Rethinking Higher Education Policies for Inclusivity through a Decolonial Lens: A Historical and Future-Oriented Analysis of South African Education

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South Africa's higher education system remains shaped by colonial and apartheid legacies that embedded systemic inequalities in access, curriculum, and governance. Despite decades of reform, these historical injustices continue to marginalise African knowledge systems and lived experiences. This conceptual paper uses a decolonial lens to critically examine how Euro-North-American epistemologies have dominated education policy formulation, often at the expense of local perspectives rooted in African values. The analysis foregrounds *Ubuntu* as an alternative framework for rethinking inclusivity, emphasising interconnectedness, collective dignity, and social justice. By tracing the evolution of education policy from missionary schooling in the 1800s through apartheid's Bantu Education to contemporary reforms, the paper highlights how inclusivity has often been narrowly framed. It argues for an expanded understanding of inclusivity that moves beyond access to encompass epistemic and cultural representation. The paper concludes by proposing a transformative policy approach grounded in decolonial thought and *Ubuntu* ethics, envisioning higher education as a space that actively dismantles structural inequalities and empowers all communities through co-creation and shared knowledge.

Keywords: decolonial lens, ubuntu, inclusivity policies, higher education, systemic inequalities, euro-north-american centric, epistemic justice

1   Introduction and Background

South Africa's education system has evolved through overlapping colonial, apartheid, and post-colonial regimes, each leaving behind structural inequalities that persist in the present. The foundation was laid in the early 1800s through missionary education, serving religious and imperial functions. Missionaries introduced formal schooling with the dual aim of Christianisation and Westernisation, prioritising English and Dutch as mediums of instruction while marginalising indigenous languages and epistemologies. This education system reinforced cultural hegemony, portraying European ways of knowing as superior and rendering African knowledge systems less important (Gladwin, 2017).

During the 1900s, British and Afrikaner administrations deepened these exclusions by formalising racial hierarchies in education. Under British colonial rule, the curriculum was designed to conform Black learners into subordinate roles within the colonial economy, often through vocational training and Christian instruction (Irvine, 2016). With the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, educational policy became a vehicle for asserting Afrikaner identity and language. Afrikaans and English were institutionalised as the dominant languages of instruction, while African learners were consigned to underfunded schools and systematically excluded from academic advancement (Kamwangamalu, 2001).

This culminated in the *Bantu Education Act* of 1953, which codified apartheid's racial segregation in education. The act deliberately provided inferior education to Black South Africans, designed to prepare them for menial labour rather than intellectual development or civic participation. The policy not only deprived generations of equal opportunity but also entrenched a view of Black learners as unworthy of rigorous academic instruction (Wills, 2012).

Following the fall of apartheid in 1994, the democratic government pledged to redress past injustices by restructuring the education system along principles of equity, transformation, and inclusion. While several policy frameworks – such as the *White Paper on Education and Training* (1995) and the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (2013) – have aimed to expand access and promote transformation, many universities remain tied to colonial curricula, this is what Cloete (2016) refers to as the continued dominance of Euro-North-American-centric knowledge systems, and exclusionary institutional cultures.

The term "Euro-North American-centric" refers to perspectives, ideologies, or frameworks that are predominantly shaped by European and North American historical, cultural, intellectual, and political traditions (Fox, 2007). This term critiques the tendency of Western scholarship, policies, and global narratives to prioritise and universalise experiences, values, and knowledge systems rooted in Western contexts – often marginalising or excluding indigenous and African perspectives. In education, a Euro-North American-centric approach manifests in curricula, pedagogies, and institutional structures that reflect Western epistemologies while marginalising other knowledge systems such as African or Indigenous knowledge (Fox, 2007).

These enduring inequalities reveal that the transition from segregated schooling to inclusive education has been incomplete, prompting urgent calls for deeper structural change such as national equity audits or transformation progress reports (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2022).

This historical context is crucial for understanding the current challenges facing South African higher education. It foregrounds the need for a decolonial policy approach that acknowledges this legacy and actively works to dismantle the systems that perpetuate marginalisation in the post-apartheid era.

2   The Decolonial Lens

The decolonial lens provides a transformative framework for analysing higher education policy in South Africa by exposing the embedded coloniality in knowledge systems and institutional design. Rather than viewing policy reform as a neutral process, it reveals how epistemic hierarchies – which are rooted in missionary education and apartheid logic, continue to shape whose knowledge is considered valid. Drawing on thinkers such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), this perspective critiques the systemic structures – disciplinary boundaries, funding mechanisms, and quality controls – that marginalise African intellectual traditions. Decoloniality thus shifts the conversation from inclusion as access to inclusion as epistemic justice, interrogating who defines knowledge and how power is institutionalised (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

This lens interprets South Africa's historical trajectory not as a linear progression toward equity, but as a series of disruptions, impositions, and resistances that have produced enduring inequalities in access, language, representation, and cultural belonging. It critically reframes the post-1994 policy landscape, noting that while democratic reforms aimed to redress access, they often left underlying structures – such as curricula, language hierarchies, and institutional governance – untouched. Decolonial critique thus shifts the policy conversation from quantitative expansion (i. e., enrolment targets and infrastructure) to qualitative transformation – whose knowledge is taught, valued, and institutionalised (Kelebogile, 2020).

To strengthen this theoretical positioning, the critique should be contextualised within broader frameworks of neoliberalism and educational performativity (Ball, 2003), which illuminate how policies reduce transformation to managerial indicators while preserving the colonial logics embedded in governance systems. Crucially, the decolonial lens foregrounds epistemic justice as the foundation of inclusivity. This involves not only diversifying perspectives but fundamentally questioning the colonial roots of educational content and pedagogical authority. It resists the superficial inclusion of marginalised voices within dominant frameworks and instead advocates for dismantling the very frameworks that perpetuate exclusion (Omodan, 2024).

In this context, *Ubuntu* emerges as an important ethical-philosophical complement to the decolonial critique. *Ubuntu* centres values of relationality, mutual recognition, and collective well-being. These principles are largely absent from colonial-era educational

policy. When applied to higher education, *Ubuntu* urges policy frameworks to prioritise social cohesion, restorative justice, and participatory governance. It moves policy beyond technocratic reform toward humanising transformation (Hungwe et al., 2023).

A decolonial analysis, therefore, calls for a reorientation of South African higher education policy – from merely accommodating diversity to actively dismantling inherited structures of epistemic privilege. It invites institutions to adopt policy tools that recognise local knowledges, support multilingualism, and engage students and communities in co-constructing inclusive academic spaces. As a lens, it is both diagnostic, revealing the depth of structural inequality, and prescriptive, offering pathways for educational justice grounded in African values and intellectual traditions (Maluleke & Nadar, 2022).

3   Legacies and Continuities of Exclusion

While South Africa has formally transitioned from apartheid to democracy, many of the structural and cultural legacies of colonial and apartheid education continue to shape the landscape of higher education. These continuities are not simply fragments of the past, but are actively reproduced through institutional policies, pedagogical practices, and linguistic hierarchies that sustain exclusion and marginalisation.

The continued dominance of Western academic paradigms is not merely an oversight, but a symptom of institutional self-preservation. These paradigms confer symbolic capital aligned with global university rankings and international funding bodies, reinforcing a logic of compliance rather than critical emancipation. As such, inclusion efforts become performative – retaining colonial logics under new rhetoric. A critical interrogation must ask: whose interests are preserved when African knowledge systems remain optional rather than foundational?

This concern has been echoed in the CHE's (2022) analysis of university transformation, which documents resistance within institutions to embed indigenous knowledge systems at the core of academic structures.

One of the most enduring legacies is the dominance of English and Afrikaans in higher education, which reinforces the marginalisation of indigenous African languages. Despite constitutional recognition of multilingualism, African languages are often confined to symbolic use or relegated to peripheral spaces within universities. This language hierarchy not only limits epistemic access for students from non-dominant linguistic backgrounds, however, it also erodes their cultural identity and sense of belonging within academic institutions (Alexander, 2005). Language, therefore, operates not merely as a medium of instruction, but as a gatekeeper to participation, voice, and legitimacy in the knowledge economy.

Institutional culture is another domain where exclusion persists. Many universities continue to reflect Euro-North American norms and values in their curricula, codes of conduct, and spatial organisation. These environments often privilege Western modes of knowledge production and academic expression, rendering African epistemologies invisible or secondary.

As Cloete (2016) notes, the continued dominance of Western academic paradigms is not merely an oversight but a symptom of institutional self-preservation. These paradigms confer symbolic capital through alignment with global rankings and funding criteria, sustaining compliance over critical transformation. Inclusion efforts thus risk becoming rhetorical, replicating colonial logics rather than dismantling them.

This dynamic emphasises how African knowledge systems are frequently positioned as supplemental rather than fundamental components of academic life, which serves to uphold established hierarchies of legitimacy. For students and staff from historically marginalised communities, this creates a form of "epistemic alienation" – a disconnect between their lived experiences and the dominant academic culture (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The persistence of colonial symbols, hierarchical governance models, and standardised metrics of academic success further exemplifies how exclusion is embedded in institutional structures.

The effects of these legacies are visible in student activism. The vocal 2015 movements, such as *Rhodes Must Fall* – which campaigned for the removal of statues and colonial figures like the Cecil Rhodes statues at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and *Fees Must Fall* – which started at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) protesting against rising and unaffordable tuition fees, demanding greater access to higher education – these movements drew national attention to the ways in which universities remain sites of symbolic, material, and epistemic violence. De Schryver (2021) defines epistemic violence is occurring when people's ideas, histories, and lived experiences are silenced and ignored, making it seem as if they either do not exist or do not matter. These protests called for more than the fall of the Rhodes statues and financial relief; they demanded deep curricular transformation, the recognition of African knowledge systems, and institutional cultures that affirm rather than marginalise Black identity (Trippe, 2019; Hlatshwayo, 2023). Such demands reflect an acute awareness that inclusion cannot be achieved through representation alone; it must be accompanied by the restructuring of space, knowledge, and power.

Taken together, these examples highlight that exclusion in South African higher education is not a historical artefact but a systemic condition that reproduces inequality through seemingly neutral policies and inherited practices. Addressing this condition requires confronting the institutionalised assumptions that define what counts as

legitimate knowledge, who belongs, and on what terms. A decolonial and inclusive policy approach must therefore contend with these legacies as active forces in the present – not as problems of the past to be commemorated, but as injustices to be dismantled.

These systemic exclusions are perhaps most visibly contested in South Africa's historically White institutions, such as UCT. While UCT has taken steps toward transformation, such as establishing a Disability Service and supporting first-generation students, it remains symbolic of the tensions between institutional reform and deep structural change. The Rhodes Must Fall protests at UCT did not simply call for the removal of the statue; they exposed the symbolic and material ways in which colonial legacies continue to shape everyday student experiences. These included the lack of curriculum diversity, alienating campus spaces, language policy barriers, and the marginal presence of Black academics and administrators (Cornell, 2021; Karisa et al., 2024).

Such moments of rupture reveal the limits of inclusionary policy frameworks that do not fundamentally disrupt inherited hierarchies. They also highlight the importance of policy reform that is responsive not only to material disparities, but to cultural, epistemological, and spatial exclusions embedded within university structures. In light of these continuities, the following section critically examines how post-1994 higher education policies have attempted to address issues of inclusion and transformation, and assesses the extent to which they succeed or fall short in dismantling these deep-rooted systems of exclusion.

4   Evaluating Current Policies: Between Reform and Resistance

In response to the persistence of exclusion in higher education, the South African government has implemented several policies aimed at redressing historical inequalities. The *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (2013) and the *University Capacity Development Programme* (UCDP, rolled out in 2018) are among the flagship initiatives designed to promote transformation through increased access, staff development, and curriculum reform. These policies present a blueprint for higher education that acknowledges historical injustices and aspire to redress them, not only by widening access but also by reimagining how institutions validate knowledge, support students, and engage with communities.

However, despite their progressive intent, these policies often fall short in practice. While access has improved quantitatively, through enrolment growth and financial aid expansion, transformation at the epistemic and institutional level, such as student/ staff demographics or curriculum review outcomes remain uneven (CHE, 2022). Cur-

ricula remain immersed in Euro-North American traditions, often sidelining indigenous knowledge in both content and approach. While language policies often highlight inclusivity, their implementation frequently privileges bureaucratic compliance over meaningful cultural and intellectual change needed for genuine reform. As a result, many universities remain shaped by hierarchical structures that reproduce inequality under the appearance of neutrality.

The superficiality of many policy reforms lies in their instrumental rationality: they approach transformation as a measurable output rather than a structural undoing. Inclusion is framed as an administrative deliverable rather than an ontological shift in how universities understand knowledge, community, and justice. This technocratic framing reduces decoloniality to tokenism, avoiding the unsettling ethical and political questions that decolonial theory demands. This critique aligns with Ball's (2003) theory of policy performativity, which argues that neoliberal regimes translate complex educational aims into quantifiable indicators, thereby masking inequality under a veil of reform.

Although South Africa's constitution promotes multilingualism, most universities continue to prioritise English and Afrikaans as mediums of instruction. This perpetuates the marginalisation of African languages and, by extension, the marginalisation of students whose identities and worldviews are intimately tied to those languages. Without robust support for African languages in teaching, research, and administration, policies aimed at inclusivity risk reinforcing the very exclusions they seek to undo (Alexander, 2005).

Nevertheless, some institutions have introduced targeted interventions that gesture toward inclusive reform. At UCT, for instance, the establishment of the Disability Service has created mechanisms for academic accommodations, accessible technologies, and individual support. These efforts are aligned with the *White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2015) and reflect a broader attempt to address intersectional exclusions within the academy (Karisa et al., 2024). However, even such initiatives, while commendable, often operate in silos and are not fully integrated into the university's broader transformation agenda. To align disability inclusion with a decolonial agenda, it is essential to move beyond the biomedical model and embrace inclusive philosophies such as *Ubuntu*, which view all forms of embodiment as equally dignified and socially interdependent. As Karisa et al. (2024) argue, embedding disability justice within decolonial higher education requires addressing spatial, epistemological, and institutional design biases that historically excluded disabled Black bodies from both academic recognition and full civic participation.

Furthermore, student-led movements such as Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall have revealed the limits of top-down policy interventions. These movements were driven not only by demands for financial access, but by critiques of institutional cultures that remain alienating and unresponsive to Black lived experiences. Their calls for curriculum decolonisation, greater staff diversification, and recognition of African epistemologies underscore the gap between policy commitments and lived realities on campus (Hlatshwayo, 2023; Trippe, 2019).

Taken together, these developments suggest that while South African higher education policy has evolved in form, it has not yet achieved transformation in substance. The persistence of exclusionary norms, coupled with the superficial application of decolonial rhetoric, points to the need for a fundamentally different approach – one that moves beyond access metrics and procedural compliance and instead centres epistemic justice, relational ethics, and participatory governance. The next section outlines such an approach, proposing a decolonial policy framework rooted in African philosophies such as *Ubuntu* and committed to dismantling the enduring legacies of epistemic and structural inequality.

5 Towards a Decolonial Policy Framework for Inclusive Higher Education

Transforming South African higher education requires more than incremental reform; it demands a paradigmatic shift grounded in decolonial thought and African humanist philosophies such as *Ubuntu*. This framework challenges not only the symptoms of exclusion, but the foundational assumptions that have historically structured knowledge, power, and belonging within the university. It calls for policy models that are not merely technocratic, but emancipatory, co-constructed, and contextually rooted (Zembylas, 2018).

An emancipatory policy model cannot emerge from within the institutional grammar of coloniality. It must rewire epistemic infrastructures – from redefining peer review standards to dismantling the colonial underpinnings of academic disciplines. Therefore, *Ubuntu* is not simply a moral anchor, but a counter-hegemonic methodology; inviting dialogical, non-hierarchical, and intergenerational modes of policy co-creation that challenge the power of audit cultures and neoliberal systems of measurement. To achieve coherence with historical analysis, this framework must be explicitly grounded in the documented failures of the 1995 and 2013 White Papers to translate access into structural change (Badat, 2010). These failures underscore why future pathways must move beyond rhetoric and toward institutional redesign.

To operationalise this, universities must embed decolonial commitments into policy instruments such as institutional development plans, senate curriculum reviews, and

governance protocols. This involves introducing mandatory modules on African phi-
losophy and decolonial thought, reforming hiring and promotion criteria to recognise
community-engaged scholarship, and establishing accountability structures that
evaluate transformation through both qualitative and cultural indicators. In doing so,
the governance and practice of higher education can shift from symbolic alignment to
structural realignment with decolonial imperatives.

To translate these principles into actionable governance reforms, universities must
establish policy units that embed community voices into institutional decision-making.
This could include forming community advisory boards, integrating participatory
budgeting processes, and co-developing local curricula with civic actors and indigenous
knowledge holders. These governance practices are not merely consultative, they also
operationalise decoloniality by dismantling academic elitism and affirming the legiti-
macy of grassroots knowledge production (Ntsele, 2024). Policy frameworks that
institutionalise horizontal partnerships between universities and communities offer a
scalable path toward ethical, responsive, and socially anchored transformation.

A decolonial policy framework centres epistemic justice as its foundation, recognising
the systemic erasure of African knowledge systems and the continued privileging of
Euro-North-American epistemologies. It rejects the tokenistic inclusion of diversity
within existing paradigms and instead advocates for the redistribution of epistemic
authority. This involves rethinking curricula, pedagogy, institutional governance, and
accountability mechanisms through African worldviews and histories (Adam, 2020).

Complementing this is the *Ubuntu* ethic, which offers a distinctly African lens for
reimagining educational relations. *Ubuntu*, commonly expressed as *"I am because we
are,"* prioritises community, interdependence, and human dignity (Muyonga, 2024).
Applied to policy, *Ubuntu* compels institutions to cultivate inclusive cultures of care,
respect, and mutual upliftment. It moves higher education from a competitive, indi-
vidualistic model to one that fosters relational accountability, participatory decision-
making, and ethical responsiveness. Table 1 outlines five core principles of a decolonial
policy framework for Higher education, linking each principle to practical policy
implications.

Table 1: Decolonial Policy Framework for Inclusive Higher Education

Principle	Description	Policy Implication
Epistemic Pluralism	Affirming the Legitimacy of African Knowledge Systems and Plural Epistemologies	Integrate Local Philosophies, Histories, and Languages Into Core Curricula and Research Priorities
***Ubuntu* Ethic**	Embedding Relational, Community-Centred Values Into Institutional Cultures	Mandate Value-Based Leadership, Communal Consultation, and Restorative Practices in Policy Processes
Cultural-Linguistic Justice	Promoting Indigenous Languages and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy	Develop Multilingual Instruction Strategies and Support African Language Scholarship and Translation
Participatory Redress	Involving Marginalised Stakeholders in Shaping Institutional Policies	Institutionalise Co-Governance Structures, Including Student, Staff, and Community Representation
Structural Transformation	Dismantling Inherited Hierarchies in Governance, Staffing, and Pedagogy	Redesign Hiring, Funding, and Assessment Criteria to Reflect Equity and Contextual Relevance

Together, these principles move beyond the rhetoric of transformation to offer a grounded and actionable vision for change. This approach insists that transformation must be lived, felt, and experienced – not only measured in numbers or captured in compliance reports.

By centring African knowledge, relational ethics, and community engagement, a decolonial policy framework has the potential to reimagine higher education as a space of liberation rather than exclusion. It offers South African universities a chance not just redress the injustices of the past, but to co-create futures where all identities, histories, and ways of knowing are valued equally.

6   Reimagining Higher Education Futures: Operationalising Decolonial Inclusivity

Realising a truly inclusive and decolonial higher education system in South Africa requires more than philosophical commitment; it demands sustained, systemic implementation. The proposed framework of epistemic pluralism, *Ubuntu*, structural transformation, cultural-linguistic justice, and participatory redress must be operationalised across the policy, pedagogical, and institutional domains.

Ubuntu offers a critical entry point for reimagining academic culture. Its emphasis on relationality, mutual care, and collective dignity reframes higher education not as a competitive, individualistic enterprise, but as a space for ethical co-existence. In practical terms, this means cultivating inclusive classroom pedagogies, empathetic leadership practices, and community-responsive curricula. University governance structures must adopt decision-making models that are dialogical and accountable to

historically marginalised voices, both within and beyond the institution (Hungwe et al., 2023).

Meaningful transformation also requires shifting how success and accountability are defined. Traditional metrics such as graduation rates, research outputs, and global rankings often obscure the lived experiences of students and staff navigating historically exclusionary spaces. A decolonial lens insists that institutional success must be measured by the extent to which policies advance equity, cultural affirmation, and intellectual justice. This includes regular audits of curriculum content, language use, and staff demographics, along with qualitative assessments of belonging, participation, and epistemic representation (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018).

Collaborative partnerships with communities are essential for grounding educational policy in social reality. Institutions must co-create knowledge with students, indigenous knowledge holders, and civil society actors, moving away from extractive models toward reciprocal and emancipatory engagement. These partnerships also support the implementation of inclusive curricula that reflect local contexts while nurturing global consciousness (Omodan, 2024).

Operationalising decolonial inclusivity further requires investment in capacity development, particularly for academics, administrators, and curriculum designers. Workshops on African philosophies, curriculum co-design labs, and multilingual academic resources can equip institutions to bridge the gap between transformation rhetoric and practice (Ntsele, 2024).

Finally, fostering a more inclusive future demands a commitment to mentorship and succession planning that empowers a new generation of scholars – especially women, people with disabilities, and scholars from rural and working-class backgrounds – to participate in shaping higher education. Inclusivity must be embedded not as a compliance measure, but as an ethical imperative and institutional ethos (Ntsele, 2024).

Reimagining higher education in this way invites South African institutions to not only confront their colonial pasts, but to co-create responsive, just, and humanising futures. The final section outlines concluding reflections and recommendations for embedding this framework in long-term policy planning and institutional transformation.

7   Governance for Decolonial Transformation

While curriculum transformation and epistemic justice are central to decoloniality, governance structures continue to be a crucial yet less understood area for systemic change. Decolonising governance entails disrupting hierarchies that centralise author-

ity in elite managerial bodies while marginalising students, staff, and local communities. This involves democratising decision-making forums, revising institutional statutes to decentralise power, and establishing open accountability procedures based on relational leadership models rather than extractive ones. A decolonial approach to governance must institutionalise ethical responsiveness by prioritising relational accountability, participatory deliberation, and multilingual communication norms within academic councils, senates, and university boards (Maqashalala, 2025).

Drawing from Mbembe's (2019) critique of the colonial university, meaningful decolonisation must engage governance as a space where institutional memory, authority, and symbolic power are distributed. Paquet (2008) notes, governance reform requires an ontological shift – from viewing leadership as control to embracing it as stewardship. South African universities can actualise this by embedding *Ubuntu* into leadership criteria and performance evaluations, emphasising humility, service, and social reciprocity. Moreover, policy design must include community-nominated stakeholders in governance structures, such as university councils, ensuring shared authorship of institutional missions and responsiveness to local contexts.

Decolonial governance is not merely about inclusion, but about transforming the rules by which institutions operate. In practical terms, this may involve establishing rotational leadership models, anchoring decisions in cultural advisory forums, and legislating a shift away from managerialist metrics toward justice-based outcome evaluations. By enshrining these commitments in institutional policies, South African universities can transition from symbolic representation to substantive decolonial change.

8   Governance as a Site of Knowledge Justice

Beyond structural inclusion, governance reform must engage with the ontological question of what counts as legitimate knowledge in institutional policy-making. Academic boards and policy committees often operate through inherited Western procedural norms that exclude African, and indigenous epistemologies from shaping institutional futures. As scholars such as Keet and Tibitts (2024) and Hlatshwayo (2023) argue, epistemological access is not merely about adding diverse knowledges, but about restructuring the very frameworks by which knowledge is validated and authorised.

Embedding decoloniality into governance thus requires revising not only who participates in decision-making, but also the epistemic rules under which decisions are made. This means disrupting procedural neutrality and interrogating how Eurocentric traditions have been embedded in committee practices, strategic planning norms, and evaluation criteria. To do so, institutions must foster dialogical processes that are situated, context-

sensitive, and historically aware, drawing on African ethical-political philosophies such as *Ubuntu* to frame governance as collective responsibility rather than a bureaucratic function.

One practical pathway is to include indigenous knowledge practitioners and student leaders as voting members in curriculum and planning committees, thereby ensuring co-authorship of transformation agendas. Furthermore, institutional audits could be designed to assess not only demographic representation, but also epistemic influence – assessing the ways in which governance frameworks either promote or impede the growth of several knowledge systems. Governance then becomes a site not merely of administration but of justice-oriented knowledge creation, enabling South African universities to disrupt their colonial inheritances and reimagine their institutional futures through participatory and epistemically plural frameworks (Willand, 2021).

9   Conclusion and Recommendations

South Africa's higher education landscape remains burdened by enduring legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and structural exclusion. While significant policy efforts have been made to expand access and promote transformation, they have often failed to address the deeper epistemic and cultural foundations of inequality. This paper has argued for a decolonial policy framework that reorientates inclusivity around epistemic justice, relational ethics, and community-driven engagement. Anchored in African philosophies such as *Ubuntu*, this framework moves beyond symbolic reform toward substantive transformation.

This paper critically examines the evolution of South African higher education policy through a decolonial lens, arguing that true inclusivity must go beyond demographic representation to include epistemic justice, cultural recognition, and participatory governance. Historical legacies of colonial education continue to influence institutional logics, often reinforcing exclusion even under reformist banners. By integrating *Ubuntu* and decolonial thought, the paper proposes a transformative vision of inclusivity that centres African knowledge systems and ethical frameworks.

Importantly, the paper expands the focus beyond curriculum and pedagogy to highlight governance as a crucial, yet often overlooked, aspect of decolonial transformation. It demonstrates how reforming institutional leadership, decision-making processes, and knowledge validation norms is essential for breaking the colonial legacy embedded in university governance. Drawing on theorists like Mbembe, and Hlatswayo, they outline practical interventions like rotational leadership, cultural advisory forums, and epistemically inclusive committees. These governance strategies aim to change the very basis of how power and legitimacy circulate in higher education.

To embed this framework into institutional and national policy contexts, the following key recommendations are proposed:

(1) Curriculum Reform for Epistemic Justice

Review and revise curricula to incorporate African knowledge systems, histories, and languages as central rather than supplementary components of teaching and research.

(2) Multilingual and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Develop language policies that support instruction in African languages and promote linguistic inclusion as a right, not a barrier.

(3) Participatory Governance Models

Institutionalise co-governance structures that include students, academic staff, and community stakeholders in policy formulation and curriculum development.

(4) Values-Based Institutional Culture

Foster leadership and professional development grounded in *Ubuntu* principles of empathy, dignity, and collective accountability.

(5) Inclusive Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

Redefine success metrics to evaluate inclusivity based on cultural affirmation, student experience, and representational equity – not merely outputs.

(6) Sustainable Partnerships and Community Engagement

Create long-term partnerships with local communities and indigenous knowledge holders to democratise knowledge production and contextualise policy decisions.

By implementing these recommendations, South African universities can move toward a higher education system that not only redresses historical injustices, but actively cultivates inclusive, humanising, and socially responsive academic environments. True transformation will not emerge from adapting outdated structures, but from rebuilding them through sustained partnerships, epistemic humility, and a deep investment in African-led intellectual traditions.

Future research should explore how these governance innovations can be adapted across different institutional contexts, ensuring that decolonial transformation is both structurally grounded and contextually relevant. Only through such comprehensive rethinking of policy, curriculum, and governance can South African higher education move from symbolic gestures to meaningful inclusion.

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