The foundational tenet of Afrocentricity advocates for African people to move beyond being characterised as passive victims or objects, and instead emphasise the affirmation of African agency and the central role of African perspectives in interpreting various phenomena. Afrocentricity critiques and contests Eurocentrism by asserting that Eurocentric values are not universally applicable (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Thus, Afrocentricity provided a perspective wherein university students from a South African university were interviewed and analysed through the lens and perspective of their African experience. Throughout the study, the researcher aimed

to establish the appropriate centrality of African people in the analysis and interpretation of findings. Asante (2009) argues that a central assumption of Afrocentrists is that all relationships are structured around centres, margins, and distances.

According to Graham (1999, p. 112), the African-centred worldview is rooted in five principles and values: a. The interconnectedness of all things: This principle views all elements of the universe, including people, animals, and non-living (spiritual and natural) objects, as interconnected. b. The spiritual nature of human beings: Afrocentricity emphasises valuing human beings beyond their assigned social and economic status. Thus, one's personhood comes through one's relationship with the community. c. Collective/individual identity and the collective/inclusive nature of family structure: The motto "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" embodies this principle. It values human similarities and commonalities over individual differences, thus collective identity. d. Oneness of mind, body, and spirit: Optimal health and spiritual divinity are attained through self-development and knowledge of oneself across optimal emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. e. The value of interpersonal relationships: Success is measured by personal achievements and contributions to other people's success and active engagement in collective problem-solving efforts.

The aforementioned values are essential components incorporated into the research that is reported in this paper. This is because the study investigates the social dynamics and interactions among students residing in university residences in South Africa. It was imperative to adopt a theoretical framework that resonated with these principles to ensure alignment with African values, culture, worldview, spirituality, and *Ubuntu* philosophy. Consequently, Afrocentricity provides a culturally relevant lens for exploring the role of *Ubuntu* within these settings. This framework facilitated an authentic representation of African students' lived experiences and ensured that their perspectives were integral to the analysis.

Methodology

Research paradigm

An Afrocentric paradigm was adopted, emphasising African experiences, spirituality, and holistic inquiry (Mazama, 2001). In contrast to Western epistemologies, the Afrocentric paradigm challenges the treatment of research participants as mere objects of inquiry and rejects the concept of an objective reality in interpreting human nature. The principles of an Afrocentric paradigm guiding this research, as noted by Mazama (2001), include the following aspects and assumptions:

- a) African experience must guide and inform all inquiries: This principle emphasises that research seeking to comprehend African phenomena should be centred on African people, focusing on their lived experiences, perspectives, and worldviews.

- b) The spiritual is important and must be given its due place: This principle emphasises the importance of recognising and incorporating spirituality as a vital aspect when conducting research involving African people.
- c) Involvement in the subject is important: This principle is highly significant in social science research, emphasising a participatory methodology. Within this framework, the researcher transcends the role of a detached observer, instead of engaging as an active participant who profoundly appreciates and values the lived experiences, cultural contexts, and viewpoints of the African communities being studied.
- d) Wholism is a must: This principle signifies the belief in a shared origin of all life forms and the intrinsic interconnectedness of all entities within the planetary ecosystem, including animate and inanimate components.
- e) Intuition is a valid source of information: This principle critiques the predominant dependence on empirical and quantitative methodologies that characterise Western social science research. Instead, the Afrocentric paradigm emphasises the significance of intuition, recognising the profound and often implicit knowledge rooted in African communities' cultural and spiritual traditions.
- f) Not everything that matters is measurable: This principle is particularly significant in social science research involving people of African descent, as it emphasises the importance of adopting a holistic and culturally informed perspective to comprehend human behaviour, social interactions, and historical contexts.
- g) The knowledge generated must be liberating: This principle asserts that the primary aim of research within this paradigm is not solely to generate knowledge for its intrinsic value but to produce knowledge that actively fosters the empowerment and liberation of African communities.

Research approach and design

The study reported in this paper employed a qualitative approach. The appropriateness of a qualitative research approach lies in its alignment with the principles of *Ubuntu*. As a foundational concept of collective orientation, *Ubuntu* naturally informed and shaped the research methodology. Mkabela (2005) highlights that within the framework of *Ubuntu*, there is a strong emphasis on mutual engagement among participants, fostering a sense of tolerance, hospitality, and respect for individuals, including their language, perspectives, and conversational styles. Mkabela further argues that this approach suggests a transition from an alienated mode of consciousness, which perceives the knower as separate from the known, to a collective mode of consciousness (Mkabela, 2005).

An exploratory design was adopted to understand students' lived experiences, particularly in contexts of significant uncertainty and limited understanding (Neuman, 2014). This design was well-suited to examine *Ubuntu's* value among students residing in university accommodations. The examination was further complicated by the pervasive dominance of Western cultural frameworks in higher education institutions, which often marginalise students' cultural identities, spiritual practices, and communal values. This cultural hegemony frequently limits appreciation for students' distinct perspectives, creating barriers to understanding their experiences fully.

The study adopted a context-sensitive lens to address these challenges, recognising the complexities and uncertainties surrounding student behaviours in university residences. These behaviours are deeply rooted in students' worldviews, which are frequently overshadowed or suppressed by the predominance of Eurocentric norms. Such dominance impedes a holistic understanding of students' lived experiences within the university environment, highlighting the need to explore these dimensions through culturally relevant frameworks like *Ubuntu*.

Purposive sampling was used to select fifteen participants, comprising both undergraduate and postgraduate students, who met specific criteria to ensure the richness of the data. Firstly, participants were required to have lived in university residences for at least two years, with a minimum of one year spent in the residence under study. Secondly, they needed to be familiar with the *Ubuntu* philosophy or values to provide detailed insights into its relevance within a university residence context. Lastly, participants were selected based on their proficiency in South African languages, specifically isiZulu, isiXhosa and siSwati, which are commonly spoken in the residence under study. This linguistic criterion facilitated effective communication and enriched the study's cultural context.

Data collection

The study reported in this paper used semi-structured, in-depth interviews for data gathering. The interviews were conducted in multiple South African languages, including isiZulu, isiXhosa, and siSwati, alongside English, reflecting the university student participants' linguistic diversity and literacy levels. Participants were encouraged to communicate in their preferred language to ensure comfort and clarity in expression. The use of these languages, with their shared linguistic features, facilitated mutual comprehension between the researcher and the participants, thereby enriching the data collection process. This multilingual approach was intentionally adopted to create a supportive environment where students could authenticate their experiences and insights without hesitation. Even Wa Thiong'o (1992), cited in Zibane *et al.* (2025), argues that language is not merely a communication system but a cognitive resource that enables individuals to access and engage with their culture. As a result, the participants contributed valuable perspectives and in-depth information regarding the social phenomena under investigation. Permission to record interviews was obtained.

The researchers kept notes and used an audio recording device during data collection. Consent for audio recording was explicitly outlined in the informed consent process, and participants had to be permitted to use the recordings. All recorded data and transcripts from the study were stored securely in a locked cabin, with access limited solely to the researcher and the supervising authority. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and insights related to the role of *Ubuntu* in residence life. The thematic analysis method facilitated the interpretation of the collected data by systematically identifying, analysing, and reporting significant patterns (Neuman, 2014). In the study context, thematic analysis was employed to uncover themes and recurring patterns in the data that were considered noteworthy. These identified themes were subsequently used to address the research questions and to provide insights into specific issues aligned with the study's objectives.

Findings and discussions

Students' understanding and practice of Ubuntu

Participants displayed a strong theoretical understanding of *Ubuntu*, identifying values such as respect, humanity, sharing, and unity. These were often attributed to upbringing and teachings from elders. Below are some of the participants' responses when their knowledge of *Ubuntu* was explored:

"Ubuntu is all about oneness and living in harmony, where we recognise that you cannot function alone, especially here at the university residence. You know, we need each other in order to function at our best potential. There is a phrase in IsiZulu that says 'Umntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu', which explains Ubuntu very clearly. This means that even if I am not directly affected by any challenge we face here at the university residence, I sympathise with my sisters and brothers. Therefore, all of us are affected by the same issue. This further means that even when seeking solutions to resolve a particular issue, we seek solutions together because we are one." (Participant 2)

"Ubuntu is the ability to live with people in love and harmony and being able to think for another person on their behalf. I think Ubuntu can be shown by the way you speak or through your actions." (Participant 3)

"Ubuntu is love, where a person appreciates and values other peoples' opinions and way of life... and I think respect is paramount when explaining Ubuntu because it plays an important role. This is because all the values of Ubuntu are rooted in respect. For example, let us take supporting one another with academics here at the university residence, we do this because we respect each other, and we know the importance of contributing to the success of other fellow residence mates. All these practices of helping, sharing and giving through unity are fundamental to Ubuntu." (Participant 4)

"It is people treating each other equally, regardless of how high their [social] status may be. Ubuntu

is un-victimisation, it is humanity. Ubuntu is to give without being asked or expecting something in return. It is to open your heart so that other people can feel the warmth. I mean, we know love is free. So, Ubuntu would be giving off the love where it is needed.” (Participant 5)

The above extracts show the shared ways in which research participants conceptualised *Ubuntu*. Almost all participants anchored their definitions in the well-known *Ubuntu* maxim, “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (“I am, because we are”). During the interviews, participants applied this maxim to their lived experiences, mainly regarding how they supported and assisted one another during challenging times and fostered a sense of togetherness within the university residence. This aligns with Shutte’s (2001, p. 12) assertion that “personhood comes as a gift from other persons.”

Participants’ interpretations of *Ubuntu* correspond closely with scholarly definitions of the concept. Early African humanist philosophers expanded the notion of *Ubuntu* to encompass ideas of shared humanity, reconciliation, and solidarity, emphasising that its meaning is best understood through its social value, demonstrated by mutual respect and communal living (Ngcobo *et al.*, 2023). This understanding is evident in the participants’ responses, such as Participant 3’s emphasis on “*the ability to live with people in love and harmony.*”

Scholars such as Nabudere (2005) and Ramose (2002; 2022) describe *Ubuntu* as a social philosophy grounded in care, community, harmony, hospitality, respect, and responsiveness, reflecting the fundamental interconnectedness of human existence. Similar themes emerged in how Participants 2, 3, and 5 defined *Ubuntu*. Additionally, participants’ responses align with three of the five principles of Afrocentricity articulated by Reviere (2006) and elaborated on by Chilisa (2017): the spiritual nature of human beings, collective identity, and the value of interpersonal relationships.

Overall, the participants emphasised *Ubuntu*’s core principles, including helping others selflessly, fostering unity, and living together in love and harmony. Their interpretations resonate with the foundational tenets of Afrocentricity and reinforce the relational and communal values central to *Ubuntu*. The participants mentioned the following:

“The values that come to my mind when I think of Ubuntu include love, sharing, compassion, collaboration, social cohesion, tolerance, respect and interdependence. However, I can only say that it is all about valuing togetherness. Even the way we look at the community at the university residence is very communal because it is all about valuing togetherness and oneness.” (Participant 2)

“As you know, you cannot have everything, so it is heart-warming when one asks for something and knows they would surely get help. The girls here at the residence even lend each other’s bags and other stuff when one is going on a date. If someone does not have food, we would donate some to them. See, Ubuntu does not have to be so big; these small things we do effortlessly count to show humanity.” (Participant 11)

The extract emphasises the prevalence of *Ubuntu*-related values within university residences, including sharing, humility, solidarity, care for others, collaboration, respect, and togetherness. These values align closely with Asante's (2003) conceptualisation of *Ubuntu* as embodying the foundational principles of the African worldview. Asante (2018) further describes *Ubuntu* as a multidimensional philosophy encompassing respect for all human beings, human dignity, collective responsibility, humility, solidarity, care, hospitality, interdependence, and communalism. Study participants echoed these sentiments, highlighting the significance of respect, sharing, collaboration, and mutual assistance within the residence context. They noted that such values foster a sense of community and support, particularly in addressing the challenges students encounter, while also contributing to the overall well-being and harmony of the residents. This perspective aligns with Khoza's (2005) interpretation of communalism in *Ubuntu* as a collective existence grounded in supportiveness, cooperation, and solidarity.

Residence activities that promote social cohesion

Programmes by the Department of Student Residence Affairs (DSRA) and other university-based organisations included food parcel distributions, residence parties, and sharing of facilities. While rooted in principles of cohesion, poor management often undermined these initiatives. During the interviews, three participants shared their perspectives on the programmes organised by the university's DSRA to foster cohesive living within student residences. They highlighted that residence parties serve as opportunities for students to socialise, establish connections, network, and cultivate new friendships and interactions that are not typically part of their daily routines. Participants described these events as enjoyable initiatives that promote a culture of social cohesion among students. The findings further suggest that such social gatherings are designed to foster unity and provide students with a sense of social security. Participant One (1) said:

"Residence parties are always exciting experiences; I have attended them since my first year. They understand that we are facing many pressures as students, so I think this student housing [DSRA] hosts these parties for us to de-stress from all the academic pressures we face during the academic year. These parties also help us as Residence mates to socialise because some of us do not even have fun as a result of our studies and other academic responsibilities. It is always fun. I do not know how this happens, but you find quiet people laughing, singing and playing with others, which they do not always do. So, residence parties always bring that togetherness among us." (Participant 1)

"Student housing [DSRA] hosts these parties for us to socialise as students of the same residence." Participant 4)

"I think what is fun about residence parties is not only the braai and cold drinks but being together as students of Alert Luthuli Residence is always good. We play games and eat together, and sometimes you get to speak with residence mates that you never spoke to before. This, on its own, shows that student housing wants us to socialise and have fun as students." (Participant 8)

In the discussion above, participants emphasised the vibrant social atmosphere of residence parties, describing these gatherings as sources of joy and unity among students. Activities such as singing and dancing were identified as central to the enjoyment of these events. This resonates with one of the core principles of Afrocentrism, namely the “spiritual nature of human beings” (Reviere, 2006), which underscores the importance of togetherness over materialism within African cultural values. For individuals of African descent, collective singing and dancing at social events are imbued with spiritual significance. Supporting this perspective, Mbiti (1990) argues that African religion and philosophy view spirituality as an intangible essence that connects individuals to the divine (God) and one another in a profound and meaningful way.

During the interviews, participants highlighted the university’s DRSA programmes as fostering a sense of cohesive living and enhancing students’ overall well-being in university accommodations. This section examines the food parcel distribution initiative led by the university’s Campus Clinic and the Campus HIV/AIDS Support Unit (CHASU) and its alignment with the values of *Ubuntu*. Through collaboration with Residence Assistants (RAs), who manage student-related issues within their designated residences, CHASU distributes food parcels to students in need. This initiative exemplifies the *Ubuntu*-inspired principles of communalism, precisely the ethos of giving and sharing (Waghid, 2022). Students who benefited from the programme shared their experiences during the interviews. While they expressed gratitude for the support, many acknowledged feelings of embarrassment associated with being seen collecting free food. This sentiment aligns with findings from a recent South African study, which employs the isiXhosa phrase “*Bazothini abantu?*”—translated as “What would people say?”—to illustrate the influence of peer perception on student behaviour (Mansvelt, Schenck and Soji (2022). The following transpired:

“I have taken the food parcel from our RA before. As much as I knew I needed food, it was never easy to take without feeling embarrassed. I know it would have been easy if it had been given to everybody at Res. There is that tendency for everybody to know that when you receive a food parcel, it means you do not have money to buy whatever you like, or you are poor. I do not like to be seen in the receiving hand. You know, especially us as girls, we like to gossip - everybody will be speaking about me. No!” (Participant 3)

“I have never taken food from RA. However, I think distributing food parcels is critical. I know a friend who uses his NSFAS money to support his family. He always takes food parcels, which have been invaluable to him.” (Participant 13)

“When we are called to go and take food, I take mine even if I still have food. I do this because people are always embarrassed to take food, and I do not know why. They give us this food because they know some of us do not have funding and some of us are coming from poor backgrounds.” (Participant 15)

The extracts above underscore the critical role of university programmes in embedding

Ubuntu philosophy within student residences. These programmes reflect the core values and principles of Afrocentricity and *Ubuntu*. The findings further highlight participants' generally positive reception of food assistance initiatives, although some expressed discomfort with accepting such aid. Specifically, one participant voiced unease about being perceived as a recipient, which seems paradoxical to the essence of *Ubuntu*, where giving and receiving are integral components of the philosophy (Higgs, 2012). This tension suggests a shifting paradigm, influenced by the growing prevalence of Western values among university students, prioritising individualism and self-centredness as a hallmark of Western ideology (Asante, 2003; Phoswa, 2024).

Sharing communal facilities within student residences, such as bathrooms, kitchens, refrigerators, and television rooms, emerged as a significant theme during the interviews. Participants reflected on their experiences of sharing these spaces and highlighted the challenges that arise when differing personal preferences and habits conflict. Scholars such as Letseka (2012) and Ngcobo, Mzinyane and Zibane (2023) have argued that sharing is deeply rooted in the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which emphasises interconnectedness and mutual support. Moreover, sharing aligns with the principles of social cohesion. However, participants also noted that resource-sharing can be a source of tension, occasionally leading to conflicts within residences. For instance, the Zululand Observer (2018) reported a tragic incident at a university in KwaZulu-Natal where a student from Port Shepstone was stabbed to death by his roommate in their shared bedroom. Such accounts underscore the complexities of communal living in student residences. During the interviews, participants mentioned that:

"Sharing is good if you happen to find a person with whom you can get along. A person that you can talk to and a person with respect. The problem is that sometimes you get allocated with a scruffy person. In that case, conflict will inevitably arise. I like to stay in a clean room, even in the morning, when I wake up and make my bed. Some roommates do not even want to sweep the floor. Conflicts always start when you try to confront someone; sometimes, it does not end well. In 2018, I had to be separated from my roommates because of such issues." (Participant 1)

"I think the problem is allocating different people to one room. It will definitely be hard for them to stay together. There were two roommates in one of the off-campus residences I was staying in. These two roommates always fought, sometimes we would mediate when a conflict arose. The other was too focused on his studies, and he used to study in their room when he was not on campus. The other one was full of life and he used to invite his friends to come over and drink alcohol. That is why there was always a conflict between them because they were different in terms of their lifestyle." (Participant 10)

"In this residence, we do not share rooms, but I once had a roommate off-campus and we had a perfect relationship - we were like brothers. However, I know the conflicts that usually occur at student residences, and I am aware of the conflicts that usually take place at student residences. In my own experience off campus, my roommate was fighting because one of them was not taking responsibility for making the place clean. He used to come with his girlfriends without letting the

other roommate know about this. This used to cause inconvenience to the other roommates, which is why they were always fighting.” (Participant 15)

The sharing of rooms in university residences, intended to promote connections and enhance social cohesion among students from diverse backgrounds, has revealed unexpected challenges. Findings from this study indicate that shared residence facilities often become a significant source of conflict, primarily due to ineffective communication and differing lifestyle practices. These tensions undermine the goal of fostering harmonious communal living among students. Additionally, some students display individualistic and self-centred behaviours, lacking respect for their peers and deviating from Afrocentric principles. Reviere (2006) emphasises the importance of interpersonal relationships in African value systems, suggesting that such conflicts contradict these cultural ideals. Similarly, Mabovula (2011) notes that such disputes are inconsistent with communal cultural values, further highlighting the challenge of maintaining unity within shared living spaces.

Challenges to the internalising Ubuntu fully

This section presents the data and findings from the interviews, highlighting key challenges that undermine the functionality of *Ubuntu* within university residences. Central to these challenges are issues related to alcohol and substance abuse and the dominance of Western ideologies, which participants consistently identified as significant barriers to fostering community and social cohesion. Participants shared their experiences of how the newfound autonomy in the transition to tertiary education, coupled with heightened stress and academic pressures, often led students to turn to substances as coping mechanisms. These behaviours, in turn, hinder the practice of *Ubuntu* and disrupt the communal relationships essential for creating supportive and inclusive living environments. The findings below provide a deeper understanding of these issues and their impact on students' ability to embody and apply *Ubuntu* within university residences

Alcohol and substance abuse

When identifying challenges threatening social cohesion in residences, participants expressed the following sentiments during the interviews:

“I think the issue is that some fellow students do not talk, especially when faced with difficulties in life. They resort to high consumption of alcohol to deal with such difficulties. As much as I love helping people, I cannot assume what is troubling a person. I had a friend here at the residence, we were very close and we used to talk about everything. He then changed and joined a company of friends who do not prioritise academics like we used to. He has been struggling with finishing his degree and he constantly uses alcohol. I do not know how I can help him because we no longer even talk. We only speak now when we are greeting each other in the corridors here.” (Participant 12)

In the above quotation, Participant 12 mentioned that alcohol consumption by students also leads to difficulties in coping with studies. Although alcohol is highlighted as a problem among students at university residences, it also plays a significant role in strengthening relationships and building unity among them. The unity of people is strongly emphasised in the philosophies of Ubuntu and social cohesion (Ramose, 2022). During the interviews, participants also highlighted how alcohol use and substance abuse have the power to eliminate respect among them as students. As mentioned before, respect is one of the key principles of Ubuntu and its value is noticed when two or more individuals are considerate of each other's feelings and differences. In addition, showing respect to others demonstrates honesty and trustworthiness (Idoniboye-Obu and Whetho, 2008). One participant mentioned that their friend almost sold them to men without their knowledge, which was one way of showing them that they had become disrespectful and dishonest towards them. The participant stated that:

"I think alcohol is a big problem among us, and it continues to ruin our lives more than any other social problem we have in South Africa. I used to drink with my friend at the residence in her room in one of the off-campus residences. One day, she said let us go out with her friends. Only to find out she had already allocated me a boyfriend without me knowing. I was furious at her because of what she did to me, and I was insulted by her decision to leave after knowing what the gathering was all about. Now, I hear from other people that she engages in transactional sex to sustain her life. Even at that time in 2017, she did not have funding, but she always dressed nicely, and she always bought wine and other drinks for us at the residence. I am sure she had been living this life without me knowing as her friend." (Participant 7)

Participant 7 referred to having a friend who used to make a living by being involved with 'blessers' at the residence. This participant also noted that men at their residence could not afford buying them alcohol and paying for their expensive lifestyles because they were students and did not have much money. Hence, they opted for 'blessers' who funded their luxurious life. This showed how *Ubuntu* was tested among participants who mentioned that they shared everything at the residence. However, when times are tough, they look for opportunities outside the residence, from people who can afford their standard of living. The study conducted by Hunter (2002) suggested that transactional sexual relationships are always associated with financial concerns. Another participant highlighted that the consumption of alcohol and substance abuse is likely to result in physical violence and assault among students at the residence. According to Tesfai (2016), alcohol consumption is likely to result in physical and psychological harm. Participants expressed that high consumption of alcohol is a direct contributing factor to the demise of *Ubuntu*. Participant stated that:

"I always see when they drink alcohol, it always starts as fun - students playing music, dancing and screaming words of happiness. The problem starts when they are intoxicated, especially male students, who tend to engage in physical fights. In these fights, some students suffer serious injuries. I was not familiar with violent behaviour, but I experienced a lot of it at the residence. To witness such behaviours is very traumatic, especially to see people who stay together and who share a room having a physical fight, which results in serious injury." (Participant 9)

Although a profound understanding of the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is easily conveyed, there is limited literature on how university residences become spaces of violence as a result of alcohol and substance abuse (Kyei and Ramagoma, 2013). As evident, alcohol and substance abuse were some of the factors that participants noted to contribute to the demise of *Ubuntu*. Mogotsi, Nel, Basson and Tebele (2014) found alcohol use and substance abuse to be the detrimental challenges that slowly attempt to eliminate *Ubuntu* values in African societies. Further, unhealthy and problematic use of alcohol and other substances among students continues to have negative implications on their overall well-being and the values of *Ubuntu*.

Dominance of Western ideologies and erosion of traditional African values

Participants indicated that *Ubuntu* is increasingly marginalised and dismissed as a simplistic form of African thought within the university context, mainly due to the structure of teaching and learning in African universities. Amidst the dominance of Western values in South African higher education, participants expressed feelings of isolation stemming from the disconnect between Western individualistic frameworks and the deeply ingrained cultural ethos of communalism, which is also central to Afrocentric perspectives. The following extracts capture the participants' perspectives.

"I love my culture very much as an African, and I was raised at home with respect. At home, we still do cultural practices, but I know most of us, as black students, hide the fact that we still believe and do cultural practices back at home. Usually, they ridicule you at the residence and call you uMkhaya [a traditional and primitive person] if you continue being rooted in what you believe in. That is why it is not easy to be who we truly are, because we are at the university, and want to keep up with modernity. Modernity is inculcated in us through the education curriculum we study in school. This is why most of us at university try to mimic Western culture: the whole education system is Western, and that is how Western values dominate our minds." (Participant 6)

"I believe it is not easy to practice our African value systems and cultures because Europeans created the disciplines we study at university, and we study them in a language that is not ours. This has an influence on our behaviour as students." (Participant 13)

"There is always this urge among us of wanting to fit into the Western culture at university because that is the only dominant culture at university. This makes us end up forgetting who we are and seeing our culture as backwards. We laugh at one another when one reveals himself as a cultured being." (Participant 14)

The extracts above highlight the pervasive influence of Western values among university residence students as a significant contributor to feelings of isolation for some individuals. Additionally, participants identified the education system as a central force undermining African culture and *Ubuntu* principles. The literature underscores how Western ideologies prioritise individualism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), contrasting sharply with African value systems, which emphasise communalism — an integral aspect of

Ubuntu (Waghid, 2022). Gumbo's (2014, p. 68) study contends that "Western ideologies and culture were being hammered into the African child at the expense of African values and culture to ensure the deadness of Africanness and implantation of Westernness." Furthermore, Mucina (2013) asserts that Ubuntu is absent mainly in Western societies and in many African academic institutions, which operate within a Western Eurocentric scholarly framework.

Participants shared further insights into how the idea of Westernisation prevails at the university residence. One participant highlighted that some students do not even care to greet you because they walk around with headphones on and listen to music, caring less about community interaction. In addition, another participant expressed that they are moving with time, and they should not be held accountable for not practising what their ancestors used to do in their time. During the interviews, they expressed that:

"I do not see a need to go back and study how our ancestors used to live their lives; we are going forward and not back. I see some things our ancestors used to do as irrelevant in this modern society." (Participant 7)

"One of the reasons is that people are slowly adopting a Western culture of self-centredness and not upholding the values of Ubuntu." (Participant 10)

"You find others always putting their headsets on, listening to music and minding their business. This shows that this fellow student was not raised in Ubuntu's philosophy and communalism. This can also be caused by the fact that the fellow student is more into the Western culture, where being self-centred and self-reliant is a priority." (Participant 12)

This paper shows a disjuncture between African and Western value systems. This disjuncture makes students of African descent adopt Western value systems. The education system hammers Western value systems into African students (Phoswa, 2024). Ali and Shishigu (2020) also assert that the Ethiopian education system is conquered by Western ideologies, which reflect values different from those indigenous to the people. Participants stressed that the curriculum they study at university is carried out in a language that is eccentric and alien to them as the natives. Similarly, the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Decolonising the Mind", is in line with what was found in this study. Wa Thiong'o (1992) argue that if a colonised person is stripped of his language, he is also stripped of his culture and identity. In addition, language carries culture and a sense of being (wa Thiong'o 1992; Mkhize and Nimande-Hlongwa, 2014; Zibane *et al.*, 2025). Wa Thiong'o (1992) also argue that the African child who encounters literature in a colonial school or university experiences the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history. In this current study, participants viewed the dominance of Western value systems in South African universities as one of the contributors to the demise of *Ubuntu*. Consequently, this dominance directly influences the behaviour of students in university residences.

Conclusions and recommendations

The article underscores the importance of sustained mass conscientisation on the philosophy of *Ubuntu* as a foundation for community building and fostering harmonious social relations. *Ubuntu* holds the potential of transforming university residences into safer, more inclusive spaces by emphasising collective responsibility and mutual support. However, its implementation requires a concerted effort to align university practices with African values. By integrating *Ubuntu* into institutional frameworks, universities can foster cohesive residences and a deeper sense of community and humanity among students.

In collaboration with university management, the DSRA should continue leading initiatives and implementing programmes grounded in *Ubuntu* values. *Ubuntu*, embodying the principle ‘I am because we are,’ provides a robust framework for cultivating collective responsibility and empathy in interpersonal interactions (Ajitoni, 2024). The findings indicate insufficient supervision during DSRA-organised events, such as residence parties, sports days, and soccer matches. It is recommended that such events be more closely supervised by Risk Management Services (RMS) and DSRA representatives to ensure that students comply with residence rules and regulations.

The paper has also revealed the dominance of Eurocentric values in university residences, pointing to significant historical amnesia among students (Chiumia, 2012). This lapse underscores the need for further research into African Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Research should explore how these systems can be applied in contemporary society to restore humanity and foster positive social bonds, especially within university residences, which have increasingly become spaces of chaos, violence, and moral deviation from African values.

Internalising and practising *Ubuntu* in higher education institutions can minimise chaos and disruption, creating a more harmonious environment. Given the global prominence of Western ideologies, this study recommends integrating *Ubuntu* philosophy into educational curricula at all levels across Africa. *Ubuntu* opposes all forms of oppression, exploitation, and violence, advocating for conscientisation in all spaces where humans interact—schools, universities, and workplaces. This article, and previous works by African scholars, emphasise that *Ubuntu* is not merely a concept but a call to action, requiring practical application in everyday life to cultivate empathy, respect, and communal responsibility.

Thus, this paper underscores the importance of sustained mass conscientisation of *Ubuntu* as a foundation for community-building and fostering harmonious social relations. *Ubuntu* holds the potential to transform university residences into safer, more inclusive spaces by emphasising collective responsibility and mutual support. However, its successful implementation requires aligning university practices with African values. By integrating *Ubuntu* into institutional frameworks, universities can foster cohesive residences and cultivate a more profound sense of community and humanity among students.

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Interventions to Promote Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Online Teaching and Learning During COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and its concomitant closure of schools and transition to online teaching and learning led to many educational disruptions. Although the COVID-19 pandemic affected all students, those with disabilities were the most brutal hit. Existing research globally has assessed the social inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs) in online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a comprehensive database of the interventions made to advance the inclusion of SWDs in teaching and learning is needed. This paper aimed to develop this database to provide institutions of learning with good practice examples they can use to promote the inclusion of SWDs as a marginalised group. The social justice theory underpinned this study. A systematic literature review was conducted to identify these interventions using keywords relevant to the study. Data were collected from policy frameworks, research papers and projects and analysed using content analysis. Results revealed that various stakeholders developed interventions that promoted social inclusion of SWDs during the pandemic. The paper recommends that interventions implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic be evaluated for their effectiveness, be widely disseminated through various formats, and grants be made available by institutions of learning, government and ministries of education to fund the development of new interventions.

Keywords: Social inclusion, students with disabilities, online learning environments, social justice, interventions

Introduction

The highly unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic and its concomitant school closures led to one of the most significant disruptions in education in the history of humanity (United Nations (UN), 2020a, 2020b; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2021a). The school closures resulting from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic affected over 1.5 billion students and families (UN, 2020c; UNESCO, 2020). To curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and to limit the rate of person-to-person infections, the governments imposed different levels of COVID-19 lockdowns on the nations. Higher education institutions (HEIs) adopted emergency online teaching and learning (OTL) to ensure the completion of the academic curriculum and to mitigate losses in teaching and

learning time (UNICEF, 2023).

Rashid and Yadav (2020) state that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed deficiencies in the higher education sector, whereas Toquero (2020), Mhlanga (2020) and Parker, Morris and Hofmeyer (2020) claim that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic shined a spotlight on the historical inequalities and disparities in access to quality education for students with disabilities (SWDs) that propelled the need to support vulnerable students. The Concerned Education Researchers (Moeti, 2020, p.1) expressed a similar concern: "Going online immediately will simply widen existing inequalities and make meaningful learning impossible for the vast majority of students." According to Mhlanga, Denhere and Moloi (2022), the fact that some students were left behind during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that South Africa was unprepared for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), that differences still exist between the rich and the poor and that the marginalised and disenfranchised are constantly left behind.

Research indicates that the immediate shift to online learning added new challenges for SWDs (Gin, Pais, Parrish, Brownell and Cooper, 2022; Kourea, Christodoulidou and Fella, 2021), leading to them lagging, thus worsening inequalities between non-disabled students and those with disabilities and necessitating extra support for the vulnerable students. Therefore, the shift to OTL amplified and aggravated the disparities of equitable access to education for SWDs when compared with students without disabilities. Gleason, Valencia, Kirabo, Wu, Guo, Jeanne Carter and Bigham (2020) echo this view that the rapid transition to remote online learning exacerbated accessibility issues to education for people with disabilities. Young and Rooney (2023) assert that a transition for SWD inherently gives rise to a wide range of complexities related to the process and period of change. Consequently, much as the shift to OTL affected all students, those with disabilities were the most brutally hit (Bones, Bates, Finlay and Campbell, 2021; Dickinson, Smith, Yates and Tani, 2021; Meleo-Erwin Kollia, Fera, Jahren and Basch 2020; Porter, Green and Esposito, 2021; The World Health Organization (WHO), 2020; United Nations, 2020d). Gin *et al.* (2022), Kourea *et al.* (2021), and Meleo-Erwin *et al.* (2020) support this view that the rapid shift to OTL presented inimitable challenges for SWDs, presenting them with difficulties in adapting to this mode of learning. Porter, Green and Esposito (2021, p.43) echo this sentiment that "Students with disabilities, an already marginalised population, were particularly vulnerable to the many educational, mental, and socio-emotional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the abrupt conversion to virtual learning." Bones *et al.* (2021) contend that the shift to online learning created an additional layer of conundrum for SWDs and their parents, while The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020, p.1) predicted that persons, including learners, with disabilities will be 'impacted more significantly' by the pandemic."

Existing literature reveals that providing online instruction for SWDs is not only different but challenging (Young and Donovan, 2020). Part of the reason is that SWDs represent a diverse group of learning disabilities. Consequently, they have varied experiences and needs for accommodation (Öhrstedt, Käck, Reierstam, and Ghilagaber, 2024). In addition, equitable provision of online resources tends to be increasingly challenging

if a class has students who suffer from multiple or more significant disabilities, as they may require special services that include speech, occupational, or physical therapies (Schaeffer, 2020). Some of these services include “taking notes during lectures or seminars, customised examinations, adapted course literature, mentor, digital aids, hearing loops, study and language support, accessible and inclusive teaching (e.g., recorded lectures), subtitling of visual teaching material and sign language interpreter” (Öhrstedt *et al.*, 2024, p.775).

Overall, students and teachers felt the effects of the shift to OTL. Young and Clerke (2024) hold that overall, the shift to OTL during the COVID-19 pandemic led to serious social and technical challenges for SWDs that ranged from poor socialisation and engagement issues to technological barriers, leading to negative attitudes (Masalimova, Khvatova, Chikileva, Zvyagintseva, Stepanova and Melnik; Zaimakis and Papadaki, 2022). Busby and Tanberk (2020) point to limited home access to the Internet for these students, while Hartwell and Thomas (2021) and Teane (2024) believe that because the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented, many teachers were caught off guard without the requisite knowledge and skills to teach online. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, some teachers lacked technological training and resources (Smith, 2020) and self-efficacy for teaching online (Sosibo, 2025; Teane, 2024). Consequently, most of them were not well-equipped with the skills to teach SWDs online and required capacity development to deliver the online curriculum effectively. Whereas these factors affected students from disadvantaged backgrounds generally, they might have been more pronounced for SWDs who faced the double jeopardy of being underprivileged and having a disability. Hamilton, Kaufman and Diliberti (2020) studied how K -12 public school teachers and principals delivered curriculum, what support and resources they needed, and their expected priorities and plans for the 2020–2021 school year. They found that 42% of teachers reported not receiving adequate support and guidance for working with SWDs. They experienced challenges in acquiring knowledge and skills in technology, learning management systems, and pedagogy of online instruction for SWDs.

The shift to online learning at home without social interaction with teachers and peers exacerbated the plight of SWDs during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting from the lack of the unique services they usually received in their physical classrooms. For example, support staff and services and alternative teaching modes or knowledge (Conderman, Liberty and DeSpain, 2017; Dickinson *et al.*, 2021) were unavailable in their home environments. Greenway and Eaton-Thomas (2020) report that parents of SWDs lacked confidence in teaching their children online. They reported feeling inadequate and underprepared to provide the key pedagogical role of helping their children navigate online learning while managing other parental roles. Bones *et al.* (2021) mention that other parents reported unavailability of appropriate interactive resources, poor internet access, and poor content knowledge as challenges that affected home online learning for SWDs. These facts demonstrate that the shift to OTL away from the classroom environment was a tall order for SWDs when compared with students without disabilities.

Young and Rooney (2023) contend that these complexities demand various interventions. De Klerk and Palmer (2022, p.80) concur with Young and Rooney (2023), arguing that “Technology-based platforms in higher education institutions (HEIs), including online learning, require innovative approaches to ensure inclusive and transformative educational spaces for students living with disabilities.” Because these innovative interventions were not available to the students while learning at home, one can conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic raised equity, social justice, and social inclusion issues and challenges for all disadvantaged students caused by gender, race, socio-economic class, and geographic disparities, but primarily for SWDs (Kaden, 2020; Sullivan, Hillaire, Larke and Reich, 2020).

In South Africa, SWDs have inalienable rights to equity, equal access, and participation in education, as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (South African Government, 1996), the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Amendment Act 52 of 2002 (South African Government, 2002) and other disability policy frameworks. Denying this group the rights afforded to their able-bodied counterparts is counter-productive and a violation of human rights, social justice and social inclusion. Despite the policies that have been put in place to ensure the inclusion of SWDs in mainstream education without constraints, and “Whilst significant progress was made in mainstreaming disability in South Africa after 1994” (Department of Higher Education (DHET), 2018, p.30), far more still needs to be done to ensure and regulate disability inclusion. Despite their inalienable right to quality education, access to resources and support, unfortunately, SWDs continue to be marginalised and stigmatised and face barriers and unfair discrimination.

Problem statement

There is a dearth of a comprehensive database that has documented the interventions made to advance the social inclusion of SWDs in teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in its COVID-19 risk-adjusted strategy, the South African Government committed to leaving no student behind and ensuring the safety of all higher education institutions. The government formulated different strategies to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university students (Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, 2020a, 2020b). However, in its statements, the government made no mention of SWDs, which reflects a lack of commitment to disability and those who live with it. Similarly, most of the strategies developed by the universities focused on vulnerable students without paying particular attention to SWDs, which reflects the lack of commitment to SWDs. Kamga (2020) highlights the lack of political will to foster education for SWDs as the reason for the violation of their right to education during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a vulnerable group, there appears to be a need to develop a comprehensive resource that is sensitive to the exclusion of this group from OTL environments and informs the practice of including them in the teaching and learning processes.

Purpose and research question

This paper aimed to develop a comprehensive database of the practical interventions (initiatives, activities, strategies, techniques, projects, policies, and the like) made to promote the inclusion of SWDs in OTL during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective was to provide HEIs with a comprehensive database of good practice examples that can be used to redress inequalities and increase equity and access to quality education provided through OTL for SWDs as a marginalised group. If implemented and integrated into university policy and practice, information from this database can help to leverage ICTs in the education of SWDs beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby preparing them for the world of work, globalisation, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). In addition, the HEIs, DHET and other education stakeholders such as the CHE can use this database to create a comprehensive strategy that addresses and redresses disparities and fosters inclusion of SWDs in OTL, thereby creating a balanced, just, and egalitarian education system for all students. The study sought to answer the following main question: What interventions were made to foster social inclusion of SWDs during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Theoretical framework

The social justice theory underpinned the study reported in this paper. Van den Bos (2003) defines social justice as a fair and equitable distribution of power, resources, and societal obligations to all people, regardless of background. Mollenkamp (2024) reiterates this point, adding that social justice promotes a fair division of resources, opportunities, and privileges. From her perspective of parity of participation, Fraser (2005) posits that a society is just only if it allows all its adult members, including people with disabilities, to interact with each other as peers. According to Rawls (1971, p.3), justice is the 'first virtue of social institutions'. In a just society, all individuals are treated fairly, their basic human rights are observed, and resources are distributed in a way that is beneficial to everyone but particularly those who are the most disadvantaged.

Rawls' principle of fairness is in sharp contrast to the condition of SWDs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ideally, effective physical and social accommodations must be made to improve the academic performance and welfare of SWD (Brown, 2017). These accommodations may include changes in the physical environment, provision of special equipment and services, as well as change of societal attitudes and practices. However, when compared with their counterparts without disabilities, SWDs encountered more challenges and constraints with remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the limited resources and inadequate support, which, as shown earlier, exacerbated their plight. Rawls' (1971) social justice upholds the principle of equality and fairness for all, which suggests equity and equality of opportunity, fairness and justice for both SWDs and students without disabilities. Therefore, unequal distribution of resources for the two groups of students during the COVID-19 pandemic infringed upon the rights and social justice of SWDs. This also means that the principles of equity of access and equal educational opportunity for all, but particularly for the least advantaged groups, which in

this context were SWDs, were not observed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Deeply ingrained in Rawls' (1971) social justice theory are two principles: the principle of equal liberty and the difference principle. According to the former, every individual has an equal right to the basic liberties compatible with the rights of all others. This right is intrinsically tied to respect for individual autonomy and freedom of individual decision-making and (individual) success. The difference principle, on the other hand, holds that inequalities in wealth and resources can be tolerated only if they uplift the condition of the most disadvantaged people in society. The implication of the principle of equal liberty is that both SWDs and students without disabilities had equal freedoms, rights and equal opportunity of access to resources and quality education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The implication of the difference principle is that the inequalities that existed during the COVID-19 pandemic were unjustified, but they could only be tolerated if they had improved the situation of SWDs. However, instead of improving the situation, the inequalities exacerbated the challenges for the least advantaged group of students, as reflected in the literature presented. Therefore, Rawls' social justice theory has serious implications for how universities must observe the principle of equal liberty and difference principle by providing inclusive, enabling learning environments and equal access to quality education for all their students, regardless of their backgrounds.

Method

A systematic and in-depth search of local and international literature was conducted to identify interventions made to create inclusive OTL environments for SWDs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative content analysis was used. Stemler (2001, p.1) defines content analysis as "... a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding." This process helps researchers to sift through large amounts of data with ease and to make inferences. The researcher used a large volume of resources to seek relevant data. However, only 16 resources were viable to make inferences about the interventions made to make classrooms inclusive of SWDs. The type of sources used to conduct this research included peer-reviewed journal articles, policy frameworks on disabilities, media statements, reports, conceptual and opinion papers, blogs, website articles, conference proceedings and books. Although a high volume of resources was used in the development of this paper, only a few were found relevant to answer the research question or address the purpose of this paper. All the sources used in this paper were written in English and published locally and internationally, with only one that was written in Spanish and English (UNESCO 2021b).

Data sources

Data were obtained from policy frameworks, conceptual papers, empirical research papers, projects, a story and a Blog. The 10 policy frameworks that underpin the

inclusion of people with disabilities in South Africa were developed by the South African Government, Department of Education, Department of Basic Education, Department of Higher Education and Training, Department of Social Development and Inclusive Education South Africa, respectively. Data on the interventions were obtained from the following countries: Australia (3), South Africa (5), Bangladesh (1), Mauritius (1), Colombia (1), Spain (1), United States of America (2), Kenya (1). Regarding one source, the country where the work was published is unknown except that two authors are from Pakistan and one is from Malaysia, respectively. The results are presented in the next section under the following six themes: South African policies and frameworks for inclusive education, Research on pragmatic/enacted strategies and practices, Impact evaluation studies, Projects, Story and BLOG.

South African policies and frameworks for inclusive education

Ideally, the policy frameworks on disability/inclusion are supposed to always mitigate challenges and discrimination against SWDS but especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, despite their abundance, SWDs in South Africa and internationally still faced inequalities to access quality education, as shown in the literature in the Introduction of this paper. This shows that these policies and frameworks are good on paper but weak on implementation. The other reason is that although there are many policies on disability in South Africa, they are fragmented (Mutanga, 2017).

Different policy frameworks govern the rights to inclusive education for SWDs in South Africa. One of these frameworks is the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa that was gazetted in 1996 (South African Government, 1996). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa enshrines the rights of people with disabilities to equity, equal access and participation in education. *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education- Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (Department of Education (DoE), 2001a) introduced a new inclusive system in the education system of South Africa. The other policy framework concerned with the rights of people with disabilities and their inclusion is the *South African National Plan for Higher Education* (Department of Education (DoE), 2001b) which promotes the increase of admission of marginalised and SWDs in higher education. The *Framework on the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination* Amendment Act 52 was gazetted in 2002 (South African Government, 2002). In 2013, the Department of Higher Education and Training published the *White Paper on Post-School Education and Training* (DHET, 2013), whereas in 2014, the Department of Basic Education gazetted the *Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support* (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2014). The publication of this policy was followed by the gazetting of the *White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (Department of Social Development, 2016) and the *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in the Post-School Education and Training System* (DHET, 2016). In 2017, the *Right to Education for Children with Disabilities Alliance* was published (Inclusive Education South Africa, 2017). The DHET thereafter published the *Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for the Post-School Education and Training*

System (PSET) (DHET, 2018), which outlines strategic objectives for the PSET sector.

Clearly, there is a plethora of policy frameworks on the social inclusion of SWD in education. However, the extent to which they were implemented during the COVID-19 to promote this cause has not been widely documented.

Review of previous studies on pragmatic/enacted strategies and practices

This section reviews previous studies on pragmatic/enacted interventions, practices and strategies used during the COVID-19 pandemic to foster the inclusion of marginalised students, including SWDs.

In a study on fostering school connectedness online for students with special educational needs during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, Page, Charteris, Anderson and Boyle (2021) found that the students' school embraced social inclusion and ensured access to OTL for vulnerable students. They showed the political will and eagerness of staff and leadership to support SWDs and to ensure that learning resources were distributed fairly among vulnerable students.

Kamga (2021) examined the interventions that the Centre for Child Law (CCL) in South Africa made to uphold social justice for SWDs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The LLC was acting against the DBE directions for the phased return to school and closure of special schools that both excluded SWDs and violated their rights to inclusive education. When teaching and learning switched to the online mode in 2020, the Minister of Basic Education was reluctant to take measures and give directions for the provision of education for SWDs when they returned to schools after the lockdown. It was on this basis that the LLC challenged the Minister of Basic Education to provide clear directions for the inclusion of SWDs in the teaching-learning processes. On the 8th of April 2020, the CCL, represented by the Equal Education Law Centre, engaged the DBE and its Inclusive Education Directorate in a discussion to establish the measures taken to support SWDs and their parents or caregivers. The DBE provided directions for measures to be taken when the learners and staff returned to schools, such as wearing of masks. However, the DBE failed to consider the special needs of deaf learners who rely on lip reading and for whom the face mask would impede learning. The DBE's omission led the Equal Education Law Centre to approach the DBE again to amend the directions. On the 1st of June 2020, the DBE responded with Amended Directions that still failed to address the concerns of the Equal Education Law Centre. The DBE provided other Amended Directions on the 9th and 23rd of June 2020, respectively, both which failed to adequately address the needs of SWDs. When it was clear that the DBE had failed to address the needs of SWDs, the Equal Education Law Centre took the DBE to court. The court issued the order for the DBE to make amendments to the 23rd of June 2020 Directions to "include guidelines for learners with physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, epilepsy and severe to profound intellectual disabilities" (Kamga 2021, p.356).

The CCL intervention served as evidence of the seriousness of equal quality education for all students, including SWDs. It also exposed the DBE's neglect and lack of consideration for the rights of SWDs to equal access and (equal) opportunity to quality education compatible with that offered to their counterparts without disabilities.

UNESCO (2021b) presents an elaborate assortment of programmes, initiatives, strategies, interventions and practices that were undertaken by various stakeholders in Colombia to ensure social inclusion of SWDs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these initiatives were already implemented before the outbreak of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic served to intensify their uptake. In this presentation, the researcher has classified the initiatives according to the stakeholders who spearheaded them. During the pandemic, the Colombia Ministry of Education (MEN) implemented many interventions for SWDs. These included providing each school with additional funding of 20% for each student with a disability; developing pedagogical, technical, and administrative guidelines for inclusive education for students with disabilities; developing a disability specific plan called an individual adjustment project for SWDs, providing meals and other types of support to families and caregivers of SWDs, devices (computers, tablets, smartphones) SWDs who needed them on loan. Other interventions included launching the platform 'Learn Digital: Content for Everyone' with access for people with visual and hearing impairment, launching an online platform for the National Institute for the Deaf (INSOR), and providing schools with resources for the administration and development of classes and meetings, including Google Classroom/G Suite, Edmodo, Community Your Class, Google Meet, Skype and Zoom.

The strength of the initiatives for SWDs in Colombia was that they were subjected to regular monitoring and evaluation for effectiveness. The other strength was that some of them were already implemented before the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the pandemic intensified their implementation.

UNESCO (2021c) reports about the initiatives of the Government of Bangladesh aimed at closing the gap between access to quality of education for students with disabilities and those without disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It implemented the Accessible Reading Materials (ARM) programme and collaborated with non-governmental/private organisations to develop materials for full and partial visually impaired students. The ARM programme contributed to ensuring disability-inclusive and accessible education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. It developed digital multimedia books, accessible e-books and digital Braille books for learners from Grades one (1) to 10.

UNESCO (2021d) reports about collaborations on promoting inclusion of SWDs in learning in Mauritius. The Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE) played a leading role in the development of virtual learning materials during the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure that this project materialised, the team members communicated via WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams while producing the digital resources. Some of the materials they developed included activity-based videos to engage learners with instructional activities, videos to

improve fine motor skills and informative videos on COVID-19 to increase awareness about the pandemic. The videos were disseminated through different channels of the national television. The wide scope of NGOs allowed them to contribute a variety of ODL solutions. Overall, the NGOs agreed that WhatsApp was the most versatile technological tool for all stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic. They perceived WhatsApp as “accessible, useful, relevant, effective, and efficient given its ease of use and popularity among parents” (UNESCO, 2021d, p.23) and that it facilitated the shift from face-to-face to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 lockdown. Different WhatsApp groups were created to promote learning during the lockdown, with one for parents, teachers and paramedical team. The other group was based on learners’ disability profiles. The control WhatsApp group consisted of teachers, school management and paramedical team. The diversity of the teams involved in this project ensured divergent strategies that promoted inclusion of all learners from all angles.

Reyes (2022) explored how drama therapy techniques could be used as an intervention for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Drama therapy is a type of psychotherapy and creative arts therapy that uses, among other techniques, psychodrama, art therapy, dance and movement therapy, music therapy and bibliotherapy aimed at achieving psychological growth and change (Reyes, 2022; Feniger-Schaal and Koren-Karie, 2021; Feniger-Schaal and Orkibi, 2020). Reyes (2022) identified several drama therapy interventions as beneficial for supporting students with ASD to combat the stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic. Reyes (2022, p.2) argues that “The literature supports how [the] drama therapy interventions complement the ASD population in therapeutic services and can be a prominent benefit to combat the stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic.” The lack of social supports during the COVID-19 pandemic put ASD students at risk, just as it did with other SWDs. Reyes (2022) surmises that drama therapy techniques could help improve the social and emotional skills (SEL) of ASD students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Smith, Tani, Yates and Dickinson (2023) investigated the learning experiences of children with disabilities in Australia and the impact of the interventions made on their experiences. They wanted to find out how the performance of SWDs compared with that of students without disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The administered online survey yielded data from 719 Australian families. The results revealed significant gaps in the support offered to the students with disabilities and their families. They also showed that the social supports students with disabilities received from their education facilities before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic were not carried over into the pandemic. The main reason was that school learning support workers were not allowed to visit these students at home during the lockdown. Nonetheless, several interventions were made, including providing extra curriculum and special learning materials for the SWDs during the pandemic, providing specific aides and equipment were provided to the SWDs, and providing care services and additional supervision to SWDs. Overall, the results revealed that of all the other supports (educational support, extra learning materials and equipment), social support (regular contact with SWDs) was highly associated with improved educational outcomes for SWDs. Results showed that social support led to

better learning processes and reduced isolation of SWDs. Unfortunately, social support was one of the systems hit hardest during the COVID-19 pandemic. Emphasising the importance of social supports, Smith *et al.* (2023, p.7) states that "... we assert from our findings that it [social support] is a key consideration when supporting the learning of young people in remote teaching and learning." As the most valued type of support, social support must be emphasised in the provision of teaching and learning for SWDs.

Aftab, Amjad and Chaudhry (2024) conducted a study to assess the strategies used to facilitate inclusion of SWDs in mainstream classes. Results revealed that 95%-100% of the participants expressed effective implementation of co-teaching, differentiated instruction, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, whereas 96% mentioned assistive technology. Another 96% of participants mentioned collaborative planning and teaching between general and special education teachers. Moreover, 99% of the participants expressed preference for positive behavioural interventions and supports (PBIS) while 95% favoured individualised education programmes (IEPs). In addition, 93% highlighted peer support programmes, 96% favoured flexible seating and classroom arrangements, while 96% mentioned parent and family interaction as beneficial. Ninety nine percent of the participants reported that school leadership that supports inclusive practices reinforce social inclusion of SWDs, whereas 93% of the participants mentioned collaborating with foreign professionals as effective for inclusion of SWDs. Other participants mentioned the use of inclusive education techniques by special education teachers as promoting inclusion of SWDs. This study contributes to the area of inclusive education by sharing practical examples of making classrooms inclusive of SWDs, as well as opinions of teachers on these strategies. The advantage of data obtained from this study is that it applies during crisis in education, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic but also to non-crisis periods where teachers teach for the social good of including SWDs.

Review of previous studies on impact evaluation studies

This section reviews previous studies focused on the evaluation of the impact of the interventions used to promote the inclusion of SWDs in mainstream teaching and learning.

Kamga (2020) analysed the interventions made by the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that teaching and learning continued during the lockdown. These interventions included the provision of online resources for parents, caregivers and learners to support learning at home. Others were the delivery of study materials for all grades on multimedia with assessments, audio lessons, video tutorials, interactive workbooks, lockdown digital school, Vodacom e-school and reading material. In addition, COVID-19 guides were translated into various languages, with numerous links to e-education resources, school curricula and broadcast support programmes on television and radio as well as numerous tips for parents. The department also developed the Basic Education and SABC Coronavirus television and radio curriculum support programmes for learners. Moreover, the Free Stem Lockdown

Digital School developed a community television station to reach more learners.

Kamga (2020) critiqued these interventions for their irrelevance to the context of SWDs and for not taking into consideration the situation on the ground for SWDs. He argued that since most interventions rely primarily on computers, tablets and online learning portals, virtual lessons and radio or television lessons, they were not accessible to the SWDs. Others required connecting to the Internet whereas data is not cheap. Rural students struggled with connectivity. Kamga (2020) also expressed concern that the digital gadgets did not have the feasibility features to make them user-friendly for SWDs. The same view was echoed by Macharia (2022) about the interventions made by the Kenyan Government, that they failed to address the specific needs of SWDs.

Roldán, Maraui, Aubert and Flecha (2021) conducted a study evaluate the intervention of implementing interactive learning environments for the inclusion of students with and without disabilities. The results revealed that interactive learning environments were mutually beneficial to SWDs. They developed positive attitudes on diversity and educational and social inclusion. They learned to embrace diversity: to respect others, acknowledge and embrace differences and respect that people have different abilities. This situation created opportunities for new friendly relationships. In addition, they acquired social skills of helping and supporting others, thus enhancing collaborative learning skills. Moreover, they benefitted from the cognitive effort required from them to explain themselves and from the contributions of peers with able-bodied students. The interactions between the two groups taught able-bodied students to appreciate that people have different abilities and difficulties and that being a SWD does not imply zero knowledge and skills. The results of this study underscore the importance of not discriminating against SWDs by segregating classrooms according to whether students have or do not have disabilities. It must be noted that although this intervention was made during the COVID-19 pandemic, nothing suggests that it was directly linked to this pandemic although it can be effective in such crisis situations to make learning inclusive of SWD.

Kim and Fienup (2022) evaluated an intervention for three second-grade children who presented low engagement and participation during online learning. These children had the appropriate technology resources but did not actively engage with the online learning activities as expected. All the participants had access to a laptop and internet. The researchers worked together with the teacher of these learners to conduct the baseline assessment. During the baseline assessment, the teacher provided learners and parents with educational activities via Google Classroom. They found that although the strategy worked, the challenge with the transactional approach was that it relied on rewards and incentives that make it unsustainable. There is a need to develop an alternative sustainable approach that involves the students' intrinsic motivation. Nonetheless, the strategy worked to resolve the challenge of learner disengagement faced by vulnerable students and their teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Macharia (2022) analysed the challenges encountered by SWDs to access online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the interventions that the Kenyan Government made. He found that there were many learners who had no access to digital learning facilities; learners with visual disability did not have access to assistive devices such as Braille, screen readers, magnifiers and other devices at home that they accessed at school; learners with hearing impairments could not access lessons presented on TV, as captioning and sign-language interpretation was not provided, and learners with intellectual, mental and psychosocial disabilities were unable to receive additional support for learning that they received at school. In essence, much as the Kenyan Government made some interventions to include SWDs, those interventions were ineffective to create social inclusion of SWDs in teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Review of previous projects

This section reviews two previous projects. The first one is reported by Moeti (2020) and it is about dividing the 2020 the academic year into three segments: April- June 2020; July- September 2020 and September-December 2020 or into 2021. This promoted inclusive participation of students as active citizens, promoted equality and justice, and prioritised people within the environment. It was also liberating and dialogic, which are views aligned with Paulo Freire's (2005) perspectives. This project was endorsed and signed by 25 academics from different universities in South Africa. The bold action by these academics was a sign of their concern about the plight of all students and of SWDs as well.

Tenza (2020) reported about a project conceptualised and implemented by an advocacy team of 11 Concerned Education Researchers in South Africa. The team met regularly via Google Hangouts and WhatsApp. Responses from universities were collected online. The team voiced opinions against the implementation of emergency OTL in a document entitled "Public Universities with a Public Conscience" based on inequalities among students from different backgrounds, lack of resources and the unpreparedness of educators to teach online, basing these arguments on the four principles that they claimed guided them, including "inclusivity and participation, equity and equality, transformation and decolonisation and academic development and progress with integrity". The team called for immediate cessation of formal online curriculum roll-out.

Conclusion

The purpose of this systemic literature review was to investigate the interventions that were made during the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate the social inclusion of SWDs in online teaching and learning. The objective was to create a comprehensive database of these interventions to be used in institutions of learning to further promote this inclusion. Data were collected using a systemic literature review and analysed through

content analysis. Rawls' (1971) social justice theory undergirded this study. Results were obtained from different sources that included South African policy frameworks, quantitative and qualitative papers, projects, a story and a Blog. Data was sourced from nine (9) countries, of which one was not disclosed except that the authors are based in Pakistan and Malaysia.

Of the interventions presented, two addressed social inclusion of SWD in teaching and learning in general (See Aftab *et al.*, 2024 and Roldán, Marauri, Aubert and Flecha, 2021). These interventions were not directly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, their contribution can facilitate inclusion of SWDs in teaching and learning during the times of a crisis in education when institutions of learning are forced to switch to online teaching and learning.

Across all the literature consulted, issues of fairness, rights and social justice, as espoused by the social justice theory of Rawls (1971), prevailed. The interventions have shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic, some institutions of learning observed the principle of equal liberty, as shown by the efforts made to have SWDs enjoy the same rights to education as their counterparts without disabilities. These interventions afforded SWDs the same amount of access, equity, autonomy and respect that students without disabilities enjoyed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This explains why the interventions reported in this paper, no matter how small, are highly commendable. They transformed the lives of vulnerable students who would not have fared well without them. The social supports, interactions, resources and planning that took place all enhanced the liberties of these marginalised students.

Rawls (1971) also refers to the difference principle, which argues that inequalities are tolerable only if they improve the situation of the most disadvantaged in society, who in this context are SWDs. In this study, one can safely argue that the inequalities that existed between SWDs and those without them did not benefit the most disadvantaged SWDs. Therefore, the difference principle had no place in online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was encouraging to learn that some interventions used during the COVID-19 pandemic to include SWDs in teaching and learning were already implemented before the outbreak of the pandemic. This shows that some institutions of learning prioritised inclusion of SWDs long before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, which is commendable. Equally encouraging was to learn that some institutions of learning leverage the interventions used during the COVID-19 pandemic and will carry them over to the post-COVID-19 pandemic era. This demonstrates a huge investment in these strategies.

Recommendations

Although the uptake of online teaching and learning has increased in many institutions of learning, inequalities still abound and social justice has not been achieved for

marginalised students, including SWDs. It is, therefore, recommended that various education stakeholders, departments, governments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector develop projects that promote the inclusion of SWDs. It is also recommended that these projects must be widely disseminated through various formats, including conference presentations, seminars and publication in journals, conference proceedings, books and book chapters. Furthermore, it is recommended that governments and ministries of education should fund these initiatives and reward scholars who develop and publish them. Institutions of learning should provide grants for staff to develop new interventions. Institutions must also recognise staff members who undertake these projects and reward them with certificates or gifts that they can use to further the cause of inclusive education.

Regarding further research, the recommendation is that studies should be conducted to investigate the effectiveness of the interventions implemented to include SWDs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research must also investigate whether these interventions are sustained beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. If they are, it would be important to examine how they are monitored and evaluated for their effectiveness.

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Advancing Multilingualism and Decolonising Curricula for Social Justice in Academic Literacy

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Abstract

This paper addresses the necessity of decolonising higher education curricula and promoting multilingualism within academic literacy modules. Regardless of longstanding advocacy for reform, the current curriculum and the higher education institutional culture remain predominantly Eurocentric and marginalising students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The supremacy of English as a powerful pedagogical and systematic language is a barrier to effective learning for most African students for whom English is not the first language. South African higher education monolingual pursuit continues to entrench inequalities. However, recent developments, such as the updated *Language Policy Framework for Higher Education* makes provision for incorporating multilingual practices within academia. Using culturally responsive pedagogy as a theoretical framework, the study reported in the article found that multilingualism would result in equitable educational opportunities for all South African students. By recognising and valuing the various language backgrounds of students, educators can cultivate inclusive learning environments that enable academic and social success., highlighting the potential of multilingualism to promote linguistic and social justice in higher education. By developing strategies to support multilingual students and confronting dominant monolingual language ideologies, South African higher education institutions have the chance to address historical injustices and establish a more inclusive and equitable educational framework for all students.

Keywords: Academic literacy, decolonisation, higher education, language policy, multilingualism, social justice

Introduction

The South African landscape of higher education is at a critical juncture. With a legacy deeply rooted in apartheid, Motaung (2022) notes that many South African higher education institutions continue to reflect Eurocentric values that marginalise African languages. For this reason, Govender and Naidoo (2023, p. 559) argue that “without the decolonisation of the curriculum, the achievement of social justice for the colonised remains elusive”. Munyaradzi (2024) adds that many students from non-fee-paying public schools might be disadvantaged in many ways. The majority of these students come from oppressed, ineffective schooling systems and poor communities.

Le Grange (2016, p.1) states that poor “students are burdened in multiple ways: they are academically underprepared, financially hampered, and for some, the university’s culture is foreign”. The argument by Le Grange shows that Western ideologies continue to influence academic epistemologies. These cultures include the dominance of English as the medium of teaching and learning in South African higher education, which compounds these students’ challenges and perpetuates inequalities, especially for non-native speakers who often encounter significant barriers to learning effectively. Mavhiza and Prozesky (2020) also note that the sophisticated English in the poetry canon is one of the challenges faced by English first additional language (FAL) learners in a Grade 11 class. This means that some learners who are partially prepared for higher education, as noted by Ntsalay, Ramabenyane, Koen, and Loock (2021), continue to suffer the double blow of learning English as a language of teaching and learning and as a subject of study. Because of these challenges, the student protests in South African higher education during 2015–2016 played a pivotal role in advocating for a renewed focus on transformation and decolonisation within higher education institutions. To that effect, Hlatshwayo (2023) comments on the primarily organised protests under the banners of #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall as articulated movements that posed persistent critiques of the deeply rooted coloniality, academic literacy issues, and the insufficient transformation in the higher education sector.

While the basic education Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) document promotes multilingualism in the classrooms to empower learners and embrace their linguistic repertoires for academic success, higher education has continued to represent Western culture, which many students from underprivileged communities find challenging and alienating. Roald, Wallin, Hybertsen, and Stenøien (2020) comment on the frustrations and anxieties of first-year students who view academic literacy expectations as challenging to understand and maintain. The concept of academic literacy, as examined by Wingate (2018, p.2) cited in Shrestha and Parry (2019), refers to the student’s “ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community,” and this includes reading, assessing information, as well as presenting, arguing, and creating knowledge through both writing and speaking. This means that acquiring academic literacy involves an academic socialisation that is context-dependent. According to Roald *et al.* (2020), academic literacy goes beyond merely learning technical skills. It consists of an experience of understanding and being able to live by the norms, codes and discourses of a community of practice. These norms, codes and discourses have denied access and success to most students from linguistically diverse backgrounds. Recognising this challenge, the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has initiated efforts to revise the *Language Policy Framework for Higher Education* (2020). Cishe, Linake, Nongalo, and Nqabeni (2021) note that the policy encourages institutions to adopt multilingual practices that respect and value all students’ linguistic identities. However, implementing these initiatives remains uneven and inconsistent across institutions, necessitating further investigation and action. As a hegemonic language, English reinforces existing power dynamics and serves as a gatekeeping mechanism that sidelines African languages. Accordingly, Cishe *et al.* (2021) argue that realising the goal of ensuring equity in access to higher education is difficult to achieve because many

students from disadvantaged backgrounds, drop out before completing their studies. At the same time, others who remain in the system take long to graduate (Munyaradzi, 2024).

It is clear from the foregoing that South African higher education institutions continue to grapple with the legacy of colonialism and linguistic imperialism, resulting in Eurocentric curricula and institutional cultures. Despite many efforts to change the higher education system, the dominance of English as the primary language of learning and teaching persists. This paper explores the potential of adopting multilingualism in academic literacy modules to support equitable educational opportunities for all students, promoting linguistic and social justice in education. The following research questions underpinned the study that this paper reports about:

- How do higher education curricula and institutional cultures perpetuate Eurocentrism and linguistic exclusion in academic literacy modules?
- What impact does the dominance of English as a hegemonic language have on the academic performance and social experiences of English First Additional Language first-year students?
- How can educational institutions better support students from diverse linguistic backgrounds?

To contribute meaningfully to the conversation on decolonising higher education curricula and adopting multilingualism for social justice in academic literacy, this paper examines literature around key issues such as decolonisation of education, multilingualism and language policy, and Linguistic and social justice.

Imperatives for decolonising academia

Discussions around decolonisation and decoloniality with respect to curriculum and pedagogy are not new. Many scholars across the globe have written on decolonisation of the curriculum, prompting Das, Dey, Khoo and Amoo-Adare (2024, p.1) to argue that “it is important to conceive the exercise of decolonising academia as an ongoing and inconclusive process”. This has seen significant scholarship around the topic across all spheres of education. Ranging from classrooms to scholarly publications, researchers play a crucial role in promoting the expression and acknowledgement of new and diverse viewpoints. South African scholars have critiqued an education system centred on Western perspectives (Mbembe, 2015; Chetty and Knaus, 2016; d’Abdon, 2016; Le Grange, 2016; Naiker, 2016; d’Abdon, Byrne & Newfield, 2020; Mavhiza and Prozesky, 2020). The term ‘decolonisation’ relates to many concepts in academic discussions. It has been used since the onset of the decolonisation movement, including aspects such as access to higher education, infrastructure, and public spaces (Mbembe, 2015). Hence, it is essential for discussions about ‘decolonisation’ to define and clarify the

term, recognising that its interpretation can vary based on context. Mckenna (2004) notes that such contexts are inherently intersectional, consisting of many dimensions that call for ongoing reflexivity and dialogue while appreciating the diversity of identities and geopolitical positions. In practical terms, decolonising academia means creating a creative collaboration that breaks down barriers between academic content and real-world experiences across different cultures. Das *et al.* (2024) view decolonising academia as creating an equal and inclusive framework for knowledge exchange that recognises and elevates marginalised perspectives. For this paper, decolonising academia entails integrating knowledge expressed through diverse media and languages into the curriculum. A decolonised academic environment should facilitate the understanding, discussion, and dissemination of varied forms of knowledge, challenging the predominance of English as the language of teaching and learning, research and scholarship, and community engagement or service learning.

Higher education and language policy multilingualism

The colonial history, apartheid era and post-apartheid reforms shape the South African linguistic landscape. During apartheid, language policy was used to marginalise non-European languages and enforce segregation (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007). However, the post-apartheid South Africa has adopted a more inclusive language policy to redress historical injustices and promote linguistic diversity (Bamgbose, 2011). As such, multilingualism in South Africa is deeply rooted in its socio-historical and political context because it is characterised by a rich tapestry of languages, reflecting its diverse cultural heritage. This linguistic diversity presents both opportunities and challenges in higher education. The language policy for South African higher education institutions are informed by the *Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions* (DHET) (2020), which promotes using multiple languages for teaching and learning, research and scholarship, and community engagement. However, the policy does not call for the replacement of English with the African languages, which means English remains the primary medium of instruction due to its status as a global *lingua franca*. At the same time, the recommended use of African language face challenges such as limited resources, lack of qualified staff, and resistance from some stakeholders (Heugh, 2011; Mavindidze, 2015; Mzangwa, 2019).

Social justice and linguistic diversity

While the South African government has made strides with respect to widening access to higher education, the language issue still needs attention. Mzangwa (2019, p.7) suggests that “language is not just a barrier but could also be deemed an oppressive tool, particularly if such language usage is compulsory in the education system.” Thus, if language is an oppressive tool, liberation is needed, which can be achieved through adopting multilingualism in practicality. Multilingualism promotes social justice by providing equitable opportunities for all students, regardless of their linguistic background (Kamwangamalu, 2012). However, achieving this requires addressing systemic

inequalities and ensuring policies translate into effective practices (Murray, 2016).

Implications for promoting multilingual practices

By supporting multilingual practices, the policy helps to create a more inclusive environment for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This inclusivity can improve student engagement and academic success by allowing students to learn in their preferred or native languages (Smith and Jones, 2024). In addition, multilingual practices improve educational outcomes as students' access to knowledge improves (Munyaradzi, 2024). This approach can also enhance cognitive skills and facilitate a deeper understanding of the subject (Nguyen, 2023). Furthermore, multilingualism can give students the ability to compete globally. The world is now a global village and proficiency in multiple languages can be a significant advantage in international careers and cross-cultural interactions (Lee, 2022). Hence, the previously marginalised South African Indigenous languages are valuable.

Core elements of the revised language policy

The *Language Policy Framework for Higher Education* (LPFHE) (2020) was developed in response to a 2012 report commissioned by the Minister of Higher Education to evaluate the effectiveness of using African languages as mediums of instruction. The findings of the report indicated a significant lack of progress in leveraging African languages to enhance access and success in higher education institutions (Department of Higher Education (DHET), 2020, p.7). It encourages universities to adopt a flexible approach to implementing English as the medium of learning and teaching, and it is this self-contradictory element that makes some stakeholders reluctant to implement multilingual pedagogies. On the other hand, it emphasises the need for adequate support for students whose first language is not English to ensure their academic success (Department of Higher Education (DHET), 2020, p. 17). While this is the crucial aspect that aims to address the issues at stake, there is a need for clear guidance on pedagogical approaches. While the policy advocates for integrating local and international languages into curricula and institutional communication, more monitoring is required to ensure that higher education institutions (HEIs) offer courses and materials in various languages. The transformation approach aims to support students who are not proficient in the dominant language of instruction and to promote greater academic accessibility (Department of Higher Education (DHET), 2020).

In addition, the policy highlights the importance of training faculty and staff to teach and communicate effectively in multilingual contexts. This includes providing resources and support for educators to develop their language skills and pedagogical strategies for multilingual classrooms (Higher Education South Africa (DHET), 2020). Universities are required to create and implement comprehensive language plans that address the specific linguistic needs of their communities. These plans should outline strategies

for language use in teaching, research and administrative functions (Higher Education South Africa (DHET), 2020). This policy framework further notes that “South African higher education institutions are therefore confronted with the challenge of ensuring the development of a multilingual environment in which all official South African languages, particularly those which have been historically marginalised, are afforded space to develop as languages of scholarship, research as well as teaching and learning” (Higher Education South Africa (HESA), 2020. p.11). This means that pedagogical support is required. Similarly, the policy encourages the creation of conditions that support and strengthen “indigenous languages as languages of meaningful academic discourse, as well as sources of knowledge in the different disciplines of higher education” (HESA), 2020. p.11).

Theoretical framework

The thesis of the paper is anchored in culturally responsive pedagogy, also known as culturally relevant pedagogy by Ladson-Billings (1995), as its theoretical framework. This framework stresses the importance of understanding and valuing students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds as integral to their learning experiences. Educators can create more inclusive classrooms that support academic and social success by creating an environment where students’ languages and cultures are acknowledged (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Noting the academic challenges encountered by most students who transition to monoglot ideologies and practices in the tertiary environment from basic education, where multilingualism is embraced, a comprehensive framework that bridges the gap between home and school is essential. Acknowledging and addressing the role of power and privilege in education makes the policy relevant for this study as it advocates for caring for students, which most educators do not consider as they worry more about their work and status. Thus, a culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on the achievement of outcomes rather than mere completion of tasks. When students do not comprehend the language at higher cognitive levels, knowledge gaps discourage a sense of community, inclusivity, critical thinking and social justice awareness. A culturally relevant framework supports the growth of linguistic diversity, acknowledging that language is deeply tied to culture and identity. Culturally relevant pedagogy framework, therefore, examines how language and power intersect in education. It informs the need to decolonise the curricula to empower students and enable them to address inequalities in education and society. If higher education institutions embrace multilingualism in practice, they can create inclusive learning environments that value students’ linguistic diversity to enhance academic performance and social empowerment.

Methodology

This mixed-method study was conducted at one private higher education institution in South Africa. The study included 60 first-year students enrolled in an academic literacy module for the Bachelor of Education degree in 2024. Data was collected through participant semi-structured questionnaires to solicit students’ views on multilingualism

in higher education and reflections on lesson observations. The paper is located within an interpretive paradigm. While two data sources were used, the data from the lesson observation was too bulky, and to streamline the study, more focus was placed on the open-ended questionnaire for this paper. The questionnaire focused on students' perceptions and experiences with multilingualism in academia. The questionnaire was made simple so that data could be collected easily without students feeling overwhelmed. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how students navigate the pedagogical landscape and ideologies shaped by dominant language ideologies. Further, the questionnaire was divided into four sections. The first section sought demographic information, the second section solicited participants' language and learning experiences, and the third section probed students' understanding of the relationship between multilingualism and social justice. The last section was a poll that solicited information on the students' perceptions of the challenges in decolonising academic literacy practices in South African higher education. The questionnaire was designed as follows:

Section A: Demographic Information 1. Language(s) spoken at home: 2. Language(s) spoken in academic settings: 3. First language: 4. Level of English proficiency (self-assessed): 5. Gender 6. Age	-Beginner ☐ -Intermediate ☐ -Advanced ☐
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Section B: Language and Learning Experiences 1. How do you feel about using your first language in academic settings? 2. Have you experienced any challenges due to language barriers in your academic journey? If yes, please describe (Feel free to use your home language here) 3. How important is it for you to see your language reflected in the curriculum and academic materials? 4. Would your learning experience improve by implementing multilingual practices in your academic literacy module?	- Comfortable ☐ - Neutral ☐ - Uncomfortable ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- - Very important ☐ - Somewhat important ☐ - Not very important ☐ - Not at all important ☐ - Agree ☐ - Neutral ☐ - Disagree ☐
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Section C: Multilingualism and Social Justice 1. Adopting multilingualism in academic literacy modules promotes social justice. 2. Valuing linguistic diversity leads to more equitable educational opportunities. 3. I have experienced or witnessed instances of language-based discrimination or marginalisation in academic settings.	- Agree ☐ - Neutral ☐ - Disagree ☐ - Agree ☐ - Neutral ☐ - Disagree ☐ - Agree ☐ - Neutral ☐ - Disagree ☐
Section D: Decolonising Academic Literacy Practices 1. What is the biggest challenge in decolonising the academic literacy practices of South African Higher education?	-Lack of culturally relevant material ☐ -Resistance to change ☐ -Insufficient training for educators ☐ -Other ☐

Findings

Demographic overview

Of the 60 participants, 42 (70%) were female, while 18 (30%) were male. The mean age of the participants was 19. The results show that participants speak various languages at home, including Sepedi, Setswana, Tshivenda, Afrikaans, Xitsonga, English, isiXhosa, and isiZulu. This diversity in home languages reflects a multilingual environment that might influence their academic experiences and language preferences. Languages spoken at home and the first language yielded the following results: Sepedi: 8 participants (13.3%), Setswana: 10 participants (16.7%), Tshivenda: 6 participants (10%), Afrikaans: 12 participants (20%), Xitsonga: 5 participants (8.3%), English: 5 participants (8.3%),

isiXhosa: 7 participants (11.7%) and isiZulu: 7 participants (11.7%). All 60 participants reported English as the language of the academic setting, and the self-assessed English proficiency levels reveal that none of the participants is at the beginner level; thus, it gives 0 participants (0%); at the intermediate level, there are 40 participants (66.7%), and the advanced level has 20 participants (33.3%).

The levels of proficiency stated here are very important. The fact that more students indicated that they are at an intermediate proficiency level for English shows that their academic English comprehension is still low, and confirms the findings of Le Grange (2016) and Munyaradzi (2024), that most learners who are enrolled for higher education are not academically prepared for the Eurocentric learning programme. In addition, the language level proficiency variance also justifies the low success rate. While equality in terms of access into higher education has been attained, evidence shows that inequities still exist with respect to the medium of instruction (Nguyen, 2023). Academic literacy is one module that lays the foundation of academic success. Most students are not interested in the module, which is worsened by its technicalities, as Le Grange (2016) alluded to. Therefore, the results call for action from all stakeholders.

Language demographics summary

Figure 1 below shows the diversity of languages that are first languages of the 60 students sampled. Only 8% have English as their first language. However, English is the language of teaching and learning at the institution.

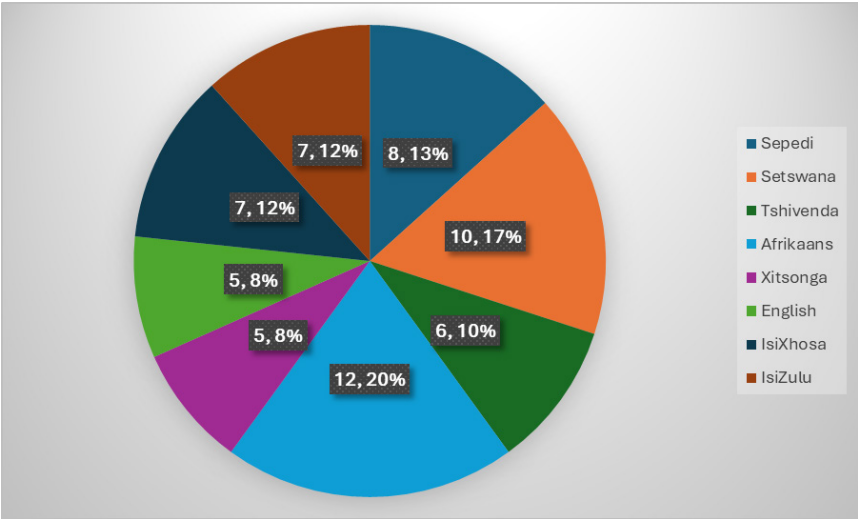


Figure 1: Language Diversity among Students in the Academic Literacy Class, 2024

Source: Questionnaire survey data

Language and learning experiences

The results show that most respondents (85%) feel comfortable using their first language in academic contexts (51 out of 60). This indicates a strong preference for linguistic familiarity in educational settings. On the other hand, a smaller group of respondents represents ambivalence or discomfort, with 10% (6 respondents) feeling neutral and 5% (3 respondents) feeling uncomfortable. This suggests that while discomfort exists, it is not widespread compared to those who feel comfortable. In response to the challenges due to language barriers, some comments illustrate the emotional and cognitive struggles that students face with language barriers. For example, Jane wrote, *"I feel very uncomfortable using English in class. Sometimes I struggle to express my ideas clearly in English even though I know the answer in my home language"*. The struggles experienced reflect a disconnect between comprehension and expression influenced by language proficiency. Another participant, Rathi, also said, *"English is difficult. Sometimes I know the answer, but I cannot say it in class because I feel that other students who are good with English might laugh at me."* Rathi expresses fear of judgment from peers, highlighting the anxiety surrounding language use in social contexts, which can inhibit participation and learning. Jacque notes that Afrikaans speaking students have strong academic performance yet struggle with academic literacy in English. The exact words written by Jacque said, *"Yes, I encounter serious challenges, and this has disturbed me throughout my schooling life. I am among the top students in the Afrikaans module because I understand and am competent in the language, but academic literacy has difficult concepts."* Jacque's remark reveals a gap in language skills critical in assessing academic success in multilingual environments. If most students were exposed to translanguaging and code-switching in high school (Mavhiza and Prozesky, 2020; d'Abdon, Byrne and Newfield, 2020) then come to tertiary where English is the only medium of instruction, these statements by Jane, Rathi, and Jacque show the significant emotional toll and academic impact that language barriers can impose on students.

Multilingualism and social justice

Most participants (81.67%) agree that adopting multilingualism in academic literacy promotes social justice and that valuing linguistic diversity leads to equitable educational opportunities. This suggests a strong consensus on the importance of multilingualism in achieving social justice in higher education. The strong agreement on the need for multilingualism highlights an urgent opportunity for higher education to integrate multilingual practices into curricula, potentially fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic environment.

On the other hand, when asked about personal experiences or observations of language-based discrimination or marginalisation, only 6.67% agreed with this statement. The majority (78.33%) disagreed, indicating that either those experiences of discrimination are not widespread or that participants may not recognise systemic issues. The neutral responses, accounting for 15% in both the first and second statements and 15% regarding language-based discrimination, also suggest that while many participants support

multilingualism and diversity, some may feel uncertain or indifferent about how these issues affect them personally or the larger academic community. This could also be why the *Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions* (2020, p. 5) states that "...whilst simultaneously sustaining the standard and utilisation of languages that are already developed". This pronouncement makes many institutions reluctant to embrace multilingualism. However, the data presented here suggests a significant endorsement of multilingualism as a tool for achieving social justice in South African higher education while also indicating a need to explore and address the nuances of language discrimination. Efforts should be made to validate and promote multilingualism in academic environments, recognising its vital role in equitable education for all students.

Challenges of decolonising academic literacy practices

As reflected in Figure 2 below, the data distribution frequency reveals that 28 out of 60 participants (46.67%) identify a lack of culturally relevant material as a significant challenge to decolonising academic literacy practices in South African higher education. This finding highlights a critical resource gap supporting the findings of Le Grange (2016) and Munyaradzi (2024). This suggests that there is an urgent need for HEIs to curate and integrate such materials into their academic literacy practices. Furthermore, 22 participants (36.67%) attributed the challenges to insufficient educator training. Data suggests that many educators may not have the necessary skills to teach in African languages. This underscores the need for professional development and training initiatives to empower educators to adopt and navigate teaching in African languages.

Additionally, 10 participants (16.67%) see resistance to change as the biggest challenge. Although this challenge garnered the least attention, it still represents a significant barrier to decolonisation. This resistance may stem from an institutional culture that is entrenched and is self-perpetuating. The results make it clear that decolonising academic literacy practices in South African HEIs revolves primarily around content relevance and educator training. Institutions might focus on developing culturally informed curricula and accompanying educator-training programmes to tackle the identified challenges effectively. d'Abdon, Byrne, and Newfield (2020, p. 2) reiterate that the 21st-century South African curriculum was "designed to advance a European agenda and perpetuate white male supremacy".

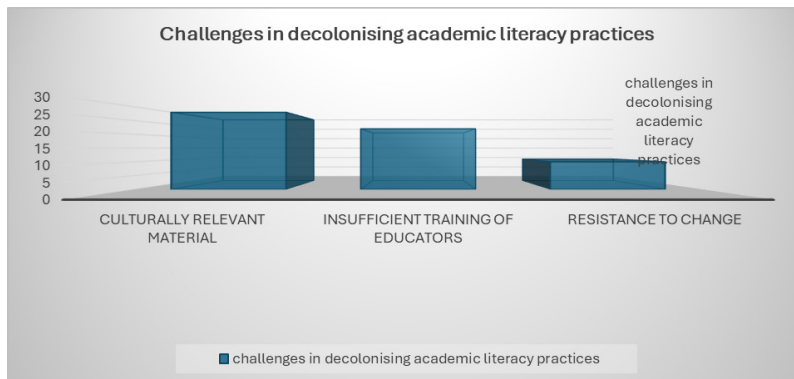


Figure 2: Frequency Distribution of Perceptions Regarding Challenges to Decolonisation

Source: This study's questionnaire survey

Discussion of findings

The findings indicate that the academic literacy class comprises of students from different language backgrounds. In line with the findings of Ladson-Billings (1995), such a linguistically diverse class requires culturally responsive pedagogy and adopting a curriculum that enables students to make sense of the experiences, knowledge and questions values, beliefs, and traditions to change worldviews. The use of only one language (English) which is not the first language of the students creates a barrier to the learning process more so that the students are not highly proficient in English. This linguistic gap may lead to feelings of exclusion or inadequacy, especially for students who struggle to articulate their understanding in a non-native language. In addition, the findings underscore the emotional and cognitive hurdles students face due to these language barriers. For example, students expressed feelings of discomfort and anxiety when using English in academic settings, revealing a disconnect between their comprehension of content and their ability to articulate their thoughts. This aligns with Ladson-Billings' (1995) assertion that culturally responsive pedagogy must address students' emotional and social needs alongside academic learning.

The other key finding stresses the need for strong support for multilingualism among participants, highlighting a crucial avenue for promoting social justice in education and reinforcing the idea that equitable treatment includes the recognition of students' linguistic diversity. As Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasised, educational equity necessitates an environment that reflects and affirms the identities of all students. Encouraging multilingual practices enriches the academic experience for students from diverse language backgrounds and aligns with the larger goal of dismantling existing barriers to educational equity. These inequalities are evident in the lack of culturally relevant materials and insufficient educational training, among other issues. Echoing Ladson-Billings (1995) arguments, a decolonised approach necessitates curricula that reflect the student's cultural and linguistic realities; this finding is critical for informing curriculum

development and teaching practices in higher education.

Conclusion and recommendations

While there is a broad recognition of the importance of linguistic diversity and its potential to promote social justice, significant challenges remain. Addressing these challenges requires, firstly, continued commitment to effective policy implementation. The emphasis on lecturer training is particularly pertinent, just like Ladson-Billings (1995) advocated for professional development that equips educators with the necessary skills to implement culturally responsive methodologies effectively. This suggests the need for a systemic shift in educational practices to create an inclusive academic environment that acknowledges linguistic and cultural diversities. Secondly, resource allocation, including developing course materials in multiple languages, such as textbooks, online resources, and multimedia content, is important. Furthermore, integrating culturally relevant materials and constant professional development for academics can also improve diverse learners' academic achievement and emotional well-being, ultimately promoting academic and social justice. Lastly, pedagogical innovations should be considered, and teaching strategies that reflect diverse cultural backgrounds should be used. These methods should incorporate local case studies and utilise translanguaging in the classroom to help students grasp complex concepts. The lecturer does not need to be fluent in all the languages the students speak for translanguaging to be effective. Since the students serve as valuable resources, group-teaching strategies should reflect their diverse cultural backgrounds. This will make all students to feel valued and respected. Adopting multilingualism and addressing barriers to decolonisation is crucial for creating a supportive academic environment that enables all students to thrive, with a particular focus on the academic literacy module. In this regard, future research should focus on developing sustainable models for adopting multilingualism in HEIs, assessing the effectiveness of current policies, and exploring the impact of multilingualism on academic and social outcomes, focusing on the academic literacy module, which is the anchor of academic success.

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