The state of quality of teaching and learning in higher education: Thirty years into democracy

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ABSTRACT

This article evaluates the state of quality in teaching and learning in the South African higher education system since the advent of democracy 30 years ago. A comprehensive qualitative summary of the legislative framework that informed the transformation of higher education, including quality assurance practices of the activities related to teaching and learning, and pedagogical developments, was analysed using a narrative review.

The analysis revealed challenges brought about by the transformation agenda, which led to flooding of institutions of higher learning, resulting in massification. Whilst access was provided, a new range of related issues arose, especially the question of the quality of teaching and learning. South Africa established regulatory frameworks that made higher education a right rather than a privilege. However, the challenge of resource distribution inequalities persists, especially in rural areas and historically disadvantaged institutions.

Keywords: democracy, higher education, teaching, learning, quality, transformation.

INTRODUCTION

University education was meant for the elites during the apartheid era, but with the advent of democracy and transformation led to significant changes that made education a right rather than a privilege. Radical changes resulting from democracy led to massification and opened the floodgates, allowing all to gain access to the university.

According to the CHE (2004), changes led to the South African higher education system, which was fragmented and racially stratified, transforming it, advancing equity, and fostering development. The past three decades have seen universities expand access, diversify student demographics, and introduce several quality assurance mechanisms (CHE 2017). These changes contributed to improved access to higher education and, as a result, led to massification (Mlambo et al, 2024).

With all these changes, a critical question remains unanswered: What is the quality of teaching and learning in South Africa 30 years after the advent of democracy? It is important to respond to this question, as this creates an opportunity for reflection. This will assist in

assessing whether the quality of teaching and learning also changed when the vision of a democratic, inclusive, and globally competitive higher education system was developed. If indeed changes have taken place, what is the nature of this change? Is it consistent with the legal framework that led to this change and with students' expectations? If not, what can be done to improve? This article examines questions about the quality of teaching and learning 30 years after the establishment of democracy.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

A qualitative approach was used to identify trends, gaps, and emerging themes in response to the question, "What is the quality of teaching and learning in South Africa 30 years after democracy?" A narrative literature review (Zarei 2025; Paré and Kitsiou 2017) and a policy analysis approach were used. Data were collected through a systematic, comprehensive review (Ahmad 2025) of all uploaded documents, including policy documents, national reviews, scholarly articles, quality assurance manuals, institutional reports, and international frameworks for teaching and learning. Each document was read, and all tables and relevant figures were analysed to capture both arguments and assumptions relevant to the quality and transformation of higher education.

A thematic approach (Naeem, Ozuem, and Ranfagni,2023) was used to analyse key information, including author perspectives, policy directives, conceptual insights, evidence of progress, challenges, and recommendations, which were manually coded and recorded. Data extracted were entered into structured synthesis tables that included fields for author, year, document type, focus, key findings, challenges, and recommendations. This ensured that each document was identified to align the findings' contribution and that the subsequent analysis was firmly grounded in the full data's textual and visual evidence. The inclusion criteria were studies that reviewed teaching quality, curriculum reform, transformation of higher education, and institutional development. The synthesis is interpretive and thematic, highlighting recurrent patterns, achievements, and persisting challenges.

Findings revealed that 30 years of democracy led to substantial structural transformation and expanded access; however, persistent gaps in the substantive quality of teaching and learning still persist. Despite maturity in policy frameworks and quality assurance systems, curriculum transformation, pedagogical innovation, equitable student success, and distribution of resources remain uneven, highlighting a continuing misalignment between democratic aspirations and lived academic realities.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS: THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

The findings from the narrative review integrated data from policy documents, national reviews, scholarly articles, quality assurance manuals, institutional reports, and international frameworks for teaching and learning to identify developments, achievements, and persistent challenges that influence the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Through thematic analysis, six overarching themes emerged that collectively describe the trajectory of higher education transformation over the past three decades as follows:

- Transformation of higher education: Deep but uneven

This examined the milestones achieved and the extent to which structural and systemic reforms have contributed to transforming the higher education landscape, whilst describing the persistent implementation challenges that negatively impacted the quality of teaching and learning.

- Legislative and policy frameworks shaping quality

This explored the impact of post-1994 legislation, national policies, and quality assurance mechanisms on institutional transformation and the promotion of quality teaching and learning.

- Quality teaching and learning in the post-1994 system

This reviewed how teaching and learning practices, curriculum transformation, student-centered pedagogies, academic development, and institutional initiatives evolved to improve educational quality.

- Funding and its impact on quality

An analysis of the funding relationship between higher education, institutional capacity, infrastructure, staffing, student support, and the quality of teaching and learning.

- Persistent challenges in achieving quality in teaching and learning

This involved challenges such as resource constraints, unequal institutional capacity, curriculum transformation, student preparedness, digital inequalities, and staff workload, all of which continue to compromise the quality of teaching and learning.

- The effect of educational reforms on the quality of teaching and learning

This provided information related to the impact of the legislative framework, policies, and institutional reforms on teaching and learning outcomes, while identifying areas where transformation remains incomplete.

All these themes provide a systematic, comprehensive analysis of the progress made in transforming the quality of teaching and learning in the South African higher education system. Findings from this analysis highlight ongoing challenges in the equitable distribution of resources across higher education institutions, showing that the road is not easy despite all efforts. A discussion is provided that indicates how each theme impacted higher education reform.

Transformation of higher education: Deep but uneven

The first theme describing the transformation of higher education summarises how the democratic era brought about comprehensive structural changes to undo apartheid's racially segregated higher education system. The Council on Higher Education's (CHE 2004) first-decade review found that the post-1994 reforms created a single, coordinated higher education system grounded in equity, redress, development, and democratic governance. The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, as amended, the White Paper for Post-school Education and Training (2013), and the Department of Education. (2001b). articulates an ambitious agenda to democratise access, reshaping admissions, governance, and accountability structures (Department of Education, 2001b). The following areas identified during a narrative literature review will be discussed in detail:

From apartheid fragmentation to a single coordinated higher education system

The transition from apartheid to democracy led to several restructuring efforts that brought previously fragmented components into a unified framework. Key reforms included system restructuring and mergers that consolidated institutions and removed apartheid-era fragmentation (CHE 2004; SAQA 2004; Symes 2006). Central to these restructurings were the establishment of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) to facilitate articulation, develop a standardised qualifications system, and align education with the labour market (Lange 2017; Robinson, 2003; SAQA 2004).

The democratic era established a comprehensive quality assurance framework across institutions of higher learning, under the oversight of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). This included programme accreditation, institutional audits, and quality enhancement, which improved teaching and learning. More initiatives, such as the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP), focused more on professional development of academics, holistic students' support, whilst creating a conducive learning environment through infrastructure

development, such as ICT infrastructure and technology for teaching and learning, as well as themed reviews such as the Modes of Provision review (CHE 2017, CHE 2025).

Another important milestone was the establishment of teaching and learning centres, across higher education institutions. These centres played a major role in academic staff development programmes, supporting evidence-based teaching practices and innovation, with special emphasis on undergraduate teaching quality (CHE 2013; CHE 2017; Hénard and Roseveare, 2012).

Although all these legislative and structural reforms brought about major changes in higher education, several authors argue that they did not translate into transformation in teaching and learning and in institutional culture. Lange (2017), Le Grange (2009), and Waghid (2003) acknowledge that the creation of a single national higher education system, institutional mergers, a revised funding framework, the establishment of the HEQC/QA system, NQF, and SAQA, and expanded participation represent significant achievements in the transformation agenda. Consequently, while South Africa has made substantial progress in establishing an equitable and coordinated higher education system, important challenges remain in achieving meaningful transformation within the classroom and the broader student learning experience, especially in rural areas.

Massification and access

A key achievement reflected across sources is the massification and diversification of access to resources. Headcount enrolments in public higher education institutions increased substantially, reaching 1,071,715 in 2023 (Luescher et al 2023). Public higher education institutions with Black African students have become the majority in most institutions (CHE 2023; Luescher et al 2023). This indicates a shift from previous racial exclusion to alignment with the constitutional mandate that education is a right, not a privilege.

Despite these growing numbers, several authors (Mlambo et al 2024; CHE 2023; Luescher et al 2023; Spaull 2013; CHE 2004) argue that the pipeline does not indicate the true picture because it is distorted, as only 12 of 100 Grade 1 learners reach university entrance. Massification is therefore a socially selective process and often results in under-prepared students, implying that quality is also compromised.

Democratisation, citizenship, public good

Scholars such as Le Grange (2009), Symes (2006), Waghid (2003), and Kahn and Reddy (2001) emphasise that transformation should not be limited to increasing student numbers. There is more to transformation; there is a need to promote democratic citizenship, critical thinking, and

the public good (Le Grange,2009; Symes 2006; Waghid 2003; Kahn and Reddy 2001). Too much focus on market-driven approaches, such as competition and performance targets, can reduce transformation to a process of improving efficiency rather than achieving meaningful social change. Waghid (2003) further argues that transformation should not only involve changes to institutional structures and policies but should also foster a culture of active citizenship, democratic participation, and social responsibility among students and staff.

Epistemic and curriculum transformation

The question that always arises is whether the transformation of higher education has created an inclusive, relevant, and socially just curriculum that develops students to become critical thinkers whilst preparing them to address local and global challenges. Student movements, namely #feesmustfall, exposed the lack of decolonisation and Africanisation of curricula. This analysis reveals that transformation has been unequally distributed, particularly in relation to academic structures and knowledge systems. Lange (2017) suggests that curriculum policy reform has focused more on structural elements, such as credits, levels, and qualification frameworks, meaning it has addressed more of the exoskeleton of curriculum; unfortunately, it has not centrally addressed questions of epistemology, identity, or knowledge hierarchies. Le Grange (2009) argues that transformation has brought about competing demands, including democracy building and neoliberal globalisation, and creating a balance between these demands is a challenge that universities must still respond to.

In summary, the systems have been transformed. One can argue that structural transformation has occurred, but epistemic and pedagogical transformation still require attention, as a gap persists between democracy and the lived experience in teaching and learning practices. However, the data reveal that progress tends to be stronger in structural and procedural areas than in educational outcomes. According to the CHE (2023), while access has expanded dramatically, success and throughput rates remain uneven across racial groups, institution types, and socioeconomic statuses.

Although there are substantial achievements, they have not been fully translated into equitable quality or consistent pedagogical transformation.

Legislative and policy frameworks shaping quality

South Africa’s legislative and policy framework was identified as comprehensive, coherent, and supportive of democratic transformation, creating a foundation on which transformation could flourish. The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, as amended, White Paper 3 of 1997, and successive national strategies established the transformation agenda for higher education

that included structure, governance, access, funding, quality, equity, redress, and development as core system imperatives (DoE 2001a). The CHE is mandated to advise the Minister of Higher Education and Training on higher education matters, ensure external quality assurance, accredit programmes, and conduct institutional audits (Higher Education Act 101 of 1997). Meanwhile, SAQA coordinates the NQF and oversees qualification standards (SAQA 2004). Although the national direction and coherence for quality assurance of teaching and learning in higher education are in place through the legislative framework, implementation has often been difficult. SAQA's (2004) meta-evaluations identified bureaucratic complexities, including confusion around roles, competence-based design, and articulation pathways. Robinson (2003) demonstrated how teacher educators experienced tensions between policy expectations and the limited material and institutional support available to them. Symes (2006) argues that quality assurance has become a top-down, compliance-driven approach, thereby affecting academic autonomy.

The strong South African legislative framework provides a foundation for transformation; however, its impact is undermined by uneven implementation, institutional variation, and systemic inequalities that shape how quality is endorsed at the implementation level.

Quality teaching and learning in the post-1994 system

Teaching and learning have become an increasingly national priority, with a growing emphasis on enhancing undergraduate success and pedagogical quality. The QEP (CHE 2013), the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP), and institutional teaching centres demonstrate a commitment to supporting academics and enhancing learning experiences.

Internationally, the OECD's quality teaching reviews indicate the need to introduce new teaching methods, provide better institutional support, and professionalise academic development for higher education institutions to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in response to massification and diversification (Hénard 2010; Hénard and Roseveare 2012). However, academics interpret "quality" inconsistently, and it is therefore implemented inconsistently. According to HELTASA (2013), there is no common understanding of what quality teaching means, and that quality is influenced by external compliance pressures rather than pedagogical intention. According to Symes (2006), quality assurance tends to produce ritualised compliance rather than meaningful pedagogical innovation.

The implementation of quality teaching is further exacerbated by institutional challenges, such as academics often improvising quality teaching in overcrowded lecture halls, with unsustainable lecturer-to-student ratios, underprepared students, and limited support

(HELTASA 2013; Scott 2013; OECD 2010; Robinson 2003; Mlambo et al 2024). The authors acknowledge that there is growing awareness of active learning, formative assessment, and student support; however, many practices still perpetuate traditional teaching and assume ideal students.

Research has shown a strong relationship between student success and curriculum design. Scott (2013) shows that degree structures assume an academically privileged student population, resulting in structurally predictable attrition for under-prepared cohorts. Spaull (2013) highlights severe foundational deficits in basic education, leading to uneven readiness for higher education and placing significant demands on university teaching. There is strong evidence that the standard 3-year degree structure is misaligned with the majority of students' preparation, resulting in systematic failure and drop-out. Extended programmes help, but are marginalised and sometimes stigmatising to students. Funding for extended programmes is lower than for mainstream programmes (CHE 2013; CHE 2023; Lange 2017).

Furthermore, students expect affordable, relevant, and decolonised education; they contest curricula, language practices, and institutional cultures that remain Eurocentric and exclusionary. Quality, from their viewpoint, includes belonging, support, and relevance, not just formal standards (Lange 2017; Luescher et al 2023).

Funding and its impact on quality

Funding will always be a critical determinant of the quality and sustainability of higher education. Whilst the transformation of higher education seems to have succeeded through improved access, the CHE (2023) argues that government funding did not keep pace with enrolment growth, creating resource constraints that affect class sizes, staffing, infrastructure, and support systems. The hardest hit by this are historically disadvantaged institutions, as they were already under-resourced.

The massification of higher education further exacerbated funding challenges. Student enrolments have grown faster than public funding, leading to resource strain (large classes, infrastructure deficits), student protests over fees, and heavy dependence on private income and student contributions, all of which can undermine quality (CHE 2023; Mlambo, Saul, & Buys, 2024; Motala, Sayed, and Maggot 2023).

Kohler (2025), whilst acknowledging high private and social returns, emphasises the importance of sustained funding for the financial sustainability of institutions and equity. Spaull (2013) also demonstrated that unequal schooling outcomes necessitate that universities invest heavily in academic support, literacy development, and bridging, further straining limited resources that would otherwise improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Funding reforms for students through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) have improved access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. All these were meant to ensure a just and equitable higher education experience and outcomes for all students; unfortunately, these investments did not account for infrastructure for teaching and learning or other relevant resources to enhance quality.

Funding formulas and earmarked grants, including the Teaching Development Grant, Foundation Grant, and now University Capacity Development Grants and Sibusiso Bhengu Grant, are used to steer institutions towards national goals to ensure more graduate output, strengthen teaching capacity, and enhance transformation and equity (CHE 2004; Lange, 2017; Mlambo et al, 2024).

There is a perceived imbalance between funding for research and teaching and learning. There is a perception that government funding prioritises research as dedicated funding and its incentives are provided, whilst teaching and learning are not considered (Kohler,2025; Spaull 2013). This imbalance discourages many senior academics from engaging in teaching and learning activities, thereby negatively affecting the quality of teaching and learning.

Thus, funding plays a major role in determining equity and quality, and, unfortunately, current funding patterns are dwindling and remain insufficient to fully realise the democratic vision.

Persistent challenges in achieving quality in teaching and learning

Findings show that several systemic and interrelated challenges emerge:

Access-success inequality

Massification broadened entry, but completion and success remain deeply stratified by race and socioeconomic status (CHE 2023; Spaull, 2013). Many students enter the higher education sector underprepared due to inequalities in the schooling system.

Slow epistemic and curriculum transformation

Curricula often remain Eurocentric and insufficiently responsive to the contexts of the African and global South (Lange 2017; Le Grange, 2009). These gaps were highlighted by student movements, which demanded the decolonisation of the curriculum during the #FeesMustFall protests.

Compliance culture in quality assurance

The culture of compliance was emphasised instead of encouraging innovative practices; as a result, QA became bureaucratic, and the document completion process (HELTASA 2013; Symes,2006). This affected its implementation in the teaching and learning environment.

Lack of funding and resource constraints

Reduced subsidy and all forms of funding in higher education, coupled with massification and resource strain, both human and material, negatively affect the quality of teaching and learning, especially in historically disadvantaged universities (CHE 2023; Kohler 2025; Mlambo et al 2024).

Effect of educational reforms on the quality of teaching and learning

The evidence revealed both positive and negative results. Higher education has made a significant impact on ensuring that quality keeps pace with transformation in the following areas:

According to the CHE (2004), structural transformation was achieved especially in governance, policy development, and system integration. The establishment of teaching and learning centres in different institutions to provide support to academics, pedagogy-aligned programmes for academics were enhanced (CHE 2013; Hénard and Roseveare, 2012). At the national level, comprehensive quality assurance systems were established (CHE 2025).

However, there are areas where quality teaching and learning have not kept pace, as follows:

- Access to higher education, which was regarded as a success, led to a systemic challenge known as massification (Mlambo et al 2024). Although increased access is a positive outcome, insufficient resources unfortunately harm the quality of teaching and learning.
- Student success outcomes remain unequal and often low, undermining the democratic vision (CHE 2023; Spaull, 2013). Curricula and pedagogies remain insufficiently transformed, retaining Eurocentric orientations (Lange, 2017; Le Grange 2009).
- Lack of resources, both financial and human, compromises quality improvements in teaching and learning (Kohler, 2025; CHE 2023).

In summary, this analysis finds that the transformation of higher education has significantly improved the accessibility of education for previously disadvantaged communities. Although this change has increased access, attention cannot be limited to numbers alone; it must also

address the significant impact of the country's economic development on social justice, equity, and the inclusion of historically disadvantaged communities. Despite these changes, many students still struggle due to a lack of support in their learning environment, where institutional cultures, curricula, and pedagogies are misaligned with their needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Paradigm shift

To enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, there needs to be a paradigm shift from a compliance-based mindset focused on completing numerous documents to a holistic, comprehensive approach that emphasises student development and support programmes that focus on developing graduate attributes.

Curriculum review and transformation

Review of the curriculum for its relevance to global needs, aiming to enhance Africanisation versus the Eurocentric approach. This should include integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) with disciplinary knowledge and African scholarship.

Inclusion of entrepreneurship in the curriculum will empower students not only to seek employment upon completion of their programmes but also to create employment where possible.

Professionalisation of higher education and mentorship programmes

The study identified a disconnect between the structural reforms introduced by higher education transformation and the pedagogical and epistemic levels. Academics often face challenges when they are suddenly required to teach large numbers of students, particularly if they are not adequately prepared for this task. They also face competing responsibilities, as they are expected to balance their teaching with their studies, either to complete their postgraduate studies or to publish their research. The strong emphasis in academia is that "if you don't publish, you perish" (Sinclair 2021). In many instances, the less experienced lecturers are assigned lower-level classes; these are mostly overcrowded, which results in a high student-to-lecturer ratio, hampering individualised teaching and increasing failure and drop-out rates.

The importance of shifting the focus from structural transformations whilst entering the new decade of higher education to emphasise more on the professionalisation of higher education. Academic training must be made mandatory to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This includes pedagogy, which encompasses the theory and practice of teaching and learning, curriculum development, assessment, and the use of various technologies to enhance learning,

particularly in the era of digital transformation. The need to develop holistic quality enhancement strategies that are developmental for both academics and students, guided by the institution's philosophy of teaching and learning.

Staff development programmes within the teaching and learning environment should focus on developing academics who are subject experts into competent, adaptable, and effective lecturers. Higher education institutions need to transform their institutional cultures and review staffing policies to enhance diversity and foster a sense of belonging.

Workload models need review, and student-staff ratios need review to ensure workload balance. Programmes should incorporate digital and pedagogical innovations to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

Mentorship programmes for upcoming academics should be encouraged, making this a requirement for the promotion of senior academics. Platforms should be created to facilitate discussions on teaching and learning issues through the Community of Practice and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, enabling reflective and reflexive practice.

Improvement in infrastructure development

Infrastructure development is important to accommodate larger classes with technology that supports their teaching, including blended learning models. The use of technology in the era of massification is critical. This will accommodate more students accustomed to studying online.

Improve funding to support teaching and learning

Funding models must strike a balance in addressing the needs arising from the massification of higher education, aiming to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Dedicated funding should be made available to ensure equitable resource distribution across institutions of higher learning. A review of the current funding model is necessary to support equity and quality while targeting historically disadvantaged institutions.

Dedicated funding to improve teaching and learning

For Curriculum transformation to be effective, dedicated funding should be provided to support academics in pursuing qualifications in teaching and learning. Funding should create opportunities for academics to collaborate with other institutions through exchange programmes.

CONCLUSION

Thirty years into democracy, the South African's higher education system has made great progress in transforming the fragmented apartheid system. Drawing on data from policy reviews and scholarly literature, the discussion highlights achievements such as massification, improved participation rates, and the development of quality assurance frameworks, while also exposing persistent inequalities, capacity gaps, and epistemic injustices. This confirms that the transformation of higher education is an incomplete journey. The focus should now be on transforming the curriculum and pedagogies to make them relevant, inclusive, and contextual. The focus must be on creating a curriculum that will accommodate entrepreneurial skills through innovation. A balance between preparing students for the world of work and that of job creation must be established. There is a need to strike a balance between massification and resource allocation to ensure quality teaching and learning.

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