# South African Higher Education 30 Years into Democracy (1994–2024): Challenges, Opportunities, and Future Prospects

Daniel N. Mlambo[1], Thabo Saul[2] & Thamsanqa Buys[2]

[1] Office of the Executive Dean, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa

[2] Department of Public Management, Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa

Correspondence: Daniel N. Mlambo, Office of the Executive Dean, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa. E-mail: MlamboDN@tut.ac.za

**Abstract**

Most sub-Saharan African (SAA) states have massive populations, which bring many social dynamics and challenges for domestic policy in many sectors. This stems from reforms that, in most cases, require governmental intervention. In the education sector, most youth attend government schools in large numbers. Some of the challenges these numbers create include overcrowding, lack of technology, lack of qualified teachers, high student-to-teacher ratios, poverty in some households, and inequality. South Africa has 26 universities, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, and private colleges. These institutions, especially those the government runs, typically see a massification of local and international students studying at them. This raises the question of whether it is a population or government failure. This question stems from the fact that 26 public institutions cannot cater to the many students transitioning from secondary to higher education (HE). Using a qualitative research methodology, I contend that the South African government should invest more in HE to solve the transition problem as the population grows with limited university space to accommodate everyone.

**Keywords:** South Africa, higher education, historically White universities, historically Black universities, massification

## 1. Introduction

Globally, and because of education's ability to foster social and economic mobility and thus positively affect families, communities, and cities in general, Smith (2021) referred to education as a public good, and this is from its broader context of basic, secondary, and higher education (Note 1) (HE(Note 2)). However, in this paper, we will focus on the former. Pelser (2005) contended that rapid changes in human populations' growth, mortality, and settlement patterns have, over the years, been described as the most critical set of events to occur in human history and as one of the leading social changes globally. This population growth has affected the structure and organization of most societies, groups, and institutions and the physical environment within which these processes function. Thus, the population's emergent size, geographic distribution, and demographic composition will drive future social, political, economic, and environmental changes.

South Africa is a diverse state with a multicultural democracy of approximately 60 million people. Until 1994, the apartheid ideology created a scenario of inferior educational opportunities for people of colour. The disadvantaged population's protest actions often highlighted education. For example, thousands of secondary students rejected the Afrikaans language as a teaching medium. Tertiary education (Note 3) reinforced race and class differences under apartheid, and disparities in resource distribution and curricula often maintained what Ramdass (2009) referred to as the apartheid mentality. 2024 marks exactly 30 years since South Africa transformed from apartheid to democratic rule. At the same time, access to HE received much attention from the 1980s and has received even greater attention since 1994.

From a South African perspective, the newly elected African National Congress (ANC) government shifted to achieving equity in many aspects, including education from basic (often referred to as primary) to HE and how the educational system functioned. However, although the government has achieved much over the years within the HE sector, the Black majority faces challenges in gaining access to HE in South Africa. During the National Party's administration during the apartheid era, its policy of separate development consistently denied the Black majority

many aspects of tertiary education and access to well-resourced institutions that catered mainly to minority White students. The post-1994 government has tried eliminating many apartheid policies, but challenges still prevail (Boughey, 2003). These include increasing enrollments (often called massification (Note 4)), increased population, and inadequate infrastructure. The increase in the levels of HE post-1994 has also resulted in the admission of the formerly marginalized Black population.

Thus, in observing the history of education, it is possible to deduce that a large number of students have gained access to education (especially HE) from which they were previously excluded mainly because they belonged to a disadvantaged social class or marginalized race or ethnic group (Cross and Carpentier, 2009). South Africa is home to 26 (Note 5) Public institutions of higher learning, Technical Vocational and Training (TVET) colleges, and private colleges, all of which meet the high demand for study places at higher education institutions (HEIs). This has increased enrollments beyond capacity, which has put a strain on many HEIs in the face of limited resources. Lecturing large classes has posed a significant challenge to lecturers in today's era, where massification has continued to increase (Nyagope, 2023). To address some of these challenges in South Africa, Akoojee and Nkomo (2007) called for a synergy of creative strategies to engage issues of redress and access to HE remains one mechanism for achieving this. Although enabling access to improve student success instead of simply ensuring their participation (access to participation) is necessary, the adequacy of these initiatives must be evaluated in the context of institutional transformation.

The rest of this paper is divided as follows: In section two, we examine the history of HE in South Africa. In section three, we ponder the massification or challenges of South African HE. In section four, we examine the role of government in steering South Africa's HE sector. Section five offers the conclusion and recommendations we drew from the literature.

## 2. Historiographical Overview of HE in South Africa and the Transition Dilemma

Some historians consider the origins of HEIs to be the Alexandrian Museum, the Great Library of Alexandria, and monasticism, all of which date back to the second and third centuries BC and AD in Egypt. In contrast, others (Cleaveland, 2008; Kane, 2016; Saad, 1983) link HEIs to the founding in the Middle Ages (1100s–1200s AD) of the University of Timbuktu, regarded as the oldest in the world and renowned for contributing significantly to Islamic culture and for producing texts that help us understand the historical background of the period's culture. Historians link the emergence of the contemporary university to 1930–1960, when they considered Western education as a means of resisting colonialism. Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2013) observed that the result of European colonial frameworks could be used to understand the contemporary HE architecture in Africa. A cursory historical review reveals that most African states founded at least one national university following their independence, motivated by the belief that these establishments would be essential in tackling matters of national importance.

According to Smith (2021), racialized schooling and the creation of the national education system were the leading causes of racial tensions even before apartheid began in 1948—as early as 1900, which is frequently referred to as pre-apartheid. The Bantu Education Act of 1953, the Extension of University Education Act of 1959, the Coloured Persons Education Act of 1963, and the Indian Education Act of 1965 are among the landmark pieces of post-1948 education legislation that significantly shaped the character and direction of formal education in South Africa.

The University of the Cape of Good Hope's founding in 1873 provides some historical context for HE in South Africa. Victoria College in Stellenbosch was founded in 1859, the South African College in Cape Town in 1829, and Rhodes University in Grahamstown in 1904. Victoria College was renamed Stellenbosch University in 1918, and the South African College as the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1918. The University of South Africa (UNISA) replaced the University of the Cape of Good Hope as the official name. Others came after, including the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), founded in 1922 (previously the South African School of Mines, founded in 1896); the University of Fort Hare (UFH), founded in 1951 (originally the South African Native College); Vista University, founded in 1981; the Medical University of South Africa, founded in 1976; the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE), founded in 1964; and Rand Afrikaans University, founded in 1966. Even though these schools were not massive, they served nearly 62,000 pupils.

Apart from these institutions, HEIs have carried out numerous responsibilities that have shaped the continual socio-political and economic dynamics between states, societies, and academic oligarchy since their existence. However, modern HE systems in Africa are primarily a product of European colonial frameworks; numerous scholars (Abraham, 2020; Brock-Utne, 1999) believe these were already at play during the pre-colonial settings in Africa (Wolddegiorgis and Doevenspeck, 2013). Apartheid in South Africa severely complicated the HE sector because it created educational inequalities through overt racist policies and limited Blacks' educational potential.

HEIs were also governed and resourced differently, with historically White universities (HWUs) receiving more benefits (finance, administration, number of staff, government subsidies) from the government than historically Black universities (HBUs) did. In contrast, HBUs were more constrained in the decisions they could make. During the apartheid era, the relationship between individual institutions and the state varied considerably, and the four HWUs—Wits, UCT, Rhodes University, and the University of Natal—were allowed a substantial degree of autonomy and subjected to little state interference (Bunting, 2006).

Similarly, the Afrikaans-medium universities—Stellenbosch, UPE, RAU, the University of Pretoria, and the University of Potchefstroom—were accorded a unique space and enjoyed a special status during apartheid that the ideological apparatus provided. However, other HBUs, such as the University of the North, UFH, the University of Venda, the University of Zululand, the University of Transkei, and the University of Bophutatswana, were typically seen as extensions of the Bantustan and homeland bureaucracies. This was also attributable to the extension of the University Education Act, which established these institutions in 1959 and gave the state absolute power and control over these HBUs regarding student admissions, staff, and curricula. Thus, institutional autonomy and academic freedom were permissible as long as they did not conflict with state policy and ideology (Cross, 2015).

Ironically, another significant piece of architecture was designed to impede movement in the case of civil unrest, and such poor design continues to be a significant challenge for HBUs. Again, their mostly rural geographical location also affected their smooth operation, which is still the case today because most normally fail to attract top academic staff. This is because the Bantustans and homelands were established mainly to accommodate most of the Black population. However, these homelands created overcrowding, poverty, and elements of governmental maladministration. Thus, their location further impacted academic life by contributing to the social segregation the apartheid legislation had already introduced (Bozalek and Boughey, 2012). Lefa (2014) contended that the post-1994 HE sector forced the ANC government to reform participation in policymaking because of the need to transform the HE sector in South Africa and ensure access to all citizens. Globally, students are viewed as central to the success of any HEI's attempt to globalize its campus, and students are seen as the primary reason why a university exists in any particular state.

## 3. Massification and Challenges of South African HE: The Fundamental Dynamics

Even before the arrival of Europeans, some HEIs in Africa had already existed for centuries. These include the University of Al-Karawiyyin in Fez, Morrocco; Al-Azhar University of Cairo, Egypt; and the University of Timbuktu in Mali. Nevertheless, most institutions in the 21st century have roots in university colleges created by and affiliated with European universities or Africans trained in Europe. Their significant objectives were training the public sector workforce and teachers for the rapidly expanding secondary education sector. According to Mohamedbhai (2014), rapid economic growth characterized the democratic situation in SAA states in the 1960s, a profile in which youths formed an increasingly larger ratio. From an African perspective, most states have embarked on a mission to ensure that most individuals can access education, which the rapid increase in population has driven. Most states have adopted diverse and varied strategies to make HE education accessible. Their governments believe education is pivotal for social development in providing the necessary human resources and skills required for innovation strategies.

Thus, access to HE is a welcome opportunity for every state because it ensures improved access and brings new opportunities. However, it has become a burden because it also presents numerous challenges. Although there has been an uptake in student enrollment, there has been no improvement in infrastructure, space, teaching staff, or resources provided to students. Most African HEIs are young, dating from the 1960s when most independent movements began gaining momentum. Most HEIs have gained much relatively quickly, but with increased intakes and declining budgets, there is a severe risk of universities losing their influence on HE (Kabla et al., 2018). Governments recognize that education, especially HE, is imperative for economic development to improve sustainability toward human capital. A common notion, especially among the Black population, is that possessing a university diploma or degree means access to better opportunities.

However, intensifying globalization has increased the population and unemployment levels, so obtaining a degree is no longer a guarantee of employment. However, education is still crucial for individuals' upward mobility, particularly the disadvantaged, because it allows them to participate in a knowledge-based economy (Adetiba, 2019). As outlined earlier, South Africa has 26 public institutions, which are too few to accommodate the high annual demand for places among an ever-growing population. This presents numerous challenges for both students and lecturers. These include overcrowded and cramped lecture halls and a high lecturer-student ratio, significantly impacting the quality of teaching and marking of assessments. Even the Department of Higher Education and

Training (DHET), through its 2015 Staffing Africa's Universities Framework, attested to the fact that improved staff-student ratios lead to an in-quality throughput and success in the system and that the current average staff-student ratio is inadequate for the kinds of measures that are necessary to meet the needs of the majority of students being admitted to HEIs. The DHET (2015) recognized that the student ratios vary considerably among South African universities, with the best ratio in the better-established and endowed HWUs and the worst in the universities that serve many students, mostly from previously disadvantaged backgrounds (Mlambo et al., 2023).

According to Pillay (2020), HE has been compelled to respond globally to the demands of globalization and the massification of education. From a South African perspective, 1994 ushered in a new democratic dispensation that legally and morally had to meet the critical imperative of addressing over four decades of inequalities across all facets of South African life, including education. This meant that education was now accessible to all South Africans (Pillay, 2020). Numerous student struggles have, over the years, continued to shed light on how the expansion of HE is putting severe strain on state resources, HEIs, and individual families, especially those who are accessing HE for the first time—even though high fees continue to burden many prospective students yearly. This is because rapidly rising enrollment numbers continue to increase yearly (Allais, 2020).

With the need to improve access to HE, especially for the previously marginalized population, the government responded in 1996 with the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), applications for which have grown significantly over the last few years. However, this aid has not overcome some challenges because increased enrollments continue to overwhelm the DHET(Note 6). These increased enrollments have led to student protests through the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements (Mokoena, 2021).

Notwithstanding its challenges, the NSFAS has enhanced the quality and relevance of teaching and learning, strengthened governance management, and ensured adequate funding and sustainability. It is worth noting that HWUs also had to embrace the massification challenge that introduced Black students into the HE system. Despite their history, they needed to reflect and accommodate the glaring demands for transformation. This process has also not been easy over the past 30 years of democratic rule because these institutions are known to act slowly on transformation if they embrace it (Urson and Kessi, 2018). The need to transform these institutions peaked in the 2015–2016 period when nationwide protests highlighted student grievances on institutional transformation; these coincided with calls for reasonable tuition fees deemed exclusionary for people experiencing poverty (Hlatshwayo, 2020). The HE space ought to reflect the national landscape in its systems, processes, and population, particularly in a country that has been under the principles of the Reconstruction and Development Programme since 1994. However, massification unfortunately needs the expansion of universities. Still, until their construction takes place, existing universities must accommodate all who deserve to receive HE.

Ever-increasing student debt, insufficient student accommodation, graduate unemployment, and yearly student protests are additional problems. Protests occur at most HBUs because of their many challenges (Pramjeeth et al., 2023). Some fault lines confronting South Africa's HE sector are part of a broader package of challenges. Concerns about politics, the economy, and broader public policy further challenge the South African government. Overcoming the challenges HE encounters is a daunting proposition. Some are complex and closely intertwined with South Africa's history, the primary and secondary education system, the economy and job market, and supplementary structures, not to mention the ambition of the masses (Public Servants Association, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed some of these challenges, with the numerous lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 forcing most institutions to adapt to emergency remote teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, most institutions (especially HBUs) were unprepared for such change. Most were left behind politically, economically, and educationally, which drastically affected primarily the marginalized Black population living below the poverty line. This stems from the fact that most of South Africa's society falls into what Knowles et al. (2023) called the "poor" category (p. 12). Apart from their being historically disadvantaged HEIs, HBUs are also often categorized because of their geographical location, that is, in rural areas, which most spaces of society conceive negatively. Rural university students do not have access to the same options as their HWU counterparts do, a disadvantage considered the brainchild of the apartheid regime (Ntombela and Ntombela, 2022).

## 4. The Role of Government in Steering South Africa's HE Sector: A Need for Reform

The ANC government inherited a broken system that needed immense restructuring in almost all sectors of the economy. These form an HE perspective and include race, types of institutions (university or Technikon), location, and language of instruction (English and Afrikaans) that had profound implications for the quality of education available to different population groups. Thus, post-1994, the government has aimed most of its policies at developing a coherent system that will offer quality HE education for all and contribute to the nation's economic

growth. In any state, the government runs many HEIs and is pivotal in attending to and steering the challenges encountered. South African HEIs, especially HBUs, need robust governance, leadership, and management because they are on the front lines of these challenges, often the core of dysfunctional government entities, and this is true for HBUs in South Africa.

Although all institutions have checks and balances (through their governance structures, such as councils), the South African government's role, especially the DHET, is of utmost importance. Leadership bodies such as the Student Representative Council (SRC) also play a significant role because the government cannot manage alone. The government articulates many goals it aims to achieve through its National Development Plan (NDP). The primary purpose of this policy document is to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030 through growing an inclusive economy. It also aims to enhance opportunities for young people. The NDP views education as essential in attaining other development goals. Chapter 9 of the NDP (Improving Education, Training, and Innovation) identifies education as central to South Africa's long-term development needs through the following broad initiatives:

(1) Increase the number of university mathematics and science entrants to 450,000.

(2) Increase graduation rates by 25%.

(3) Increase the participation rate at universities by at least 70% from 950,000 to 1.62 million.

(4) Increase the percentage of PhD qualified staff in the HE sector from the current 34% to over 75% (National Planning Commission, 2011).

However, drawing from the above and considering the many social challenges facing South Africa (one being massification), it is unlikely that the NDP will reach some of its intended targets. According to Mlambo et al. (2021), South African institutions should brace themselves for no further HE expansion because the government has no immediate plans for building new HEIs. Even if that is not the case, these are normally long-term projects that take years to realize. Thus, the DHET should establish minimum accreditation standards for its institutions in the short and long term. Although these are already in place, they should be constantly reviewed regarding well-equipped libraries, office space for lecturers, employability of graduates, alignment of the curriculum to the market, and staff-student ratios. With limited HEIs and a growing number of students yearly, the South African government, through the DHET, is in a severe predicament in dealing with these challenges, especially in the short term.

With 26 HEIs, over 50 TVET colleges, and a growing youth population, the government must consider whether these institutions are enough to cater to the annual massification. As stated earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic brought many unforeseen and unexpected challenges but showed that classes could continue online or virtually. Following UNISA, Africa's most significant learning institution, the government can draw on other ideas about how to deal with massification by steering other South African institutions to offer fully-fledged online programs parallel to in-person programs. This will give students more opportunities to enter university and slightly reduce massification in HEIs. There is a system-wide need to address some of the mentioned challenges, and policies and programs should be drafted with the support of system-level bodies and be appropriately monitored and evaluated.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper, we highlight the unique trajectory of South African HE, which has been 30 years into democracy. Despite numerous challenges confronting the HE sector, progress has been made on numerous fronts. However, there is still much to be done. The impact of current challenges goes beyond immediate political and social ills, affecting democracy and socioeconomic development. We underlined the essential role of the DHET, university councils, and SRCs in enhancing and driving effective HE reforms in the short and long term. The concern about more significant participation in HE is not new in South Africa; however, it has become urgent and imperative. Despite many challenges, the HE sector has immense potential to contribute to consolidating democracy and social justice, producing critical intellectuals and knowledge, and expanding and improving the economy. Similarly, an HE that serves democracy's purpose helps lay the basis for greater participation in economic and social life while also contributing to social stability (Council of Higher Education, 2004).

In this age of rapid population growth, HEIs in South Africa cannot continue operating in traditional ways. Massification has created challenges for space, staff, teaching material, and financial support. Undoubtedly, the HE sector needs to be more innovative in dealing with the challenges of the 21st century, including massification. Increased management autonomy of HE concerning implementation and a more robust redefinition of the government's role will make this possible. As we mentioned, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it changed teaching and learning, one can utilize the insights into the unequal provision of education to rethink how to advance education as a public good.

The South African government, and the DHET in particular, should consider the following current HE issues in the quest to provide quality education:

(1) An equitable education system that serves the needs of the 21$^{st}$ century is necessary.

(2) Massification and its daily effects on teaching and learning at HEIs must be addressed in the short and long term.

Drawing insights from the above, it is possible to deduce that there is a shortage of resources to meet the high and current demand for student enrollment. As I mentioned earlier regarding UNISA, there has also been diversification of the physical HE sector, especially after COVID-19, with the introduction of distance education centers and open and virtual institutions globally. Thus, the DHET can learn from such initiatives to address current HE challenges. Globally, some states have also encouraged the creation of private institutions to meet the high demand for HE. However, most of them are First World countries and do not have the perspective of South Africa, a Second World country. The majority of Black and formerly marginalized populations face the significant obstacle of funding constraints in gaining access to HE.

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**Notes**

Note 1. The official terminology to distinguish universities post-1994 is research-intensive universities, comprehensive universities, and universities of technology. However, apartheid's legacy has extended various forms of distinction between historically Black or disadvantaged universities and historically White advantaged universities and between rural and urban universities (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014).

Note 2. "HE" refers to higher education institutions (HEIs—universities, universities of technology, and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. HE can be conceptualized as all learning programs leading to qualifications higher than grade 12 or its equivalent in terms of a national qualifications framework, and it also includes tertiary education (Mammadalizade, 2013).

Note 3. Tertiary education and HE are used interchangeably in this paper.

Note 4. From a conceptual perspective, massification means a massive increase in student enrolments in an HEI that cannot absorb the increase.

Note 5. During the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa comprised 36 public HE institutions structured along racial and ethnic lines. These institutions were characterized by a binary divide between 21 universities and 15 Technikons under the administration of the different racially defined education departments.

Note 6. DHET's role is to monitor all HE spectra in South Africa. These encompass universities, universities of technology, TVET colleges, and adult basic education and training. Its mission is, among other things, (1) to create a vibrant HE and training system to equip the youth and adults to meet the social and economic needs of the 21st century and (2) to build a rational, seamless HE system that grasps the intellectual and professional challenges facing South African HE in the 21st century.