

# Nothing but noise: Challenges impeding the transformation of higher education in South Africa

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## EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 03 November 2024

Revised: 16 February 2025

Accepted: 28 February 2025

Published: 07 March 2025

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DOI: [10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.1.06](https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.1.06)

**Abstract:** The transformation of higher education in South Africa remains an ongoing challenge that has been progressively shaped by historical inequities, structural inefficiencies, and socio-political dynamics. This study examines the barriers hindering transformation and highlights persistent disparities between historically White institutions (HWIs) and historically Black institutions (HBIs), the financial constraints limiting equity-driven reforms, and the impact of exclusionary institutional cultures. While policy frameworks advocate for inclusivity, bureaucratic inefficiencies and leadership shortcomings continue to impede substantive transformation. Furthermore, the emphasis on global rankings often diverts institutional priorities away from local imperatives, reinforcing existing hierarchies. Using a literature review methodology, this study synthesises research on transformation in South African universities to identify key obstacles and propose strategic interventions. Using keyword combinations, data were collected from 38 articles that were searched from Scopus, JSTOR,

Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and the Directory of Open Access Journals. The findings emphasise the need for equity-driven funding models, decolonised curricula, inclusive leadership, and governance reforms that foster meaningful stakeholder participation. Combatting these issues requires sustained commitment from policymakers, institutions, and civil society to dismantle entrenched barriers and create a genuinely transformative higher education system.

**Keywords:** Higher education, institutional culture, decolonisation, transformation, inclusion.

## 1. Introduction

The transformation of higher education is an increasingly critical issue in the 21st century, driven by global economic, social, and technological shifts. Several tokenistic agendas for change have been observed in academia, where scholars from marginalised groups are sprinkled throughout institutions in the name of inclusivity and awarded pseudo-power positions (Turner, 2024). Furthermore, institutions often approve perfunctory and symbolic policy changes whose lifespan does not exceed the paper on which they are crafted (Povey et al., 2023; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). As Thunig and Jones (2021) contend, transformation seeks to dismantle the systems that have engendered and normalised unfair opportunities for some at the expense of unfair disadvantages for others. According to Mutongoza (2023), higher education institutions are called upon to address pressing inequalities as societies become more interconnected. Omodan, Manquma, and Mafunda (2024) assert that such demands challenge the traditional structures and curricula that have long dominated universities, often reflecting Eurocentric and elitist paradigms. Masaka (2019) highlights that this call for transformation is particularly urgent in regions where higher education systems must contend with legacies of colonialism, systemic exclusion, and entrenched inequities. Globally, this debate is evidenced in discussions surrounding access, relevance, and governance, which emphasise the need for higher education systems to be inclusive and capable of addressing the diverse realities of their local and global contexts (Fia, Ghasemzadeh, & Paletta, 2022; Straková & Cimermanová, 2018).

### How to cite this article:

Mutongoza, B. H. (2025). Nothing but noise: Challenges impeding the transformation of higher education in South Africa. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research*, 7(1), a06. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.1.06>

In South Africa, Mutongoza, Olawale, and Mncube (2023) and Seepe (2017) demonstrate that the transformation of higher education holds particular significance given the country's discriminatory past and its current ambitions for inclusion. While higher education is intended to empower students with skills and abilities that aid critical thinking, the apartheid university education system was designed to entrench the power of the white minority. During the apartheid period and its immediate aftermath, this resulted in a profoundly unequal education system in which historically White institutions (HWIs) were disproportionately resourced and positioned as centres of academic excellence, while historically Black institutions (HBIs) were systematically underfunded and relegated to the periphery of excellence in the educational landscape (Adonis & Silinda, 2021). Bunting (2006) notes that although HBIs later played a significant role in resisting the apartheid regime, they were initially integrated into a system designed, expanded, and fragmented to serve the objectives and strategies of successive apartheid governments. While post-apartheid policies have sought to address these and other imbalances, Ayuk and Koma (2019) remind us that the persistence of disparities in funding, infrastructure, and outcomes highlights the enormity of the challenge of transforming the system. Beyond material inequities, studies such as Du Plessis (2021) contend that South African universities are also grappling with the symbolic and epistemological dimensions of transformation as students, academics, and activists demand decolonised curricula that reflect African knowledge systems and lived realities.

The South African experience of higher education transformation offers insights into how countries might reconcile historical injustices while striving to remain competitive in a global knowledge economy. Currently, access and equity remain challenges as many historically disadvantaged students struggle with financial constraints, inadequate academic preparation, and exclusionary institutional cultures that hinder their success (Abed & Ackers, 2022; Zulu, 2017). Additionally, Masaka (2019) acknowledges that curriculum reform has been slow, with decolonisation efforts often reduced to superficial changes rather than fundamental shifts in knowledge production. At most HWIs, staff diversification remains inadequate, particularly in senior academic and leadership positions, where White academics still dominate (Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019). A reading of Booi et al. (2019) reveals how institutional culture continues to alienate Black students and staff, with persistent reports of racism, gender discrimination, and a lack of inclusivity. Furthermore, existing governance and leadership structures have often failed to foster meaningful transformation, as many universities remain entangled in bureaucratic inefficiencies, political interference, and corruption (Habib, 2016). Although student support mechanisms have expanded, they have not effectively addressed dropout rates and academic underperformance, particularly among first-generation students (Chakabwata, 2022). The language policies in higher education continue to favour English and Afrikaans while marginalising Indigenous languages and reinforcing historical linguistic hierarchies (Du Plessis, 2021). Thus, while the focus is on South Africa, the lessons drawn from its ongoing transformation resonate far beyond its borders, illuminating shared challenges in pursuing equitable and transformative education systems worldwide.

The following research question guided this study:

- What challenges hinder the attainment of transformation at South African universities?

## **2. Methodology**

This study used the systematic literature review method to analyse and synthesise existing peer-reviewed publications. The literature review method was chosen to synthesise literature on transformation in South African universities and aggregate the empirical findings to support evidence-based practice. The first step was to define the research question guiding the study – What challenges hinder the attainment of transformation at South African universities? The author then searched for articles from Scopus, JSTOR, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and the Directory of Open Access Journals. This follows the advice of Bramer et al. (2017), who recommend searching multiple

databases when searching for references for systematic reviews. Literature was searched using the following combinations of the keywords: “transformation AND South African universities” OR “university AND transformation AND South Africa” OR “challenges AND transformation AND South African universities” OR “barriers AND institutional change AND South Africa” OR “post-apartheid universities AND transformation”. To minimise the loss of potential data sources, the author further checked the cited studies in the articles to ensure a comprehensive sample of studies. At this point, the initial sample of articles was 113 articles. The author then applied the following inclusion/exclusion criteria:

- Recency: The author defined recency as having been published between 2016 and 2024.
- Contextual relevance: The article had to be about South African higher education.
- Reputation of publisher: The author defined good reputability in terms of accreditation by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training.
- Methodological rigour: The author relied on designs that answered the research questions and clearly justified the selected designs.

After applying these criteria, the author ended up with 38 articles that were utilised for this study. The arguments of these articles were manually combed through, organised, and summarised independently by the author, ensuring the identification of patterns and trends and drawing preliminary conclusions on the findings. After this, the author integrated the findings and sought the opinions of critical readers who are experts in education management and systematic reviews.

### 3. Presentation of Findings

Table 1 below presents the findings in the form of emergent themes and the studies supporting each theme. Some of the studies presented in this table had cross-cutting themes and thus appear more than once in the table.

*Table 1: Presentation of findings*

<b>Emergent themes</b>	<b>Authors, years</b>
Historical inequalities and funding constraints	Chakabwata (2022) Ayuk & Koma (2019) Adonis & Silinda (2021) Faloye & Ajayi (2022) Nkohla (2020) Abed & Ackers (2022) Wildschut, Megbowon & Miselo (2020) Mbhalati (2024) Mokgotho, Njoko & Burman (2023) Booi, Vincent & Liccardo (2019)
Institutional cultures and leadership	Belluigi & Thondhlana (2019) Adonis & Silinda (2021) Dirk & Gelderblom (2017) Booi, Vincent & Liccardo (2017) Belluigi (2023) Ngcamu (2017) Walters (2021) Zulu (2017) Abed & Ackers (2022) Habib (2016)
Administrative and structural inefficiencies	Magida, Yazbek & Thambura (2024) Swartz et al. (2019) Cornell & Kessi (2017)

Global pressures and rankings	Seepe (2017) Muller (2017) Buthlezi (2018) Booi et al. (2017) Belluigi & Thondhlana (2019) Ayuk & Koma (2019) Ndofirepi (2017) Downing, Loock & Gravett (2021) Breetzke & Hedding (2020) Fomunyam (2017) Nyemba, Mbohwa & Carter (2021) Cullen, Calitz & Kanyutu (2020) Du Plessis (2021) Mfengu & Raju (2023) Welsh (2020)
Social and political dynamics	Sebola (2023) Dirk & Gelderblom (2017) Seepe (2017) Jansen et al. (2024) Timmis et al. (2021) Nkohla (2020) Belluigi & Thondhlana (2019) Masango Chéry (2023) Ntombana, Gwala & Sibanda (2023) Booi et al. (2017)

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## **4. Discussion of Findings**

### **4.1 Historical inequalities and funding constraints**

The legacy of apartheid has left an indelible mark on South Africa's higher education system, with historical inequalities in resource allocation and institutional development continuing to hinder transformation efforts. Studies by Chakabwata (2022) and Ayuk and Koma (2019) highlight the stark disparities between HWIs and HBIs, which persist despite post-apartheid policy interventions. According to Adonis and Silinda (2021), HWIs benefitted from decades of state investment that enabled them to establish robust infrastructure, attract skilled faculty, and produce high research outputs. By contrast, Faloye and Ajayi (2022) reveal that HBIs were systematically underfunded and designed to serve limited educational purposes, leaving them ill-equipped to compete on an equal footing. These historical inequities have translated into enduring challenges for HBIs, including under-resourced campuses, outdated infrastructure, and limited access to research funding. The broader issue of funding constraints exacerbates these inequalities. According to Nkohla (2020), South Africa allocates a relatively small proportion of its GDP to higher education, which many scholars argue is insufficient to meet the needs of a growing and diversifying student population. Ayuk and Koma (2019) contend that the reliance on tuition fees as a significant source of income for universities places undue pressure on both students and institutions. Similarly, Abed and Ackers (2022) argue that HBIs, in particular, lack the financial reserves and alternative funding streams – such as private donations and endowments – that HWIs often leverage to offset funding gaps. This disparity perpetuates a cycle of resource deprivation that limits the capacity of HBIs to attract high-calibre staff, invest in infrastructure, and expand academic offerings.

Financial insecurity among students also emerges as a significant theme in the literature. Despite the expansion of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which has played a critical role in

increasing access for disadvantaged students, many still struggle to afford higher education (Wildschut, Megbowon & Miselo, 2020). Mbhalati (2024) notes that NSFAS funding often fails to cover the full cost of attendance, leaving some students reliant on precarious personal or familial resources. This issue is particularly pronounced at HBIs, where Ayuka and Koma (2019) explain how limited institutional resources further constrain the availability of scholarships, bursaries, and academic support programmes. According to Mokgotho, Njoko, and Burman (2023), the financial pressures students face hinder academic success and exacerbate dropout rates, undermining efforts to achieve equitable access and outcomes. The literature also emphasises the role of resource disparities in reinforcing institutional hierarchies within the higher education system. Booii, Vincent, and Liccardo (2019) argue that HWIs continue to dominate research outputs, attract international partnerships, and secure higher rankings, while HBIs struggle to overcome their historical disadvantages. This perpetuates perceptions of prestige associated with HWIs, often to the detriment of HBIs. Such dynamics undermine the broader goal of creating a unified and equitable higher education system that addresses South Africa's developmental challenges.

The enduring legacy of apartheid manifests most acutely in the stark resource disparities between HWIs and HBIs. Decades of discriminatory funding and development have resulted in HBIs consistently struggling with inadequate infrastructure, limited access to cutting-edge technology, and a chronic shortage of resources. This inequitable distribution perpetuates a vicious cycle: underfunded institutions struggle to attract and retain high-quality faculty, invest in modern facilities, or expand crucial student support services, thereby further entrenching their disadvantaged position. Simply increasing funding is insufficient; what is required is a fundamental restructuring of funding models to prioritise equity and redress historical imbalances. This includes targeted investments in HBIs to build capacity in research, teaching, and infrastructure.

#### **4.2 Institutional cultures and leadership**

Institutional culture and leadership have emerged as significant factors in transforming South Africa's higher education system. Belluigi and Thondhlana (2019) report the persistence of exclusionary practices and mindsets, particularly in HWIs, where the legacy of apartheid continues to shape the socio-academic environment. According to Adonis and Silinda (2021), the institutional culture in many HWIs is characterised by subtle yet pervasive practices that marginalise students and staff from historically disadvantaged groups. These include Eurocentric curricula, a lack of representation in senior leadership, and an environment that often fails to accommodate linguistic and cultural diversity (Dirk & Gelderblom, 2017). Such cultures alienate students and staff, undermining efforts to foster inclusivity and transformation. While leadership plays a central role in navigating these entrenched institutional dynamics, research indicates that leadership at South African universities often faces significant challenges in addressing the systemic issues necessary for meaningful transformation (Booi, Vincent, & Liccardo, 2017). Belluigi (2023) argues that leadership in higher education is frequently constrained by competing priorities, including financial pressures, political interference, and resistance to change from within the institutions. Furthermore, many leaders are tasked with balancing the expectations of various stakeholders, such as students, staff, government, and funders, which can dilute their focus on transformation agendas.

A key finding in the literature is the critical role of transformative leadership in driving institutional change. A reading of studies such as Ngcamu (2017) reveals that transformative leaders are characterised by their ability to articulate a clear vision for equity and inclusivity, foster collaboration among diverse stakeholders, and challenge entrenched norms and practices. Walters (2021) emphasises that leadership effectiveness depends on a leader's capacity to build trust, navigate conflict, and create a sense of shared purpose; yet there remains a worrisome lack of diversity in leadership positions. Women and individuals from historically marginalised communities remain underrepresented in senior academic and administrative roles (Zulu, 2017). This lack of diversity in

leadership limits the perspectives brought to decision-making processes and perpetuates perceptions that transformation is not a genuine institutional priority (Abed & Ackers, 2022). According to Belluigi and Thondhlana (2019) and Zulu (2017), institutions that have diversified their leadership are more likely to adopt innovative approaches to curriculum reform, resource allocation, and student support. Habib (2016) demonstrates that governance models that prioritise bureaucratic efficiency over inclusive decision-making alienate stakeholders and stifle the momentum for change.

Beyond mere resource allocation, the transformation of institutional culture and leadership is paramount. Many universities continue to operate within exclusionary frameworks that marginalise certain groups, both within their curricula and in the composition of their leadership. While leadership is often touted as the driving force of change, its effectiveness is frequently hampered by conflicting priorities, a lack of diversity at leadership levels, and a resistance to challenging established norms. True transformation requires visionary leaders who are not only committed to fostering inclusivity but also possess the courage and strategic acumen to actively dismantle outdated practices and promote a culture of equity and social justice. This includes diversifying leadership positions, promoting inclusive curricula that reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of South African society, and implementing robust anti-discrimination policies.

### **4.3 Administrative and structural inefficiencies**

Administrative and structural inefficiencies have been widely identified in the literature as significant obstacles to transforming South Africa's higher education system. Despite various reforms aimed at creating more equitable and responsive institutions, deeply entrenched bureaucratic processes and outdated governance models often hinder progress. The findings from Magida, Yazbek, and Thambura (2024) reveal that many universities operate within rigid administrative frameworks that prioritise compliance and hierarchy over innovation and inclusivity. These inefficiencies slow down decision-making processes, making it difficult for institutions to respond effectively to the dynamic challenges of transformation (Swartz et al., 2019). One recurring theme in the literature is the misalignment between governance structures and institutional needs. Historically, South African universities inherited governance models designed for exclusivity and control rather than for fostering participatory and transformative practices. Cornell and Kessi (2017) note that these models often marginalise key stakeholders, such as students and junior academic staff, from critical decision-making processes. This lack of inclusivity alienates those most affected by transformation policies and undermines the legitimacy of institutional governance (Seepe, 2017). Recently, movements like #FeesMustFall highlighted the disconnect between institutional leadership and the student body, as well as the inadequacies of traditional governance structures in addressing urgent demands for change.

Another issue highlighted in the literature is the inefficiency of resource management within universities. Several studies point to challenges in financial planning, procurement processes, and infrastructure maintenance, particularly at HBIs. According to Muller (2017), bureaucratic inefficiencies often exacerbate funding shortages, as delayed procurement and poor financial oversight lead to wastage and misallocation of limited resources. These challenges are compounded by the high administrative burden placed on academic staff, which detracts from their ability to focus on teaching, research, and community engagement—key pillars of transformation (Swartz et al., 2019). A further dimension of administrative inefficiency is the lack of coherence between institutional policies and their implementation. While many universities have adopted transformation strategies on paper, translating these policies into actionable outcomes remains inconsistent (Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019). Studies like Buthelezi (2018) and Booie et al. (2017) highlight the frequent gap between pledged commitments to inclusivity and the actual experiences of students and staff from marginalised backgrounds, thus demonstrating the inefficiencies in policy implementation and the resistance to change from entrenched institutional cultures. Without

mechanisms for accountability and continuous evaluation, transformation efforts risk being superficial rather than substantive.

As demonstrated by the literature, structural inefficiencies within the system represent a significant impediment to transformation. Rigid bureaucratic systems, which often prioritise procedural compliance over innovation and responsiveness, lead to protracted decision-making processes and hinder the effective implementation of transformative policies. This disconnect between strategic vision and practical execution underscores the urgent need for more agile and inclusive governance models. These models should empower all stakeholders (including students, faculty, staff, and community members) to contribute meaningfully to the transformation process and ensure accountability.

#### **4.4 Global pressures and rankings**

Pursuing global recognition through international rankings presents significant obstacles to transforming South Africa's higher education system. International ranking systems, such as the Times Higher Education and QS World University Rankings, emphasise metrics like research output, funding levels, and international collaborations. While these benchmarks may enhance institutional prestige, Ayuk and Koma's (2019) work reveals that they blindly privilege HWIs, which were well-resourced under apartheid, and disadvantage HBIs that continue to grapple with systemic underfunding. This disparity perpetuates existing hierarchies within the sector, undermining efforts to create an equitable higher education system (Ndofirepi, 2017). A key issue, as Downing, Loock and Gravett (2021) contend, is that the emphasis on ranking metrics can divert institutional priorities away from transformation goals. Institutions seeking to improve their global standing may allocate resources towards initiatives that enhance research output and international partnerships rather than addressing the urgent need for equity and inclusion. According to Breetzke and Hedding (2020), this focus disproportionately benefits HWIs, which are better positioned to meet ranking criteria due to their established research infrastructure and global networks. HBIs, already disadvantaged by historical inequalities, are further marginalised as they struggle to compete in a system that does not account for their unique challenges or developmental needs.

Moreover, pursuing global rankings often leads to policy decisions that conflict with local imperatives for transformation. According to Fomunyam (2017), this results in the prioritisation of global competitiveness over addressing the historical exclusion of marginalised groups. Nyemba, Mbohwa, and Carter (2021) argue that resources may be funnelled into attracting internationally recognised researchers or meeting publication quotas in high-impact journals rather than improving access for disadvantaged students or decolonising curricula. This misalignment slows the pace of transformation and reinforces perceptions that universities prioritise external recognition over their commitment to local communities (Cullen, Calitz & Kanyutu, 2020). The focus on rankings also perpetuates epistemological exclusion, hindering the incorporation of African knowledge systems and perspectives into university curricula. Ndofirepi (2017) further highlights that ranking criteria often reflect Western-centric academic standards that discourage the integration of indigenous and local knowledge, as these are not recognised as valuable in global academic metrics. This tension undermines efforts to create decolonised and contextually relevant educational experiences, which are central to the transformative agenda in South Africa (Du Plessis, 2021). Additionally, Mfengu and Raju (2023) and Welsh (2020) note that the cost of competing in global rankings disproportionately affects HBIs. Institutions with limited resources face immense pressure to stretch their already constrained budgets to improve ranking performance, often at the expense of essential transformation efforts.

The literature demonstrates that the increasing pressure to compete in global rankings adds a further layer of complexity. The emphasis on metrics such as research output, international collaborations, and publications in high-impact journals often diverts attention and resources away from critical

local priorities, such as decolonising curricula, addressing historical injustices, and ensuring access and success for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While international recognition holds value, it should not be pursued at the expense of addressing the pressing needs of under-resourced institutions and fulfilling the social justice mandate of higher education in South Africa. A critical re-evaluation of the weight given to global rankings is necessary.

#### **4.5 Social and political dynamics**

Social and political dynamics in South Africa significantly influence the transformation of higher education, often acting as both drivers and obstacles to progress. Sebola (2023) notes that the interplay between societal inequities, political expectations, and institutional autonomy creates a complex environment that hinders the full realisation of transformation objectives. Literature on this topic underscores the challenges posed by conflicting stakeholder interests, public protests, and broader societal divisions, which often complicate the implementation of transformative policies.

One major challenge is the persistence of societal inequalities mirrored within higher education institutions. According to Dirk and Gelderblom (2017), the higher education system remains deeply stratified along racial and socioeconomic lines, reflecting the broader inequities in South African society. These divisions influence access to education, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds often facing financial, academic, and social barriers to success (Seepe, 2017). Even after gaining entry, Jansen et al. (2024) explain that many of these students and academics encounter unwelcoming institutional cultures, limited support services, and inadequate educational resources, further perpetuating inequities. These systemic issues limit individual success and hinder the broader goals of transformation, such as fostering inclusive campuses and addressing historical injustices.

Political dynamics also play a critical role in shaping transformation efforts. According to Timmis et al. (2021), while the government has prioritised higher education transformation through policies aimed at redress and equity, political pressures often create unrealistic or conflicting demands on universities. This is corroborated by Nkohla (2020), who notes that institutions are expected to expand access, improve equity, and maintain academic excellence while operating within constrained financial environments. This tension between policy directives and practical realities frequently results in superficial compliance rather than substantive change. Institutions may adopt transformation strategies to meet government mandates but lack the resources or institutional will to implement them effectively (Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019).

Student protests, such as the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements, have also highlighted the role of political activism in shaping transformation debates. Although these movements have brought critical issues to the forefront—including decolonisation, tuition affordability, and institutional racism—they have also exposed the fragility of higher education governance structures (Masango Chéry, 2023). According to Ntombana, Gwala, and Sibanda (2023), the protests disrupted academic calendars, strained institutional resources, and highlighted divisions between students, staff, and management. While such activism is a vital expression of democratic engagement, it often results in short-term disruptions that hinder the long-term planning required for sustainable transformation. Booie et al. (2017) add that resistance to change delays policy implementation and creates institutional tension, further hindering progress.

Thus, transformation efforts risk becoming fragmented and ineffective without a unified vision and consistent engagement among stakeholders. Existing inequalities within the education system are mirrored and often exacerbated by societal inequalities, creating additional barriers for students from marginalised communities. While student activism and public discourse have played a crucial role in bringing critical issues to the forefront, fragmented institutional responses and weak governance structures have often limited the long-term impact of these efforts. A sustained, collaborative effort



involving all stakeholders – government, institutions, students, faculty, and civil society – is essential to achieve meaningful and lasting change.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to explore the challenges impeding transformation at South African universities. The findings from the reviewed literature revealed that, despite the positive strides made since the demise of apartheid, transformation is being hampered by historical inequalities, funding constraints, institutional cultures and leadership deficiencies, global pressures and rankings, as well as social and political dynamics. Thus, the study concludes that the persistent challenges to transformation in South Africa's higher education system reflect deeply entrenched inequalities, institutional inefficiencies, and conflicting priorities. Furthermore, the interplay between societal inequities, political pressures, and institutional inertia, as demonstrated in this study, highlights the complex nature of the transformation agenda, which requires targeted and sustained interventions. The study recommends that South African universities adopt and comprehensively implement targeted interventions that address historical inequalities, funding constraints, and institutional inefficiencies through inclusive policies and leadership development. Strengthening institutional cultures to engender transformation necessitates active engagement with diverse stakeholders, particularly students from marginalised backgrounds. Additionally, the study suggests that further research should explore the effectiveness of existing transformation policies, the role of leadership in fostering change, and comparative studies on global best practices. A promising starting point could be longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of transformation initiatives in South African higher education.

## 6. Declarations

**Funding:** This research did not receive any external funding.

**Acknowledgements:** The author makes no acknowledgements.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Data Availability Statement:** This review is based entirely on publicly available data and information sourced from peer-reviewed articles, reports, and other academic publications cited in the manuscript. No new primary data were generated or analysed during this study. Readers may refer to the cited sources for detailed information.

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