

# *The South African Higher Education Transformation Journey: Thirty Years after Democracy*, edited by Grace Khunou and Nompumelelo Radebe

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Amid global higher education reforms, growing reflections on postcolonial knowledge, and the expanding impact of artificial intelligence (AI), contemporary higher education increasingly reflects the interplay of institutional restructuring, epistemic reconsideration, and societal responsiveness. In South Africa, transformation goes beyond policy reform, encompassing the restructuring of university systems, knowledge production, and the pursuit of social equity. Since 1994, South African higher education has undergone profound changes. While access and representativeness have improved, entrenched institutional cultures, Western-centric curricula, and the marginalisation of African epistemologies remain pressing challenges. *The South African Higher Education Transformation Journey: Thirty Years after Democracy* frames these issues within the framework of inclusion, curriculum transformation, and epistemological shift, examining gender inequality, disability inclusion, curriculum decolonisation, African epistemologies, and university identity reconstruction. The book reveals tensions and intersections among multiple transformative forces, offering an insightful



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theoretical lens for understanding the trajectory of higher education in South Africa and the broader development of African universities.

The editors frame this volume around South African higher education transformation, highlighting the ongoing reconstruction of universities in the post-apartheid era across institutional, cultural, and knowledge-production dimensions. The book underscores persistent tensions around “race”, gender, class, and epistemology amid democratisation. Despite gains in access and representation, entrenched institutional cultures, the dominance of Western knowledge systems, and the structural exclusion of marginalised groups constrain meaningful transformation. As the Green Paper (Department of Education [DoE] 1996, 4) notes, systemic inequalities along racial, geographic, class, and gender lines, as well as academic narrowness, remain challenges. For example, although black student enrolment has increased, they are largely excluded from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, and racism and gender discrimination persist (Idahosa and Mkhize 2021, 112; Mkhize 2023, 639). Importantly, the editors portray universities as active agents of change, capable of promoting social justice, curriculum reform, and epistemological shifts, guiding higher education towards a more equitable, responsive, and human-centred future.

The book centres on several themes rooted in South Africa’s transformation journey, including institutional culture, curriculum transformation, the vision of African universities and the future of African epistemologies, employment equity, and the personal experiences of black women in South African academia. Collectively, these themes reflect the authors’ multiple approaches to examining the past, present, and future of higher education transformation. Structurally, the book is organised around three key themes: issues of inclusion, curriculum transformation, and the significance of epistemological shifts in the work of transformation. Each chapter situates these themes within South Africa’s socio-political and historical context, offering extensive discussions on African epistemologies and exploring how they can be incorporated into curriculum development, assessment, and higher education policymaking.

The first part of the book highlights persistent racial and gender inequalities, as well as exclusion based on difference. Chapter 2 critically examines the importance of equality and freedom within the context of enduring perceptions of racism and sexism that shape who is deemed to belong in knowledge-production spaces. Focusing on women in South African academia, the chapter explores why they continue to be overlooked in university leadership and other key institutional arenas, illustrating their marginalisation through three compelling narratives. Chapter 3, authored by Mohlaloga, Pillay, and Pretorius, investigates the concept of inclusive higher education beyond the classroom. It is particularly significant for its examination of the role of disability rights units in addressing the challenges faced by students with visual impairments.

In Chapter 4, Ramonetho and Shumba examine communication practices within African universities, exploring ways to address the perception of Africans as “foreigners” in

their own higher education institutions. The authors observe that existing research has largely focused on institutional policies, cultural differences, and language barriers as drivers of alienation, while the role of communication practices has received insufficient attention. This chapter therefore highlights how internal university communication strategies can either promote inclusion or reinforce exclusion, and how they shape the sense of belonging for both students and faculty.

Chapter 5, authored by Pasipamire and Chisita, focuses on the politics of national identity, toxic nationalism, and the professional elite system, while also examining the role of libraries. Similar to Chapter 3, this chapter addresses the challenges of Africans being perceived as “foreigners” within African universities, arguing that this perception is driven by national identity politics and toxic forms of nationalism.

The chapters in the second part of the book explore curriculum transformation and the significance of African epistemologies. They not only examine the shortcomings of Eurocentric curricula but also present case studies demonstrating how African epistemologies can be meaningfully integrated into curriculum transformation efforts. For instance, Chapter 6 employs bibliometric analysis to systematically review the publication trends, research foci, institutional distributions, and thematic evolution of literature on curriculum transformation in African universities, showcasing significant methodological innovation in assessing research trends within this field.

Chapter 7, titled “Towards Transdisciplinarity: Transforming Curriculum from an African Epistemology”, adopts the lens of African epistemology to demonstrate how curricula developed from this perspective can foster humanistically oriented scientific innovation and facilitate essential convergence and intersections across disciplines. Chapter 8 examines the transformation of theology curricula, exploring pathways for curriculum reconstruction in theological education through philosophical concepts such as reconciliation and forgiveness.

In Chapter 9, the editors situate their discussion within the persistent realities of racial, class, and gender inequalities in South African higher education. Drawing on Freire’s theory of critical consciousness and Black Consciousness theory, they examine the transformation of colonial structures within universities. By incorporating experiences from South Africa and other countries, the chapter critically explores the practical possibilities for decolonising higher education curricula.

The third part of the book, encompassing Chapters 10 through 12, emphasises the significance of epistemological shifts within the transformation agenda. These shifts are vital for redefining which forms of knowledge are valued, how knowledge is produced, and who is recognised as a knowledge producer. Such epistemological transformations are central to dismantling the colonial and Eurocentric legacies embedded not only in higher education systems but also in society at large.

Chapter 10 emphasises the necessity of moving from Eurocentric epistemologies towards indigenous African knowledge systems in the process of building African universities. In this pursuit of transformation, the theoretical conceptualisation of change is particularly important, as it directly shapes knowledge production and, in turn, influences curricula. Chapter 11 further illustrates this point, showing that mere compliance—rather than creative interventions, such as cognitive disobedience—restricts the generation of knowledge that embraces diverse epistemologies.

Overall, this book situates itself within the social transformations and higher education reforms in South Africa over the 30 years since democratisation. Drawing on higher education research, curriculum studies, decolonial theory, gender studies, and African epistemologies, it provides a systematic analysis of South African higher education transformation, highlighting critical post-apartheid issues such as inclusion, curriculum change, and epistemological shifts. The volume examines both incremental achievements, including expanded access and increased representativeness, and deeper structural challenges, such as entrenched institutional cultures, the dominance of Western knowledge systems, and the ongoing marginalisation of certain groups. Emphasising that genuine transformation extends beyond mere “access”, the book foregrounds curriculum reconstruction, epistemological renewal, and more responsive higher education policies. In doing so, it offers fresh insights into the distinctive trajectory of South African higher education, the complex interactions between universities and society, and the future development and knowledge autonomy of African universities in the contexts of globalisation and AI.

However, although this book has made significant strides in tracing the historical trajectory, key issues, and challenges of higher education transformation in South Africa—developing a clear discussion framework around inclusion, curriculum transformation, and epistemological shifts—there remains room for further deepening. As a collection of essays, it allows multi-dimensional discussions across institutional culture, gender equality, curriculum decolonisation, African epistemologies, and university identity. Yet, due to differing chapter foci and methods, the overall theoretical coherence and systematic development of “transformation” remain somewhat fragmented. Future work could integrate these elements through a unified analytical framework, explore connections among diverse knowledge traditions, and clarify the links between inclusion, decolonisation, and epistemological shifts. While the book highlights structural challenges and the role of African epistemologies in curriculum and institutional reform, there is scope to examine their implementation across universities, disciplines, and teaching practices, providing a platform for comparative, longitudinal, and policy-linked research.

Undoubtedly, this book makes a distinctive contribution by situating itself within the 30-year trajectory of higher education transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing on an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates higher education research, decolonial theory, curriculum studies, and African epistemologies, it provides a

systematic account of the historical development, key issues, and practical challenges of South African higher education transformation. The book addresses critical themes such as inclusion, curriculum transformation, and epistemological shifts, grounded in educators' commitment to social justice, knowledge autonomy, and holistic development—what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, 175) calls “not merely for inclusion, but to change the rules of the game”. In Mignolo’s (2009, 161) terms, this entails epistemic disobedience. The volume offers an invaluable reference for understanding the trajectory of higher education transformation, the interplay between universities and society, and the future of African universities in the contexts of globalisation and artificial intelligence, while advancing international discourse on decolonial higher education reform.

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