



An onlooker sits nearby as protesters clash with private security during protests over fees at the University of Cape Town in October 2016. Photo: [Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp](#) (CC BY-ND 4.0)

Report on transformation at SA universities:

It is about more than numbers

*Over the last two decades, repeated incidents of racism and sexism on campuses and the nationwide #FeesMustFall student protests highlighted the ongoing need for transformation in South Africa's universities. **Antoinette Oosthuizen** spoke to **Thierry Luescher** about an HSRC research report on the state of transformation in South Africa's public universities.*

Since the advent of democracy, black students have gained increased access to higher education, but this has happened in a context of significant academic, social and financial challenges. Black students in historically white universities have had to struggle against entrenched institutional cultures of whiteness; students from disadvantaged communities have faced huge financial challenges including recurring problems with the national financial aid system; and female staff and students have been faced with patriarchal attitudes and behaviours. The massification of higher education has also come at great personal costs, with high dropout rates for students.

In 2015 and 2016, a [wave of student protest action](#) under the banner of #FeesMustFall spread across South African university campuses. While protesting financial exclusion, high fees and debts, students also strongly voiced their dissatisfaction with the lack of social and academic transformation. This led to a broader debate, calling for the decolonisation of education in the country. Year after year, sporadic incidences of student protest continued on campuses, including most recently in August 2023 when students protested widely against the dysfunctionality of the national student financial aid scheme.

If universities failed to transform, dropouts and graduate unemployment mounted, and dissatisfaction escalated among young people, it could lead to an 'Arab Spring' scenario with more violent responses, researchers warned in a new HSRC report, [The state of transformation in South Africa's public universities](#).

Transformation oversight: background

In 2008, a ministerial committee was appointed to study discrimination in public higher education institutions with a particular focus on racism. Led by Prof. Crain Soudien, who later became HSRC CEO (2015–2021), the report concluded that incidents of racism and sexism at universities had been pervasive and the pace of redress '[painfully slow](#)'. A key recommendation was that a standing structure be established to monitor transformation in South African higher education. This led to the establishment of the Transformation Oversight Committee (TOC) in 2013.

In 2020, the TOC commissioned the HSRC to investigate the state of transformation in the public higher education system by studying the 2018 and 2019 annual reports of 26 public universities in South Africa. The HSRC published its report, [The state of transformation in South Africa's public universities](#), this year.

Defining transformation

The annual reports revealed that institutions interpreted transformation in different ways. Some focused on demographic equity, viewing an institution as transformed if its staff and student body reflected the demographic composition of society, while others more actively pursued what scholars call “deep transformation”, says the HSRC’s Prof. Thierry Luescher, who has been researching institutional culture transformation since 2001.

Enrolment ratios and staff numbers indicated that black students and particularly black female academics and senior managers continued to be underrepresented, especially at historically advantaged institutions and merged institutions with a historically advantaged university component. However, some historically disadvantaged universities also seemed to have undergone little change in the demographic composition of their academic staff.

“Demographic equity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to be transformed,” warns Luescher. “Transformation also involves how an institution is governed, whether the culture of operating in an institution is conducive to the diverse staff and student complement that one introduces with equity, and whether the quality of teaching and learning is such that it empowers lecturers to teach well and students to learn well and academically succeed.”

A deeply transformed institution also makes an impact in society with its research and community engagement, allows academic freedom, cultivates public accountability, and contributes to local development as an anchor institution, he says.

Other findings were that many decolonisation projects and processes at universities were still in their initiation or conceptualisation phase or at early stages of implementation. Some universities struggled to integrate information and communication technology effectively in teaching and learning, possibly deepening inequality for some students. Several universities had changed their language policies in response to shifting student demographics; however, some rural, historically disadvantaged universities lacked the resources to implement their language policies, while some urban, historically advantaged institutions lacked commitment by staff to implement theirs.

Categorising institutions

The researchers identified three main kinds of transformation narratives in higher education institutions in South Africa: those of diversity-focused universities, those of developmentally engaged universities and those of contested universities.

“The first two categories of institutions creatively and innovatively engaged with the transformation challenge. They were, on the one hand, compliant with law and policies, but they were also innovative in how they approached becoming fit for internal transformation *and* for contributing to South African society.

“Within those institutions, some were more inward-focused on equity issues (e.g. staff and student demographics) while others tended to be more outwardly focused, talking about the transformation project in terms of local development and relevance.

“But at a third subset of institutions, the concept of a transformation project was clearly contested; in some cases, they were not even compliant with basic laws and policies.

“For example, some institutions did not have functional institutional forums, the statutory governance body that is supposed to have an overview of, provide advice on, and co-ordinate all issues related to institutional transformation. Then there were other institutions where this body operated exactly as it should, where creative, innovative governance happened.”

Creative governance

Good examples of creative governance were seen in the first-year bridging courses that many institutions offered.

“Students come into universities from a broad range of high schools and many may not have had the points to study what they choose immediately. Rather than triaging them in what has been called ‘the revolving door’ – in through the first year and out again, and with that all the hopes and dreams shattered – several universities have started so-called 101 or university 1000 courses, introductory courses on how to operate at university. They tend to be broad, with components of humanities, sciences and a strong skills-development component, which includes academic writing, for example.”

Some institutions have taken this a step further by offering a higher certificate, a full one-year qualification as an access bridge into university.

“Rather than going straight into an extended degree programme where it takes a student four years rather than three to complete a programme – you go on a one-year programme to get a higher certificate first. You get the skills, enculturation and knowledge to go into the degree programme of your choice fully prepared. At one institution they found that those from the certificate stream had an almost 100% pass rate in their degrees.”

These bridging courses are not new or unique but should be properly evaluated for efficacy, mainstreamed and funded, says Luescher. Some examples are 30 to 40 years old and may be ready for systemic implementation in their current form. Institutions and students will benefit from lower drop-out rates, faster throughput and less student debt.

Societal relevance and community engagement

Many universities had also increased efforts to integrate their identity and core functions in their local communities. Many had programmes to reach learners from disadvantaged schools and other types of collaboration with local communities and businesses. Some implemented curriculum-driven external engagements through their teaching and learning, and research activities. The researchers noted that service learning should be promoted, not only for its credit-bearing function but also 'as a reflexive approach that could support the broader transformation of students, staff and the university' and to ensure practical skills development, enhanced industry linkages and easier transition into livelihoods for students.

There was, however, a lack of proper co-ordination of community engagement efforts by a central, national structure and a lack of effective mainstreaming of community engagement as an institutional goal. The report recommended establishing staff reward and recognition schemes in support of engagement activities and producing appropriate strategic plans and budgets for them.

Mainstreaming transformation

Efforts to mainstream transformation in all dimensions of higher education – in the core functions of teaching and

learning, research and community engagement, as well as in governance, leadership and management, and in the student and staff experience of higher education – should be co-ordinated and properly resourced, the report recommends.

The 1997 Higher Education Act mandated universities to establish institutional forums to advise university councils on equity and rights issues. However, about a fifth of the annual reports indicated that these forums were not working well. Some transformation-related structures existed outside these institutional forums, but a lack of co-ordination impeded their impact and may have undermined governance by creating confusion about compliance.

The researchers recommended that the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) lead the production of practical policy prescriptions or templates. These could include generic policy templates on key issues, such as inclusivity related to gender and sexual orientation, gender-based violence, and corruption. This would spare individual institutions the effort of creating these policies from scratch, releasing more resources for implementation.

Universities' strategic, annual performance and transformation plans also needed more effective co-ordination and standardisation. Linking these plans to SMART indicators, dashboards and targets, and broadening the existing "council score card" to become a "governance score card" more broadly, would help ensure that policy development and implementation becomes a mainstream operational priority.



Students at Wits University shut down the campus and clash with police during protests over free education in October 2016. Photo: Ihsaan Haffejee/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

The report recommends that the 2014 Regulations for Reporting by Public Higher Education Institutions should be revised so that universities can produce more comprehensive, standardised and transformation-focused annual reports. The goal should be that annual reports provide a trustworthy source of transformation-relevant information to the minister of higher education and training, statutory and sectoral bodies, and the universities themselves.

HSRC experts to share the findings

“The methodology required critical analysis of institutions’ self-representation in their annual reports for which we needed a strong team with a unique set of capacities and capabilities,” says Luescher. The HSRC team had expertise in higher education, skills development, community engagement, as well as institutional culture transformation, matters of student and staff experience, student activism and the decolonisation movement. They are also skilled at forming large teams and consortia, comprising various combinations of expertise to work on large or multi-year projects. They worked closely with senior higher education experts, including the former head of the ministerial commission, Prof. Crain Soudien, and the head of the transformation oversight committee, Prof. Andre Keet.

The researchers made an effort to look at the South African university system rather than focusing on individual institutions. The idea was that universities would be able to

use the [report](#) to learn from success stories in the system. The multi-dimensional conception of transformation, which considers equity, quality and societal relevance, will also help institutions to think about their unique efficiencies and inefficiencies, their relations with their local environment, and how they employ research towards social transformation, says Luescher.

Some of the universities have already asked the researchers to present the findings to them. The TOC’s mandate of monitoring transformation at universities and advising the minister has been handed over to the Council on Higher Education, and the researchers have presented the report’s findings to it. The findings were also shared at Universities South Africa’s seminar series on higher education, leadership and management.

Research team: Prof. Thierry Luescher is the strategic lead of research into equitable education and an NRF-rated researcher on matters of student experience in the HSRC’s Equitable Education and Economies division. Dr Sam Fongwa at CODESRIA has a PhD in higher education and is a recognised and highly published researcher on all matters of community engagement. Dr Thelma Oppelt is a specialist in higher education teaching and learning. Dr Bongiwé Mncwango has researched skills development and staff satisfaction. Zama Mthombeni has conducted in-depth studies into transformation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal as part of her master’s thesis.

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Further reading:

South African universities fall short of ‘deep transformation’ (*Mail & Guardian*, 30 June 2023)



Wits students protest against financial exclusion in Johannesburg, 10 March 2021. Photo: Masego Mafata/GroundUp