Higher Education (HE) transformation gains and losses 30 years into democracy: The unfulfilled quality promise(s)

M. Monnapula-Mapesela
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic and Student Affairs)
Rhodes University
Makhanda (Grahamstown), South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5342-2800

ABSTRACT

This article analyses transformation progress and trends in HE in South Africa (SA) over 30 years of democracy, highlighting key milestones, enablers, constraints, unfulfilled promises, and unresolved inequities in access and success for previously disadvantaged students and staff. A descriptive, evaluative research methodology, informed by Margaret Archer's social realist theory and stratified constructs of structure, culture and agency, is adopted to analyse literature sources, various discourses and agents. Key questions include whether the SA government achieved a coherent, well-coordinated system that is planned, governed, and funded at the national level. Has it overcome fragmentation, inequality, and inefficiencies, and met the goals of reconstruction, development, and transformation? While progress is evident in many areas, a fair and equitable system remains unfulfilled. Structural and cultural changes should be accompanied by an enabling environment, collaboration, and agency from all stakeholders, including government, university leaders, staff, and students; otherwise, transformation becomes a symbolic effort.

Keywords: South African Higher Education, policy and transformation, failed quality promise, slow transformation, access with success, persistent inequality

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Thirty years into democracy, many SA Universities struggle to change traditions and cultures that hinder the pace and quality of transformation and social justice agendas. While I acknowledge the significant milestones that have been achieved to this end in many areas regarding change and transformation, the pace of transformation in SA has been disappointingly slow (Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo 2023; Monnapula-Mapesela 2017) and is still far from fulfilling the promises, expectations, and targets made after 1994 for a better SA. This article analyses progress and trends in HE transformation in SA over 30 years of democracy, focusing on unresolved inequities in access and success, especially for previously disadvantaged students and staff, for whom justice remains elusive and unfulfilled.

A descriptive, evaluative research methodology is used to analyse data from relevant scholarly literature and from some official annual reports of universities and accredited legislative organisations responsible for the quality and transformation of HE in SA. This is

informed by Margaret Archer's social realist theory and theoretical framework of structure, culture, and agency (1995, 1996). According to Archer (1996), these stratified constructs exist in any social milieu and constantly interact to produce powers that enable or constrain. The theoretical framework permits exploration of causal links between the different strata of the social world (Archer 1996) or system. In this article, the framework is adopted to understand discourses that exert enabling and constraining effects on HE transformation and quality assurance. The approach involves analyses of supportive transformation structures (government and institutional), culture(s), and the agency of those entrusted with implementing the transformation agenda. The interplay between some, not all structures (policies, funding, frameworks, systems, programmes, positions), cultural (tradition(s), values, beliefs, ideologies, attitudes, behavious, etc.) and agential groupings/setups of key agents (policy-makers, university leaders, academics and students), is analysed to better understand how these enable or constrain quality and transformation efforts by government and institutions (Monnapula-Mapesela 2024, 218). The promise of the democratic government post–1994, in White Paper 3: A Programme for the Higher Education Transformation (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1997), was to achieve a seamless, well–coordinated system; to widen access to HE; and to provide both ontological and epistemological access outcomes, success, and prosperity for the marginalised. However, what can be observed and perhaps appreciated is a long trajectory of efforts and ongoing policy implementation steps towards fulfilling some of the promises, notwithstanding that there are still gross inequalities and "persisting injustices" (Hall 2021, 51) in race and gender. There are inefficiencies in achieving "the country's espoused goals" (Monnapula-Mapesela 2024, 221) for access, reconstruction and development. Transformation goals have not been fully met in line with the policy plans, goals and prescriptions, because progress is hampered by the aftereffects of past apartheid policies and the lack of agency among many agents (HE stakeholders). Archer (1996) argues that policy is a powerful structure that influences change and modifies people's actions, enabling or constraining progress. However, many questions remain about the "plethora of government policies" Monnapula-Mapesela (2024, 221) and their enabling power in achieving the bold promise the government set for democratic SA.

Review reports on the state of democracy (CHE 2022a) show that the demographic representation of students is almost reversed, and most SA universities have more black students than other race groups, representing the national picture. Enrolments of black African students in HE improved from 40 per cent in 1993 to 77 per cent in 2021. However, painting institutions black does not translate to a transformed, just equitable system. The participation rate in areas such as business and commerce, science, engineering, and mathematics (CHE

2022b) that yield success, wealth, and prosperity remains low, with 25 per cent to 30 per cent of students dropping out of university. The failed promise is also evident in the lack of representation in courses that provide status and yield economic security (CHE 2022b). Student completion and throughput rates are low. Leadership positions are still predominantly held by males. In contrast, professorships are predominantly held by white males and females, with fewer blacks, especially females, occupying key leadership positions "despite legislative frameworks aimed at redressing these imbalances in the country" (Kele and Pietersen 2015). Whites are concentrated in professional occupational posts, while blacks are concentrated in what the Department of Labour terms unskilled and semi-skilled occupational levels (Sadiq et al 2019). This is a mirror image of the apartheid times, repeated at some universities three decades into democracy.

Black women are severely underrepresented in senior academic and leadership positions, portraying a grim outlook. Eight of the 26 SA universities are led by women Vice-Chancellors. In 2015, there were only 43 black female professors among 552 female professors nationwide (Maphalala, Ralarala and Mpofu 2022). The current status relegates black staff to positions with less power and economic security.

Significant efforts are therefore required to establish a truly transformed and equitable system. A staff agency, an enabling environment, a supportive culture, and regular, intentional reviews of policies and their implementation by the Government and Universities are imperative; otherwise, efforts toward true change and transformation will be reduced to ideas and unfulfilled promises.

METHODOLOGY

This article analyses the progress and trends in the transformation of the HE in SA over the 30 years of democracy, and the unresolved inequities in access and success for previously disadvantaged students and staff. A descriptive-evaluative research methodology is adopted to provide accurate, systematic, and authentic data analysis from relevant scholarly literature, official annual Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) university reports, Council on Higher Education (CHE) review reports, HE policies, and other key structures influencing change, transformation, and quality assurance. Archer's theoretical framework was ideal for this study because it enables analysis of various discourses, structures, cultures, and agential aspects (Archer 1995). In this case, aspects necessary for transformation are analysed (Monnapula-Mapesela 2024, 219).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Margaret Archer's (1995, 1996) social realism framework and stratified constructs of structure, culture, and agency are used in this analysis to make sense of the interplay between various structures, discourses and causal powers that enable or constrain transformation and quality in HE in SA. The social realist theory helps one better understand the world. It enables the application of various lenses (concepts, knowledge) to understand and explain tendencies, and to reveal causal relationships and linkages that produce phenomena or explain why things occur as they do. Although Archer's framework has been widely used by many scholars in HE to explore issues of teaching and learning, little evidence is found in the literature of its use in understanding transformation in HE. The author attempts to understand the relationship and interplay between some key structural provisions(s) by the democratic government, institutional culture(s), and the requisite stakeholder agency, and how all these aspects have potentially enabled/continue to enable or constrained/continue to constrain intentions for a transformed equitable HE.

Although the documents analysed depict significant progress in transforming HE since 1994, for which the democratic SA Government can be commended, the transformation and social justice agendas remain far from realisation. The article focuses on "what" has been promised by the government and the milestones achieved, and whether adequate progress has been made over the past three decades. It is unclear why "universities fail to dislodge the entrenched institutional structures" (Khambule 2023, iv), constraining cultures (Archer 1995, 1996) and passive stakeholders (agents). Universities are still heavily clouded by resistant "dehumanising cultures and a climate of unequal power relations" Bunda, Gilbey, and Monnapula-Mapesela (2021, 24), that stifle the agency of many stakeholders, especially courageous black women academics and leaders who struggle to be part of a system and "an "acclaimed" academic community that seems transformed on the surface but still find it hard to free themselves from the imperfections caused by decades of discrimination" (Monnapula-Mapesela 2017, 30). Whilst many black women academics and leaders have consistently been and continue to seek answers and are reflexive (Stierer 2008) and reflective about their own agency and experiences, including those of others, as evidenced by the growing corpus of knowledge on the experiences of black women academics in SA and elsewhere, constraining cultures persist in stifling transformation and their equitable existence in HE (see Mabokela 2012, Makhetha 2025, Monnapula-Mapesela 2017, Ramohai 2014, Monnapula-Mapesela and Moodly 2024, Bunda et al 2021, Mainah 2016).

Agency is often stifled by the absence of supportive structures, unsupportive culture(s), and the "old guard" – a collective or organised group of staff with deeply shared traditions and

values, speaking in one voice and resisting change intended to benefit marginalised groups, thereby constraining and stalling social justice and transformation agendas (Monnapula-Mapesela and Moodly 2025). They are usually the "traditional inhabitants" (Naicker, 2013) in universities, or "outsiders" who have just gained entry to these new spaces (structures), who choose to be assimilated into the collective, surrendering their agency and power in exchange for the collective's favour and protection.

The article is not an exhaustive account of the HE transformation but provides highlights of the transformation and "cultural undertones that create conducive or constraining spaces as exhibited through certain discourses" (Monnapula-Mapesela 2024, 220), commonly advocated by some stakeholders in SA University contexts. The focus is on the following "selected discourses that are reproducing the current status quo" (Monnapula-Mapesela 2024, 220) in the Democratic South Africa:

> "South African HE Before 1994 and the Legacy of the past; The Transformation Agenda and HE Policy Development; University Differentiation and Typology; Funding and Resourcing of HE Institutions, Widened Access for Black Staff and Students (a) Staff Equity and (b) Student Access, headcount enrolments, participation, throughput, completion and success - Some notable achievements and contradictions), Curriculum Relevance and Responsiveness, the Culture of Quality Assurance, and the Transformative Agenda for Universities."

ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING DISCOURSES

SAHE Before 1994 and the legacy of the past

It is common knowledge that before 1994, the SAHE system was segregated along racial lines. Universities catered to different groups: Whites (Afrikaans and English-speaking), Coloureds, Indians, and Blacks; hence the common nomenclature (Historically White Afrikaans, Historically White English-speaking, Historically Black Universities, etc.). Universities for white students were better resourced and offered a broad range of academic programmes, while other universities had limited resources and fewer offerings. These are the structural and cultural legacies that the democratic SA has inherited and continues to live with. Part of the massive transformation agenda meant that at the dawn of democracy, through significant policy development and implementation, political commitment, and will, the ruling party had to provide an enabling environment and ensure that all universities were accessible to all races and resourced equitably. However, this was just the onset of a massive HE transformation agenda that is proving to be an ongoing and tiring process. Over the past 30 years, equal access has proven not to translate to equitable participation and success due to, among other things, a lack of agential commitment and what Professor Graeme Atherton, a guest speaker at the Siyaphumelela (Student Success) Conference on 28 June 2024, in Johannesburg, called "equity

backlash" – a typical behaviour by the traditional inhabitants/the "old guard" within historically white universities to downplay efforts that focus on issues of equity, access, and success for the marginalised.

The era of policy development and transformation

Following the first democratic elections in 1994, the Government embarked on a policy overhaul. Key SAHE policies aimed to establish a single, coherent, well-coordinated system planned, governed, and funded at the national level to enable the Government to overcome fragmentation, inequality, and inefficiencies while meeting the goals of reconstruction and development (RSA 1997).

The dawn of democracy in 1994 brought much excitement and hope to the groups of people whom the apartheid government had oppressed. The liberation was accompanied by an ambitious transformation agenda and a plethora of key policies aimed at transforming the HE system, reconstruction, and development of an inclusive society. These include:

- The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE 1996), which initiated debates on restructuring the HE system, developed several policies and essential reports to initiate the transformation agenda.
- The White Paper 3: A Framework for Transformation of SA Higher Education (1997), highlighted HE purposes regarding accountability, efficiency, effectiveness, and relevance of the curriculum; redress, equity, and equality; democratisation, as well as quality of HE.
- The Higher Education Act of 1997, a compass that guides governance of HE and provides direction for establishing institutional structures, such as the senate, institutional forum, council, and committees of senate and council, ensuring that there are clear delineations and boundaries between the roles of each structure, thus ensuring proper functioning of institutions.
- The National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE) 2001 paved the way for implementing the principles in the White Paper 3 of 1997.
- The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 provides an ambitious, but much-needed blueprint with defined key performance indicators for achieving positive growth by 2030 (RSA 2012, 50).

These policies, along with various structures (plans and reports), are a significant part of the culture that facilitates and influences transformation. They have pioneered, guided, and

informed reform monitoring since 1994. Policy implementation continues to be monitored through the DHET's institutional annual plans and reports, as well as commissioned 10–year reports. However, the system has not been able to overcome some chronic challenges that have persisted for three decades into democracy (Luescheret al 2023). Despite the plethora of policies and an ambitious transformation agenda, the Government laments the slow pace of transformation, the poor quality of life for the marginalised, and increasing poverty and unemployment, including a gloomy picture of quality in the SA HE sectors (RSA 2012). None or slow implementation demands that all stakeholders deeply reflect to identify constraints to systemic and institutional transformation.

In 2012, the DHET, through the NDP, lamented the poor performance of universities and argued that universities ranged from world-class to mediocre, and highlighted the failure of some universities to utilise their resource allocations to effect transformation (RSA 2012). DHET was concerned about continuous quality improvement to ensure the success and graduation of students who had been promised a better life through "increased and broadened participation, especially for blacks and women" (RSA 2012, 50). The failure of institutions to provide equity of access and fair chances of success for all (RSA 1997) is often attributed, among other factors, to a lack of preparedness among black students and inadequate school education (Monnapula-Mapesela 2015). Government's returns do not match its investment, resulting in small numbers of black students graduating from universities (RSA 2012, 50). As mentioned before, the implementation of national policies at the institutional level remains skewed. Other failed promises include a lack of representation in courses that yield power and wealth (CHE 2022a). Problems associated with funding for academically deserving students are mounting. There are high dropout rates, poor completion and throughput rates, and leadership positions and professorships are still mainly held by white males and females (CHE 2022a).

Three decades into democracy, intellectuals and institutions cannot continue to blame the school sector or students' lack of preparedness for the failures of universities; they must acknowledge that there are many constraining systemic barriers that also emanate from within the institutions. They must reimagine new strategies to provide both black students and academic staff with a fair chance at success. A new culture should be evident, while students' participation, throughput, and HE in general should show significant improvements.

University differentiation and typology

At the advent of democracy, the university sector underwent a distinct differentiation. Universities were not only made accessible to all deserving students regardless of their race

but were also differentiated into research-intensive (to undertake cutting-edge research and impactful teaching), comprehensive (focusing on both research (mainly applied) as well as teaching), and universities of technology (focusing on applied research and diploma qualifications). Universities were given clear mandates and missions and were differentiated by their mission/mandate and programme offerings rather than by race. Despite the plethora of policies and guiding principles, confusion persists regarding differentiation, and many universities misunderstand their roles as research-intensive, comprehensive, and technological universities, often drifting from their mission.

Universities are further differentiated by size, albeit not intentionally. Some university enrolments are as large as 350,000 (at the University of South Africa), while others are as small as around 2000 (at Sol Plaatje University) (CHE 2022b). Large enrolments have resulted in high lecturer-student ratios in some universities, ranging from 1:45 to 1:60 students, and the lowest at 1:14. (CHE 2022b). This inequality is a cause for concern and a constraining factor for student access, participation, engagement, and success.

Funding and resourcing HE institutions

Another key policy change to enable access for the marginalised to HE was the introduction of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which finances millions of indigent students studying at post-school institutions (universities and colleges). NSFAS is a critical structure and enabler for many indigent students who would not have had the opportunity to pursue university studies. Since its introduction, NSFAS funding has increased from R21.4 million to over R50 billion (NSFAS Report November, 2023). However, the fund currently appears under strain, with discussions of a shortfall running into billions of rands.

One cannot disregard the era of #FeesMustFall, which focused on free education, the decolonisation of HE, and other critical issues, such as the relevance and responsiveness of the curriculum. This movement fast-tracked the expansion and model of NSFAS funding to thousands of SA post-school students from all racial backgrounds, contrary to perceptions that NSFAS is only for black students.

In 2019, NSFAS disbursed a total of R27.7 billion across South African public Post-School Education and Training (PSET) institutions and funded over 750,000 academically deserving PSET students (NSFAS Vital Stats, 2019, published in 2021). In 2022, NSFAS disbursed a total of R41.7 billion across SA public PSET institutions, with the 26 Universities accounting for R37.11 billion and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges for R4.6 billion. This gesture gave access in 2022 to 810,532 students who met both

the academic and financial eligibility criteria. Of these, 67 per cent (541 843) were females and 33 per cent (268 689) were male (CHE 2022b).

Although Government efforts to use funding as an enabler to redress past inequalities can be celebrated, and significant milestones have been achieved in many areas, the commitment to a fair distribution of benefits and to upholding the dignity of Black staff and students across all universities, regardless of their category, appears to be a complex issue. Due to the high cost of tertiary education, many indigent students who qualify cannot afford tertiary studies. South Africans refer to them as the "missing middle". To date, these students remain the forgotten middle group. They are students from households with a combined parental income exceeding the NSFAS threshold, falling within the income range of R350,000 to R600,000 per annum (NSFAS Statement to *South African Union of Students* (SAUS) December, 2023).

The capping of university residence fees implemented by NSFAS in 2023 is also undermining some of the gains made through funding. At universities, where residence fees exceed the allocated amount, students often incur debt on their student accounts because they cannot pay the difference.

The government's efforts to advance its transformative goal of widening access to HE by providing commensurate support resources are not fully supported by those responsible for implementing policies. One could argue that the agential power of those entrusted with transformation and upholding quality efforts within institutions remains limited. While it can be argued that the Government allocated resources equitably and used them to steer transformation and quality improvement, the system remains highly and unpardonably unequal, with universities still classified as the "haves" and the "have-nots" (Monnapula-Mapesela 2024, 231). The University World Rankings often parade this inequality by ranking universities with or without their consent. These rankings, wittingly or unwittingly, condone perceptions of inequality and further influence students and parents to "vote with their feet" for particular prestigious institutions, leaving those ranked lower to fend for themselves as the public questions their quality and worth, because many stakeholders regard university rankings as a measure of quality.

Widened access for black staff and students

Access is inextricably linked to the renaming, differentiation, and change of university typology (classification). Access to HE has been widened, meaning that academically qualifying students can apply or enrol at universities of their choice, while staff equity has also become a priority. The Government's HE policies and priorities post–1994 focused on redressing past inequities. Whilst significant progress is evident in some areas, for example,

the enrolment of black African students improved from 40 per cent in 1993 to 77 per cent in 2021, the participation rate remains low, with 25 per cent to 30 per cent of students dropping out of university (CHE 2022b).

Staff equity

In 1994, academics at SA universities were overwhelmingly white (83%) and male (69%). The sheer inequality of representation is highlighted by the fact that although Black South Africans (African, Coloured, and Indian) constituted 89 per cent of the population, they comprised only 17 per cent of academics at SA universities. The under-representation of blacks was especially severe. Although comprising almost 80 per cent of the population, they constituted only 10 per cent of the academic workforce. Similarly, while women comprised just over 50 per cent of the population, they accounted for only 31 per cent of the academic workforce at South African universities (Badat 2010, 25; Badat 2015).

The general representation by race and gender has shifted over the years; gender inequality and division remain glaring in senior academic rankings of universities (see Maphalala et al 2022). Of the 2,601 professors in the country in 2010, men comprised 86 per cent, while women made up 14 per cent (*ibid*). By 2018, the sector had 3,125 professors. Of those, women accounted for 30 per cent, while men accounted for 70 per cent (see Maphalala et al 2022, 147). Examining the numbers by rank and gender, there were 641 women employed at either associate or full professor level in 2000, and by 2018, that number had increased to 2,027. The riveting story in these numbers is how women academics have remained in the lowest-level rankings, including lecturer, junior lecturer, and sometimes below junior lecturer. In 2000, there were 12,536 women academics at the lecturer level or below in the system, and by 2018, this number had increased to 23,661, representing an 89 per cent increase over 18 years (Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo 2023, 172). The HE sector can be commended for the significant improvement in women's representation; however, the DHET and universities must still do more to achieve gender parity among senior women academics and to create enabling, supportive cultures and environments that retain them.

While universities do not struggle to address gender equity in non-professional positions, the system is making disappointing progress in addressing gender parity at professional levels, including senior academic and leadership positions. The evidence is in the number of women-led universities, 31 years into democracy. The fact that there are only eight women vice-chancellors among the 26 South African public universities cannot be celebrated in the 31 years of democracy. The picture for black female professors is still equally gloomy. Many black female academics occupy junior positions that wield less power, status, respect, and wealth due

to the slow pace of transformation (Bunda et.al. 2021, 24) and the constraining environment(s), especially for women.

At my current university, the executive level can be argued to have undergone some transformation, but other levels still require significant improvement. The institution has only two black female full professors and fewer than 10 black female professors. The depressing transformation progress and bleak picture are a mirror image of many of our public universities. Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo (2023, 170) highlight some constraints and argue that the larger project of increasing the quotas of Black women academics in public universities is fraught with problems. Many continue to experience the HE system as alienating, exclusionary, and marginalising (Makhetha 2025, Monnapula-Mapesela 2017, Ramohai 2014, Monnapula-Mapesela and Moodly 2024). Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo (2023) refer to this phenomenon as "the nervous conditions" of the public university, in which the increasing access and number of women academics in the sector have simultaneously led to an emergent body of literature highlighting the gendered and patriarchal challenges they are compelled to confront and navigate. The challenges faced by black women academics and leaders have become a fertile area for research, but the positive outcomes and dividends for the marginalised are slow to materialise. Thirty years into democracy, the agency of Black women academics is critically important, as they continue to navigate and negotiate their being, belonging, and becoming in South African universities, even though their plight is often misunderstood or misinterpreted by others. As mentioned earlier, efforts must be directed not only to understanding the difficult, harrowing experiences of black women in academia and the hostility perpetuated on women leaders at many universities, but also to addressing them without fear or prejudice.

Student access, headcount enrolments, participation, throughput, completion, and success – Some notable achievements and contradictions

Many black students can be seen across all SA universities, presenting a markedly different visual picture of transformed university campuses. Even so, those tasked with monitoring transformation and quality improvement within universities need sharp lenses to see and believe that we have made only marginal progress in many areas that affect Black students. A deep, profound, and far-reaching transformation has yet to occur in many areas, including the quality, relevance, and responsiveness of education, as well as the participation and success of Black students.

Many notable achievements, contradictions, and constraints in the HE system reflect transformative strides across various universities in student access, headcount enrolments, participation, throughput, completion, and success. Other triumphs include, among other

things, the establishment of quality promotion units at various universities, some with fully-fledged structures and systems designed to create an enabling quality promotion environment. Improved agency, relationships and some understanding of quality promotion matters among universities, academics, and the CHE have also been achieved, with some progress made in promoting quality and access. However, glaring contradictions cloud the sector's accomplishments, as challenges remain with student engagement, participation, and success, which have not changed much demographically, and remain very low for Blacks compared to their White and Indian fellow students. The system struggles to achieve equitable outcomes. At the same time, many Black students have not benefited significantly from these initiatives, as success and throughput rates remain highly skewed. Scalability and the "democratisation" of quality, with significant impacts, remain considerable barriers to quality promotion within our universities.

Curriculum relevance and responsiveness

In 2015 and 2017, students' agency was seen through activism and protests – the second major wave following the 1996 protests, which exposed universities and reminded us of the importance and power of the student voice in effecting transformation. Students demanded accountability from universities regarding, among other things, what universities and academics teach and why they teach it. Issues of decolonising and contextualising the curriculum emerged during this time, questioning the relevance and responsiveness of Western-centric curricula in the African context, particularly given the growing number of unemployed youth and graduates, as well as the country's low economic growth and rising poverty. Ten years after the #FeesMustFall protests, universities continue to grapple with reaching consensus on what decolonising the curriculum and HE truly entails, as multiple understandings exist, making it challenging to track progress to date.

Unemployment also continues to rise among graduates, presenting yet another failed promise of a better life. There is evidence that the unemployment rate among young individuals aged 15 to 34 exceeded the national average of 32.9 per cent (Stats SA 2024). Limited educational attainment and social and economic inadequacies have been, and continue to be, regarded as primary factors contributing to the high number of young people who are not in employment, education, or training (Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEETs)), contradicting the widespread belief that education is a key determinant in enhancing access to employment (Stats SA 2024, 19).

Whilst universities are applauded for their resilience, this should not become a stumbling block or constraint for change. Part of their quality agenda should involve questioning the

relevance and responsiveness of their qualifications in preparing graduates for post-university life and regularly reviewing these to keep up with changing socioeconomic needs.

The culture of quality assurance and the transformative agenda for universities

The fact that, thirty years into democracy, HE institutions in SA do not have full powers to quality-assure and accredit their academic programmes and have not yet gained the CHE's trust to do so uncensored, is a concern. The CHE initiated institutional audits in 2004 to assess universities' readiness to uphold quality and to promote a far-reaching transformation agenda, with a specific focus on three central features: "increased participation and inclusiveness… Greater responsiveness and relevance, and Increased cooperation and partnerships…" (RSA 1997). However, today institutions are still audited by the CHE in accordance with legislation, and unfortunately, many, even if they meet many of the quality standards, are still found wanting and not mature enough to run the academic project without censorship. Structure(s) and culture without agency will not result in change.

There are several reasons why quality assurance or promotion in many areas has failed to gain the expected traction and has been slow to, even though many universities can be applauded for establishing quality promotion structures (units/divisions), systems and processes, some fully fledged with various capacities (including human and other capacities). On their own, these structures have no transformative power if university cultures and agents are resistant. The Government should not undermine the impact of enabling and constraining causal powers among the various university stakeholders. Unfortunately, if such power is not harnessed positively, it hinders efforts toward transformation. There is resistance by a group of academics in certain universities who detest governance, leadership, quality assurance, and performance management. They blame all the efforts to correct a system with deep-rooted apartheid and colonial ideologies on managerialism. The group negates the urgent need to shift universities away from being "utilities of imperial colonialism" and apartheid (Cornelius-Bell and Piper Bell 2025, 45) and toward serving the interests of the democratic country. Their unending old arguments perpetuate the image that universities need not transform, lest they fall prey to neoliberalism. Perhaps such arguments can be forgiven in countries and universities that have never been under colonial and apartheid rule. Quality assurance discourses in HE should not be distorted and associated with "neo-liberalism" (Badat 2015) and the corporate culture of performativity, marketisation, and consumerism, to serve the interests of non-transformative agents. These negative discourses are counterproductive. They give academics

false "rights" to perceive transformation and quality assurance as a choice rather than an imperative.

Some institutions have taken heed and accepted full responsibility for embracing quality promotion, but others argue that it has no place in universities as they perceive it as an imposition of managerialism and an invasion of the many freedoms (academic freedom, institutional autonomy) that institutions want to enjoy without accountability, intervention, and responsibility. Managerialism should not be used as an excuse to push back on the Government's efforts to promote quality. Absolute freedom or autonomy cannot suffice in a system where the culture of injustice and discrimination is rife.

The SA government uses quality education as a tool to reverse the long, deep-rooted history of marginalisation and social oppression (CHE 2017). It uses quality to advance social justice for students and all South Africans. True transformation begins with justice, and justice demands that we be true to ourselves about the status quo, our progress, impact, and willingness to disrupt common-sense practices and resistant traditions. Deep, honest introspection at the individual and institutional levels is imperative.

Government must continue using education and quality compliance as strategic monitoring tools to disrupt the long history and culture of marginalisation and social oppression, and to address subtle cultures that still condone exclusion from quality education (CHE 2017) and constrain the transformation and social justice agendas.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although nearly all universities in SA can be argued to have some structures in place to support transformation and change and have made progress in advancing transformation and social justice, to a certain extent, the efforts have not necessarily yielded their maximum impact. Progress is annoyingly slow due to resistant institutional cultures condoned and protected by some individual and collective stakeholders – the traditional inhabitants (the "old guard"), mostly whites and males still holding positions of power. If there is no positive, continuous interaction and reciprocity (interplay) between such structures, institutional culture(s), and the agency of all university staff, and if there is a lack of transformational agency, intent and conviction among those in leadership positions and the "old guard", these structures may remain "white elephants" that fail to achieve well-articulated intentions of the government.

Having the right structures is as important as having an enabling culture and key agents who have the power and courage to delegitimise and confront constraining structures and cultures. The agential obligation of the "traditional inhabitants" remains questionable for various reasons, including personal conflicts of interest in the benefits they would accrue if the

status quo were to remain, resistance to change, and non-supportive attitudes towards the national transformation agenda. Common sense models will not deconstruct deeply rooted resistant cultures found within many of our universities and their structures, especially in historically white universities. Consequences should be implemented not only for uncooperative universities but also for those within these institutions who are determined to sabotage transformative activities. The various HE stakeholders should have clearly defined transformation roles for which they should be held accountable. We are reminded to constantly "think about tools needed to dismantle" (Dwyer and Black 2021:10), constraining institutional cultures.

We are reminded that most universities lie in the colonial and apartheid past. Despite the change in racial quotas of staff and students, "the academic staff complement is still comprised largely of Whites" (Sadiq et al 2019), who are ironically expected to drive transformation. These are often the "old guard", a collective or organised group condoning resistant culture(s) and stalling social justice and transformation. This culture of resistance, often masquerading as protection of institutions against managerialism, policing, etc., is a strategy that stifles transformation and condones disadvantage on multiple levels, rendering the transformation agenda a perpetual promise to the marginalised. Absolute academic freedom is anti-transformative in many respects. Our public universities in SA continue to struggle to respond adequately and systematically to transformation, which encompasses true access and success, because institutional agents at different levels lack the necessary corporate agential power to effect change. Such power lies in a group of people who act as primary agents, willing to exercise their agency to enable and support national and institutional transformation goals. Unfortunately, there are few such people who are assertive, courageous and bold. These people not only hold relevant qualifications and competencies for their positions but also understand their transformative role in a transforming HE and are not deterred by victimisation and prejudice. A deeper, more nuanced understanding of hidden barriers and subtle anti-transformation undertakings, as well as an evaluation of transformation at all levels of the institution or university, is necessary. Universities need courageous leaders and disruptors, as well as appropriate tools to dismantle resistant cultures (Dwyer and Black 2021), unsettle those in their comfort zones, challenge and deconstruct misleading narratives. These will remain a mission impossible if agency and power remain entrusted to pretentious non-change-makers, most of whom remain unperturbed by the stakes they continue to enjoy or by their affiliation with the architects of the discriminatory system. Their oblivion to deeper discriminatory activities in a transforming HE and a country with a long history of discrimination is a serious betrayal and constraint for change. Those who knowingly fail to support transformation for

various reasons, including normalising abnormalities, should be held accountable for their individual and collective roles in constraining transformation.

Audre Lorde's words that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1984: 2) echo so loudly and are true for the SAHE system. The architects and beneficiaries of apartheid and colonial ideologies struggle to contribute to fair dinkum transformation, especially where there are no consequences for the non-committal. They are hellbent on not transforming or changing the status quo if they perceive such change as a personal threat/loss (Lorde 1984, 4) or as a gain for the marginalised. Such people may seem "temporarily beaten" by their discriminatory games, while remaining non-committal to any effort that enables transformative change. Continuous, regular policy conversations among stakeholders are critical to disrupting pretentious, superficial understandings of transformation and social justice. Spaces should be created where the voices and experiences of the marginalised are heard, given credence, and protected. Universities should instil institution-wide cultures that enable and support transformation, fostering access and success for all. Reflective, transformative change should be an integral component of all HE activities.

Transformation and institutional culture change should be understood beyond the government's compliance agenda. University stakeholders, including policymakers, need to be aware of how the HE contexts and traditions are adapting to enable and constrain transformation. Ford and Ticoalu (2025, 31) argue that individual agency is key to transforming HE institutions. Still, individuals must answer the question: "As you look at the games being played around you, who will you choose to be and what will your reaction be? What will you do to ensure the marginalised people experience respect"? Universities must appoint the right people to key positions with relevant competencies, willpower and courage to bring about lasting change. Transforming resistant cultures and traditions requires courageous individuals who will enforce policy implementation, challenge resistance to transformation, and uphold compliance with legislation without fear of prejudice or victimisation. Let us not contend with what the eye thinks it sees, for that is not necessarily true transformation and social justice for all.

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