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Collective Student Mobilization and the Pursuit of Social Change: Repositioning #TVETMustRise Within South Africa's Fallism Landscape[6]

Nolukhanyo Metula
ORCID No: 0009-0000-1023-672
University of Fort Hare
NMetula@ufh.ac.za

Gcina Mtengwane
ORCID No: 0000-0003-1675-2971
University of the Free State
MtengwaneG@ufs.ac.za

Abstract

#TVETMustRise represents a critical form of collective student mobilisation within South Africa's broader fallism landscape, alongside such movements as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, which were instrumental in agitating for the massification of access to, and the decolonisation of, higher education in South Africa. However, while movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall have generated extensive scholarly engagement with the fallism or #MustFall movements, and the decolonisation of higher education in universities, there has been very little scholarly engagement with the activism emerging from technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Like the university-centred movements that catalysed significant discursive and policy shifts, #TVETMustRise emerged as a student movement advocating for the recognition, advocacy, and voice of TVET students in their struggle for higher education access, improved student conditions, and the recognition of college students as equals to their university counterparts. Therefore, drawing from the framework of recognition theory, this paper conceptualises TVET student activism such as #TVETMustRise as a fundamental component of national higher education struggles. Using narratives collected through an in-depth interview WITH former #TVETMustRise activist, Teboho, this paper integrates his voice into proposing the strategic integration of the #TVETMustRise movement into South Africa's broader landscape of fallism and #MustFall student activism. The paper concludes that a unified higher education justice front that is attentive to TVET-specific realities is strategically necessary for advancing equitable post-school futures.

Keywords: **#TVETMustRise; Fallism Movements; Student Activism; Student-Led Mobilisation; Social Change.**

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Introduction

In democratic South Africa, student movements have continued to serve as vital forces for transformation, exposing the persistent contradictions of a post-apartheid higher education system characterised by expanded access alongside deepening inequalities in affordability, institutional culture, and epistemological relevance. Despite the formal end of apartheid in 1994, rapid increases in Black student enrolment at historically White universities collided with chronic underfunding, neoliberal cost-sharing policies, and institutional cultures that many students experienced as alienating and Eurocentric. These structural tensions erupted dramatically in 2015–2016 with the emergence of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, collectively known as the fallism movements, which represented one of the most significant waves of higher education activism since the democratic transition.

Thus, the South African higher education sector experienced significant contestation between 2015 and 2016, largely driven by the emergence of the fallist student movement. This wave of student activism mobilised widespread protest against structural inequalities within universities and the broader state (Maylam, 2020). At its core, fallism called for far-reaching transformation, demanding the dismantling of systems rooted in the historical oppression and dispossession of Black South Africans under colonialism and apartheid. It also represented a complex and evolving ideological formation, drawing on decolonial thought, Black Consciousness, radical feminism, and Pan-Africanism (Ahmed, 2020).

Within this broader landscape of student mobilisation, movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall gained prominence for challenging the cost, accessibility, and epistemic orientation of university education (Hodes, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Alongside these, #TVETMustRise emerged as a critical yet often overlooked strand of the fallist student movement, representing collective activism within technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions. While university-centred movements have attracted substantial scholarly attention, particularly regarding decolonisation and higher education reform, far less attention has been paid to student activism in the TVET sector, such as the #TVETMustRise movement.

This paper argues that the marginalisation of TVET colleges, which manifested itself through the #TVETMustRise social movement, is rooted in symbolic hierarchies embedded in South Africa's postcolonial education system. These hierarchies produce symbolic marginalisation, which manifests as misrecognition in the recognition-theory sense. Fallist decolonial movements, understood as a decolonial critique of institutional legitimacy, provide a framework of challenging these intertwined forms of injustice. This paper, therefore, positions the #TVETMustRise student movement as a fundamental component of South Africa's broader higher education struggles, and the objectives of the study are to:

- Examine how #TVETMustRise emerged within the broader fallism landscape.
- Analyse the movement's demands through recognition theory.; and
- Explore how TVET student activism expands understandings of post-school justice in South Africa.

Like its university-based counterparts, the movement sought to catalyse change by advocating for improved access, better student conditions, and the recognition of TVET students as equal participants within the higher education system. By foregrounding the experiences and demands of TVET students, this study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of fallism and its implications for transforming the South African higher education landscape.

Literature Review

TVET Colleges in South Africa

The restructuring of South Africa's education system following the end of apartheid in the early 1990s introduced a new policy framework aimed at redressing historical inequalities and rationalising the sector. Within this framework, education and training were organised into three broad bands: General Education and Training, focused on primary schooling; Further Education and Training (FET), covering secondary schooling; and Higher Education and Training, which included universities and colleges. Initially, TVET colleges were classified under the FET band (Buthelezi, 2018). However, over time, this institutional positioning shifted. In 2010, TVET colleges were transferred to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), in recognition of their role in delivering post-school education and training. This relocation signalled their formal inclusion within the higher education sector and aligned them more closely with national development priorities and labour market needs (Buthelezi, 2018).

The transformation of TVET colleges must, however, be understood within the broader historical context of apartheid, which was characterised by deep structural inequalities in education. Under apartheid, Black South Africans were systematically excluded from meaningful access to TVET, and were often channelled into inferior educational programmes that did not equip them for participation in the formal economy. Funding within the sector was racially discriminatory, with institutions serving White students receiving significantly greater resources than those serving Black students (Sebola, 2022). In response to these injustices, post-apartheid reforms sought to transform the TVET sector through legislation such as the Further Education and Training Act of 1998, later amended into the Continuing Education and Training Act of 2006. These reforms aimed to expand access, promote equity, and reposition TVET colleges as viable and inclusive pathways for all South Africans (Sebola, 2022).

Contemporary policy frameworks conceptualise TVET colleges as key institutions "rooted in and serving" their communities, with a mandate to contribute to economic growth and skills development (Majola, 2025, p. 2). In line with the National Skills Development Strategy III, these colleges are expected to provide intermediate and higher-level skills required by industry, thereby strengthening South Africa's economy (Wedekind & Watson, 2016). At the same time, they are tasked with addressing pressing socioeconomic challenges, including high levels of youth unemployment and persistent poverty, by expanding access to relevant and high-quality education and training (Powell & McGrath, 2013).

Despite this strong policy positioning, TVET colleges continue to occupy an ambiguous and often marginalised position within the higher education hierarchy. Symbolic marginalisation operates through hierarchies of value that differentiate between "prestigious" and "lesser" forms of education, shaping both public perception and policy prioritisation. In the South African context, TVET institutions are frequently positioned as secondary to universities, not only in funding allocation, but in perceived social worth. This process sustains misrecognition by normalising unequal status within the post-school system. Although formally recognised as part of the post-school system, TVET institutions are frequently perceived as less prestigious than universities and are commonly associated with limited resources, weaker institutional support, and lower social status (Magadza & Mampane, 2024). This disjuncture between formal recognition and lived reality reflects a broader condition of misrecognition within the sector.

It is within this context that #TVETMustRise can be understood as a struggle for recognition. The movement emerges not only from material concerns, such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and challenging student conditions, but also from the symbolic marginalisation of TVET students within the broader higher education landscape. By contesting their positioning as "second-tier" institutions and asserting their legitimacy and value, TVET students articulate claims that resonate strongly with recognition theory—calling for dignity, equal status, and full inclusion. In this way, the historical development and continued marginalisation of TVET colleges provide the structural foundation for understanding #TVETMustRise as part of the broader fallist movement. At the same time, the movement highlights a distinct dimension of student activism—one that foregrounds the

struggle for recognition within a stratified higher education system and calls for a more inclusive reimagining of educational justice in South Africa.

Importantly, TVET colleges operate with South Africa's post-school education and training (PSET) system, which includes universities, TVET colleges, community colleges, Sector Education and Training Authorities, and skills development initiatives. Unlike universities, TVET colleges are primarily oriented toward vocational and occupational training, often serving students from working-class backgrounds and acting as critical pathways into employment. However, the PSET system remains highly stratified, with universities occupying the apex of prestige, funding allocation, and public recognition. The institutional differentiation is central to understanding #TVETMustRise because the movement is not simply demanding inclusion within "higher education," but rather challenging inequality within a diversified and hierarchical PSET system.

Student Movements in South Africa's Higher Education

Student movements have had a profound and enduring influence on South Africa's higher education system, serving as both a mirror of societal inequalities and a catalyst for policy and institutional change (Chikane, 2026). From the anti-apartheid era through the democratic period, students have consistently challenged exclusionary structures, governance deficits, and epistemological foundations, adapting their tactics and demands to shifting political and economic contexts (Gopal, 2021). Scholarly literature on this topic is extensive, encompassing historical monographs, edited collections of protest accounts, theoretical analyses framed by decolonial, Marxist, and social movement perspectives, and reflective evaluations of outcomes. Key themes include the ideological underpinnings of activism, the interplay between campus struggles and national politics, the innovative use of digital tools, and the tensions between immediate gains and long-term systemic transformation (Daniel & Miller, 2025; Mzileni, 2020).

The historical foundations of student activism lie in resistance to apartheid's racially segregated and inferior education system. Saleem Badat's (2016) seminal work, *Black Student Politics, Higher Education and Apartheid: From SASO to SANSCO, 1968–1990*, provides a comprehensive analysis of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), rooted in Black Consciousness philosophy, and its successor, the South African National Students Congress. These organisations operated amid severe state repression, filling political vacuums left by banned liberation movements, forging alliances across campuses, and linking educational demands to broader anti-apartheid goals (Badat, 2016). Institutions like the University of the North and the University of Fort Hare emerged as hotspots where students combined protests over living conditions, academic quality, and representation with community mobilisation in rural areas. Such activism not only contributed to the erosion of apartheid education but also cultivated a generation of leaders, demonstrating the enduring pattern of student dissatisfaction with governance, resources, and racial hierarchies that persists into the post-1994 era.

Following the advent of democracy in 1994, student movements adapted to new realities of expanded access juxtaposed against persistent structural barriers. Rapid growth in Black student enrolment at historically White universities clashed with inadequate public funding, neoliberal cost-sharing policies, and lingering institutional cultures perceived as alienating (Graham et al. 2019). This tension culminated dramatically in the 2015–2016 wave of protests under the banners of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. The former, which began at the University of Cape Town (UCT) with the demand to remove the Cecil John Rhodes statue, quickly broadened into critiques of colonial symbols, Eurocentric curricula, institutional racism, and the slow pace of transformation. #FeesMustFall extended these concerns nationally, focusing on tuition fees, financial exclusion, and the call for free, decolonised education. Edited volumes such as Susan Booysen's (2016) *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa* capture participant voices, timelines of events, and governance implications, while Saleem Badat's (2016) analyses situate the protests within longer histories of underfunding, rising enrolments, and unfulfilled post-apartheid promises.

Despite these advances, the literature critically assesses the movements' limitations and partial successes. Marxist-informed reflections, such as those by Ntombana et al. (2023), argue that while protests re-centred student agency and pressured policy shifts, they fell short of achieving fully free, decolonised education for all, or fundamental restructuring of higher education governance and funding. Persistent challenges include ongoing financial exclusions for the "missing middle," high dropout rates, graduate unemployment, infrastructure deficits, and uneven progress on epistemological decolonisation. Some accounts note instances of violence, campus closures that disrupted academic calendars, criminalisation of activists, and internal movement fractures around leadership and strategy (Greeff et al., 2021). Critics also point to the gap between protest energy and sustainable organisational structures, as well as the risk of clicktivism diluting deeper engagement.

Fallism Student Movements as a Struggle for Recognition in South African Higher Education

Although protests against fee increases had already emerged at several historically Black universities in 2012, the consolidation of these struggles into a national movement occurred in 2015 with the rise of the fallist movements. Two major strands of this movement—#RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall—became central to shaping its direction and visibility. During this period, fallism evolved into a powerful political formation characterised by demands for radical transformation and immediate institutional change (Baleni, 2025; Maylam, 2020). Fallism should be understood as a decolonial critique of institutional legitimacy rather than merely a wave of protests. It challenges both the material organisation of higher education and the symbolic hierarchies embedded within it. By linking demands for free education with calls for epistemic transformation, fallism expands the terrain of struggle from redistribution to recognition. #TVETMustRise extends this project by exposing how hierarchies also operate across institutional types with the PSET system.

The rapid expansion of these movements fundamentally reshaped the higher education landscape, immersing it in unprecedented levels of student activism and sustained demands for institutional justice. Students challenged not only the rising cost of education, but also the persistence of structural inequalities, colonial legacies, and exclusionary institutional cultures within universities. In doing so, fallism articulated a broader struggle that combined material demands for access with symbolic claims for recognition, dignity, and belonging. The strength and impact of the movement can be attributed, in part, to the solidarity forged among students across institutions and social identities. This collective mobilisation enabled the articulation of shared grievances and the pursuit of broader social justice goals, reinforcing the movement's capacity to challenge entrenched power structures (Gouws, 2024). Through this solidarity, fallism became more than a series of isolated protests; it emerged as a coordinated and sustained challenge to the inequalities embedded within South Africa's higher education system.

In 2015, a large statue of Cecil Rhodes, an imperial figure in South African history who openly advocated for White supremacy through violent colonialism, was prominently displayed on the campus of UCT. As apartheid policies of segregation ended and more Black and Coloured South Africans began to attend UCT, they increasingly became enraged at the ubiquitous symbolism of colonialism and the tangible ramifications in the forms of deculturalisation and high dropout rates. Early protests began in March of 2015 with small groups of students gathering around the statue, demanding its removal. Momentum for the protests against the institutional racism of UCT rose to a flurry of disruptive activity with the hashtag #RhodesMustFall emerging to organise online discourse (Garton, 2019). The then little known #RhodesMustFall activist Chumani Maxwele and a small group of students from UCT poured faeces at the statue of the arch imperialist and coloniser, Cecil John Rhodes, calling for transformation at UCT (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019).

Scholars situate the emergence of these movements within South Africa's rich history of student activism, linking them to earlier struggles such as the 1976 Soweto Uprising while highlighting post-1994 frustrations with persistent inequalities (Jansen, 2020; Mandyoli, 2024). Despite democratic

transition, many higher education institutions (HEIs)—particularly historically White institutions—retained Eurocentric curricula, demographic imbalances among faculty and leadership, colonial symbols, and financial barriers that disproportionately affected Black students. The #RhodesMustFall campaign began with the symbolic defacement of the Cecil John Rhodes statue at UCT, quickly evolving into wider calls for epistemic decolonisation. This momentum fed into #FeesMustFall, which protested fee increases and connected economic exclusion to deeper decolonial objectives (Naicker, 2026). The protests spread across numerous HEIs, including universities and some universities of technology, while forging alliances with workers.

A central thread in the literature is the movements' grounding in decolonial, Pan-African, Black Consciousness, and Black feminist thought. Activists drew inspiration from Frantz Fanon's ideas on psychic alienation and dehumanisation (Xaba, 2017), Steve Biko's Black Consciousness philosophy (Smith & Lester, 2022), and concepts such as epistemic disobedience (Kenyon & Madlingozi, 2022). Fallism has been described as a "Fanonian moment" characterised by disruption aimed at reclaiming agency against ongoing coloniality. Ahmed's (2026) emergent theory of fallism, for instance, emphasises how the movements used these frameworks to critique the dominance of Euro-American knowledge systems while centring Black pain and building theory from the praxis of protest itself. Intersectionality also features strongly, with analyses highlighting the significant roles of womxn and non-binary activists, and the movements' attention to overlapping oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Wang, 2025).

Theoretical Underpinnings: Recognition Theory

The study uses recognition theory as a theoretical framework. Recognition theory focuses on a particular form of political struggle, conflicts over social status, rights, and how individuals and groups are valued and treated by society and the state (O'Neill & Smith, 2012). Within this framework, social movements are understood as struggles for recognition that emerge from long-standing histories of marginalisation and misrecognition. These struggles do not arise spontaneously, but develop over time as groups experience persistent exclusion, disrespect, and devaluation within social, economic, and political institutions (Hobson, 2003). Recognition theory broadens the concept of justice beyond the distribution of material resources to include questions of dignity, respect, and social belonging (Schweiger, 2024). Justice, therefore, involves the acknowledgement of individuals and groups as equal members of society, whose identities, contributions, and rights are valued (Iser, 2013).

Recognition theory also distinguishes between material redistribution and symbolic recognition as two interconnected but analytical distinct dimensions of justice (Fraser, 2000). In the context of this study, redistribution refers to the equitable allocation of economic resources such as funding, allowances, and infrastructure, while recognition concerns the status, dignity, and social value accorded to individuals and groups within institutional and societal hierarchies. In the South African post-school context, TVET students experience injustice along axes. Materially, they face unequal National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) allowances, resource shortages, and weaker institutional investment. Symbolically, they are positioned as inferior to university students within public discourse, policy prioritisation, and labour market perceptions. The #TVETMustRise movement thus represents a dual struggle; it demands redistribution (fair funding, infrastructure, and support) while simultaneously contesting misrecognition (the perception of TVET as second-tier education). This analytical distinction allows for a more precise understanding of the movement, not merely as a claim of resources, but as a challenge to deeply embedded status hierarchies within the post-school education and training system.

This study conceptualises recognition, symbolic marginalisation, and fallism as analytical distinct but interconnected. Recognition operates as a normative framework concerned with justice as dignity and equal status. Symbolic marginalisation refers to the process through which such recognition is denied, particularly through discursive, institutional, and cultural hierarchies. Fallism, in turn, represents a form of political contestation that challenges both material inequalities and the symbolic structures

that sustain misrecognition. This distinction enables a more precise analysis of #TVETMustRise as not only a response to economic deprivation, but as a challenge to entrenched systems of value within the post-school education and training. Recognition, in this study, is understood as status equality within institutional and social hierarchies, rather than merely interpersonal respect. It involves being acknowledged as legitimate participants whose knowledge, identity, and educational pathway are valued on equal terms. Misrecognition, therefore, is not simply neglect, but a structural devaluation embedded in policy, discourse, and institutional practice.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design centred on narrative inquiry. It is positioned as an intrinsic case study bounded by the experiences of Teboho, a 36-year-old founder and former activist of #TVETMustRise, who typifies the struggles and experiences of TVET students during the #MustFall movements. The case is situated within South Africa's broader fallist landscape, examining how #TVETMustRise repositions TVET student voices in relation to university-dominated activism. The study is underpinned by the interpretive paradigm, which views knowledge as co-constructed through the participant's subjective meanings, lived experiences, and social context (Fischer, 2025). This approach is particularly suited to exploring phenomena shaped by power, identity, marginalisation, and resistance.

The choice of narrative inquiry is premised on several grounds. First, #TVETMustRise and other hashtag-based movements are deeply personal and affective struggles rooted in experiences of Black pain, epistemic exclusion, and misrecognition (Williams, 2009). Narrative methods are well-suited to capturing these affective and temporal dimensions, for instance, how past legacies, present realities, and future aspirations intersect in an individual's story. Second, focusing on a key activist's narrative allows for an in-depth, contextualised exploration that illuminates broader structural issues through personal testimony. This aligns with decolonial and Black Consciousness approaches that value lived experience and praxis as legitimate sources of knowledge (Boehmer et al., 2021). Third, given the relatively recent and still-evolving nature of #TVETMustRise, narrative inquiry offers flexibility to explore emergent themes without imposing rigid preconceived categories.

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was employed to select Teboho as the sole key informant. Criteria included his foundational role in #TVETMustRise, direct involvement as an activist during the #MustFall period, and his capacity to articulate the lived realities of TVET students. This sampling strategy prioritises depth and insider perspective over breadth, allowing rich illumination of under-represented TVET experiences within fallism scholarship. While a single-participant design limits triangulation across multiple voices, it enables intensive, contextualised exploration that aligns with the study's intrinsic and narrative focus (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Limitations regarding generalisability are acknowledged, with potential for future multi-voiced studies noted.

Data Collection

Narrative data were collected through in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interviews. Interviews adopted a conversational, life-history orientation to elicit personal stories of involvement, motivations, challenges, successes, and reflections on the movement's place within broader student activism. Sessions were conducted in a mutually convenient and private setting, face-to-face and virtual, and lasted 60 to 120 minutes each, and were audio-recorded with prior consent. Probing questions explored temporal dimensions, including past legacies, present realities, and future aspirations, as well as affective elements such as the emotional experiences of activism. Field notes captured contextual observations and non-verbal cues. Verbatim transcription followed each interview, with opportunities

for member-checking through participant review of transcripts or summaries to enhance accuracy and collaboration.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic narrative analysis. This involved restorying elements of Teboho's narrative while identifying emergent themes. Analysis proceeded inductively through familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Attention was paid to how demands for dignity, equality, and institutional inclusion are articulated, and how the activist positions #TVETMustRise within the fallism landscape. Thick descriptive quotes were used to preserve the participant's voice and ensure the analysis remains grounded in his testimony. NVivo software, supported systematic organisation of the data where appropriate.

Data Quality and Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research. Credibility was strengthened through member-checking, prolonged engagement during interviews, rich thick description, and peer debriefing. Transferability was supported by providing detailed contextualisation of the case, including the South African TVET and fallism landscape as well as relevant aspects of the participant's background, allowing readers to judge applicability to other settings. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through a comprehensive audit trail that documented all methodological decisions, reflexive journaling on the researcher's positionality, triangulation of data sources where possible, and transparent thematic processes. Reflexivity regarding the researcher's own relation to student movements or the education sector played a central role in mitigating potential bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of the Free State's General/Human Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Informed consent was secured in writing and reaffirmed verbally at the start of each session, with full details provided on the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary participation, right to withdraw, potential risks and benefits, and the use of audio recording. Given Teboho's public activist role, full anonymity is limited; this reality was discussed transparently with him. Pseudonyms were used for any particularly sensitive details where feasible, and all data were stored securely using encrypted, password-protected systems with strictly limited access, in full compliance with POPIA and other applicable data protection regulations. Potential emotional risks, such as distress from recounting activism experiences, were mitigated by offering breaks, support referrals, and the option to keep certain content off-record. Benefits of the study include amplifying marginalised TVET voices in academic discourse and contributing to scholarship on student mobilisation. Reciprocity was practised by sharing interview transcripts, summaries, and final findings with the participant, and by considering the production of accessible summaries for the broader #TVETMustRise movement.

Findings

#TVETMustRise Student Movement Emerged Within the Fallism Landscape

The findings revealed that like other student fallist movements, the #TVETMustRise movement started in 2015 and 2016, during the widely recognised university-based student movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. Teboho, who was one of the SRC members at a TVET College in Phuthaditjhaba, Free State Province, describes #TVETMustRise as a movement that emerged in response to systemic inequalities within South Africa's higher education sector, particularly affecting TVET college students:

> *We were just a group of friends . . . discussing why the TVET sector is treated like a high school. A group of us, mainly SRC members from colleges in Gauteng and the Free State, started*

> *discussing these issues around 2015. We were only four people initially, but we were united by the belief that TVET students were being treated unfairly. We formally began engaging in 2016, especially in Gauteng, where student activism was more active. We travelled between campuses to raise awareness. Key issues included: lack of textbooks even halfway through the academic year, insufficient materials for practical training, and general neglect of the TVET sector. The NSFAS allowance was not equal to what university students were receiving . . . the gap was too much. These challenges motivated us to form a movement to advocate for change*.

The #TVETMustRise student movement was driven by shared experiences of marginalisation, including delayed NSFAS allowances, inadequate learning resources, and poor infrastructure. These conditions created a collective consciousness among student leaders, motivating the formation of a unified advocacy platform. Within recognition theory, such experiences are not merely understood as issues of resource inequality, but as forms of disrespect that undermine individuals' sense of dignity and social worth. The unequal provision of NSFAS allowances, lack of textbooks, and insufficient training materials therefore signify both material deprivation (redistribution) and symbolic marginalisation (recognition) (Hobson, 2003). Thus, the findings position #TVETMustRise as a dual struggle for both redistribution and recognition. While addressing tangible inequalities within the TVET sector, the movement simultaneously challenges the deeper symbolic hierarchies that position TVET education as inferior. In doing so, it articulates a broader demand for dignity, visibility, and institutional legitimacy, central concerns within recognition theory (Iser, 2013).

#TVETMustRise Movement Influenced Higher Education Funding Policies

The findings indicated that like #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student movements were able to bring about solutions to the decolonisation of the curriculum and free education, the #TVETMustRise also brought some significant improvements. Through engagement with NSFAS and DHET, including meetings with the former Minister, Honourable Blade Nzimande, the movement influenced several changes:

> *Through engagements with NSFAS . . . we influenced funding policies for TVET students. Previously, students in the same areas as university students received less funding despite facing the same living costs. This began to change due to our advocacy. (Teboho)*

The #TVETMustRise student movement achieved several notable outcomes such as policy influence on NSFAS funding allocation, introduction of personal care allowances, improvements in student accommodation funding and increased infrastructure investment in TVET colleges. These changes demonstrate the effectiveness of collective student activism in shaping policy. The findings show that #TVETMustRise achieved tangible outcomes through engagement with NSFAS and DHET, including influencing funding policies and improving student support. As Teboho notes, unequal funding for TVET students began to change due to sustained advocacy.

From a recognition theory perspective, these inequalities initially reflected misrecognition (Iser, 2013), where TVET students were treated as less deserving than university students despite similar needs. The policy changes, such as improved funding, personal care allowances, and infrastructure investment, represent a form of institutional recognition, signalling acknowledgement of TVET students' legitimacy and value. However, while these gains address material inequalities, they also point to the ongoing struggle for full recognition because deeper perceptions of inferiority within the higher education system remain.

#TVETMustRise Revealed Deep Structural Inequality in Higher Education

The findings indicate that the #TVETMustRise revealed structural inequalities within higher education. #TVETMustRise activist, Teboho, mentioned that:

> *The movement revealed deep inequalities. TVET students were often overlooked compared to university students. For example: incidents affecting university students received media attention, while similar issues in TVET colleges were ignored, TVET students were treated as less important within the system, we often felt like "stepchildren" of the Department of Higher Education. While we achieved some progress, the sector is still not taken as seriously as it should be.*

The findings reveal a persistent hierarchy between university and TVET students. TVET students received lower financial support despite similar living conditions, institutional and public recognition favoured universities, and media coverage disproportionately highlighted university student issues. This inequality contributed to the perception that TVET students were "less important" within the higher education system. The description of TVET students as "stepchildren" of the system reflects a lived experience of marginalisation and exclusion.

From a recognition theory perspective, these conditions represent systemic misrecognition. TVET students were not only materially disadvantaged, through lower financial support despite similar living conditions, but also symbolically devalued because their experiences were ignored in public and institutional discourse. The unequal media coverage and prioritisation of university issues further reinforced this hierarchy of status and worth. These findings highlight how the #TVETMustRise movement emerged as a response to both material inequality and symbolic exclusion, challenging the perception of TVET students as inferior, and asserting their right to equal recognition, dignity, and visibility within the higher education system.

#TVETMustRise Revealed the Continuing Marginalisation of TVET Students

Despite the gains indicated above, the findings indicate that the marginalisation still persists.

> *We feel like we are the stepchildren of the Department of Higher Education. When something happens at universities, it is everywhere . . . but TVET stories are not told. Why not prefer the TVET student with practical skills instead of theory? (Teboho)*

TVET students remain underrepresented in media narratives, policy prioritisation, labour market opportunities. This suggests that structural inequalities are deeply embedded and require ongoing intervention. From a recognition theory perspective, this reflects the persistence of structural misrecognition. TVET students remain underrepresented in media narratives, policy prioritisation, and labour market opportunities, indicating that they are not fully acknowledged as equal and valuable participants in higher education. Their limited visibility reinforces symbolic devaluation, where their skills, contributions, and identities are not afforded the same respect as those of university students. These findings suggest that although some material improvements have been achieved, deeper patterns of misrecognition remain embedded within the system. Consequently, #TVETMustRise continues to represent an ongoing struggle for full recognition—one that seeks to transform both institutional practices and societal perceptions to ensure dignity, equality, and meaningful inclusion for TVET students.

#TVETMustRise Showed the Decline of Student Activism and the Need of Independent Mobilisation

The findings reveal a key concern, which is the decline in student activism among the younger generation and the manner in which the #TVETMustRise student movement's success was partly due to its independence from formal political structures.

> *Students today are comfortable . . . they do not question anything. . . . We created our own platforms . . . not relying on institutions to control what we say. (Teboho)*

These finds show that some of the key factors that are a threat to the reform within the sector are the increased complacency, lack of political consciousness, and the reduced willingness to challenge authority. As a result, for #TVETMustRise to continue, the activists created their own platforms, allowing for unrestricted discussions, broader inclusivity and grassroots mobilisation of students.

#TVETMustRise Amplified the Importance of Student Activism for Social Change

The findings reinforce the critical role of student activism in promoting accountability within institutions, developing civic engagement, driving social and policy change, as Teboho lamented:

> *If students are not active in institutions, they won't be active in society*.
>
> *A lack of activism may lead to broader societal disengagement beyond educational spaces*.

The #TVETMustrise movement extends student activism beyond universities into the TVET sector, bringing marginalised TVET students into national debates on education and economic justice. By highlighting issues of funding, infrastructure, and work-integrated learning, it links educational access directly to youth employment and labour market participation. Like #FeesMustFall, it uses protest and digital platforms to hold institutions accountable when formal channels fail, showing that student movements are a structural feature of South Africa's higher education landscape. In foregrounding class and access alongside earlier concerns of race and decolonisation, #TVETMustrise amplifies the role of activism by positioning students as active agents reshaping both institutional practices and public perceptions of TVET.

Discussion

The findings illustrate how #TVETMustRise developed within the #MustFall landscape, influenced higher education funding policies, exposed deep structural inequalities, revealed the ongoing marginalisation of TVET students, underscored the decline of unified student activism, and ultimately reaffirmed the vital role of grassroots mobilisation in pursuing social change. These insights contribute to scholarly debates on student movements by foregrounding sector-specific dynamics that have often been overshadowed by university-centric narratives. They resonate strongly with Axel Honneth's theory of recognition (Schweiger, 2024), which frames collective action as a response to misrecognition, disrespect, and the denial of dignity, as well as with social movement theory's emphasis on political opportunity structures, framing processes, and resource mobilisation.

As the findings indicate, #TVETMustRise emerged as a parallel and complementary movement within the intense #FeesMustFall and #MustFall protests of 2015–2016, which primarily centred university students' demands for fee-free, decolonised, and transformed higher education (Mzileni, 2020). While university campuses captured most national and international attention, TVET colleges, serving a large proportion of working-class, Black, and historically disadvantaged students, faced similar crises of funding, infrastructure deficits, and institutional neglect (Majola et al., 2024).

This emergence builds upon South Africa's deep tradition of student resistance, from the 1976 Soweto Uprising and Black Consciousness-inspired formations like SASO and SASM to post-apartheid service delivery and education protests (Omodan, 2023). Fallism contested not only immediate material barriers but also the slow pace of post-1994 transformation and the persistence of coloniality in knowledge production and institutional cultures (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019). In the international context, comparable patterns are evident in Chile's 2011 student movement, which challenged neoliberal privatisation across both universities and technical institutes, and in various Global South youth mobilisations that extend broader justice struggles into educational spaces (Bellei et al., 2014). These movements function as subaltern extensions of citizenship claims, reframing education as a fundamental right rather than a commodified pathway to employability (Daniel & Miller, 2025).

One of the movement's notable contributions was its role in amplifying pressure that helped shape policy developments in post-school education funding. Aligning with #FeesMustFall outcomes such as

the 2016 zero-percent fee increase, significant expansion of the NSFAS, and progressive commitments toward fee-free education for poor and working-class students, #TVETMustRise extended these gains into the TVET sector through increased subsidies, bursary coverage, and greater policy visibility for vocational institutions (Booysen, 2016; Chikane, 2026; Daniel & Miller, 2025). From a social movement perspective, this exemplifies how disruptive protest creates political opportunities that compel incremental state concessions. However, persistent implementation gaps, including delayed disbursements and insufficient coverage, highlight the limits of such victories. Internationally, Bellei et al. (2014) argue that Chile's student protests similarly secured expansions of free education (*gratuidad*) that eventually encompassed technical institutes, illustrating both the power and the fragility of protest-driven reform amid fiscal and political constraints.

The movement starkly revealed the deep structural inequalities that continue to characterise South Africa's post-school education system. Apartheid's racial and class legacies endure through unequal resource allocation, with well-resourced historically White universities contrasting sharply with underfunded TVET colleges and historically Black institutions. TVET students frequently encounter overcrowded facilities, outdated equipment, weak articulation pathways to higher qualifications, and poor labour market outcomes. These conditions perpetuate cycles of disadvantage in one of the world's most unequal societies. Honneth's framework of recognition is particularly illuminating here because TVET pathways are often afforded lower social esteem, resulting in experiences of misrecognition that deny students full dignity and parity of participation.

The findings also illuminate the post-fallism decline of unified student activism and the consequent need for independent, sector-specific mobilisation. While #FeesMustFall achieved unprecedented visibility, sustained momentum later fragmented due to state repression, internal divisions, leadership burnout, co-optation, and shifting political contexts. In this vacuum, autonomous movements like #TVETMustRise became necessary to address TVET-specific concerns without subordination to university-centric agendas. Social movement theory explains these patterns through concepts of protest waves and abeyance, where periods of intense activity give way to quieter organisational rebuilding. Internationally, student movements frequently follow similar cycles of surge and retreat, requiring continual grassroots innovation to maintain relevance. Ultimately, #TVETMustRise amplified the enduring importance of student activism as a driver of social change. By centring personal and collective narratives of pain, resilience, hope, and aspiration, the movement validated affective dimensions as powerful motivators for action and validated lived experience as a foundation for decolonial praxis. It achieved greater visibility for TVET issues, contributed to incremental policy reforms, and enriched national conversations on inclusive education.

Nevertheless, the findings temper optimism by underscoring that while activism can extract concessions and shift discourses, deeper structural transformation demands sustained state commitment, cross-sector solidarity, and fundamental societal shifts to address root inequalities. In synthesis, Teboho's narrative portrays #TVETMustRise as both a product and a constructive critique of the fallism era. The movement succeeded in carving out space for TVET voices, influencing policy, and exposing systemic failures, yet it also revealed the persistent challenges of overcoming entrenched educational hierarchies. By centring an under-documented sector and an often-overlooked activist perspective, this study enriches South African higher education scholarship and contributes to global debates on youth agency, recognition struggles, and education justice. Future research could usefully undertake comparative analyses with vocational student movements in other contexts and longitudinal examinations of long-term policy and societal impacts. Through such movements, students continue to assert their role as vital agents in the pursuit of more equitable and socially just educational futures in South Africa and beyond.

Evidence from policy developments supports the claim that student activism. Including pressures from fallism-era mobilisations, contributed to shifts in higher education funding. Following the 2015–2016 protests, the South African government announced a 0% fee increase in 2016 and subsequently expanded NSFAS into a comprehensive bursary scheme for students from poor and working-class

households in 2018. Official DHET statements and NSFAS policies further reflect the extension of funding support to TVET students, including allowances for accommodation, learning materials, and personal care. These developments are widely reported in national media and policy documents as direct responses to sustained student protests and engagements. Withing this broader policy shift, #TVETMustRise can be situated as part of the pressure that extended funding equity debates beyond universities to include TVET colleges. Also, Teboho's account of engagement with NSFAS aligns with these documented policy changes, suggesting that TVET student activism contributed to extending redistribution frameworks into TVET sector.

Conclusions

Within the framework of recognition theory, the student movements, including #TVETMustRise can be understood as struggles not only for redistribution, but also for dignity, belonging, and social change. Broader fallist student movements articulated a broader demand for recognition, challenging both material inequalities and the symbolic forms of misrecognition that structure student experiences. However, while the university-based student movements, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall gained significant scholarly and public attention, there has been a relative invisibility of student struggles within other parts of the post-school education system, particularly within TVET colleges. Yet, TVET students have long experienced their own forms of exclusion—characterised by limited resources, inferior institutional status, and societal perceptions that position their institutions as secondary to universities.

A unified higher education justice front, as proposed in this article, would require more than symbolic solidarity between university and TVET students. In practical terms, it would involve: coordinated cross-sector student formations that include student representative councils from universities and TVET colleges acting collectively rather than in parallel; policy advocacy coalitions engaging DHET and NSFAS on equitable funding models across the entire PSET system; integrated models across the entire PSET system; integrated protest and mobilisation strategies that foreground both university and TVET concerns within a single framework; shared inclusive platforms, including media and digital activism, that challenge the symbolic hierarchies privileging universities; and institutional reforms, such as improved articulation pathways, equal student support frameworks, and recognition of vocational education as an equal pillar within PSET. Such a front would transform fragmented struggles into a coherent movement capable of addressing both redistribution and recognition simultaneously. Ultimately, achieving justice in South Africa's post-school sector requires not only expanding access, but restructuring the hierarchies that continue to define whose education—and whose futures—are valued.

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