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Challenges of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review of the South African Context

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Abstract: This systematic literature review examines the multifaceted challenges of learning and teaching in South African higher education institutions (HEIs). South Africa's higher education landscape is characterised by a unique blend of historical legacies, socio-economic disparities, and a diverse student population, making it a compelling context for investigating the complexities of learning and teaching. Drawing upon a comprehensive search of peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and reports, this review synthesises key findings from the past decade (2012–2022) to shed light on the critical issues faced by HEIs. The review reveals several overarching challenges, which include historical inequalities, inadequate funding and infrastructure, and the demand for curriculum transformation to address 21st-century skills and align with labour market needs, which presents a considerable pedagogical challenge. The review underscores the importance of recognising diverse student backgrounds, languages, and learning preferences in promoting inclusive pedagogical approaches. Recommendations include addressing historical inequalities through targeted interventions, increased funding for HEIs, and faculty development programmes, and leveraging technology to enhance access and engagement. In conclusion, this systematic literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted challenges facing learning and teaching in South African higher education. It underscores the need for context-specific solutions to enhance access, quality, and inclusivity in higher education institutions (HEIs) and calls for continued research and policy initiatives to address these critical issues.

JEL Codes: H52, I22, I23, I24

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1. Introduction

The attainment of quality education in the South African education system is a concern for all stakeholders in the educational sector. Spaul (2013) supports the above statement when he stresses that South Africa has the worst education system of all middle-income countries that participate in cross-national assessments of educational achievement. Generally, the South African government and its Department of Education have no checks and balances over the quality of education (Khan & Iqbal, 2012).



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Alarmingly, the higher education institutions (HEIs), where students are trained for different careers that can effectively run the economy, are of utmost concern. Therefore, the quality of higher education determines the quality of output in terms of graduates who join the labour market (Prakhov, 2023). Therefore, tertiary education is fundamental to the construction of knowledge, the economy, and society in all nations. HEIs are regarded as centres of excellence where students and academics strive for excellence (Kelly, 2017). Therefore, students should access education by attending classes most of the time (Fan, 2012). However, the current educational system has left many students in the trenches of poor educational outcomes due to large classes as well as a shortage of accommodations. The most pressing challenge for academics is how to make teaching strategies effective enough to benefit most students in institutions of higher learning. Many challenges have been identified as factors affecting the quality of higher education in South Africa. For instance, the overpopulation of students in various HEIs influences the quality of education in these institutions (Isa & Yussof, 2015). However, this overpopulation of students does not occur and affects only South Africa. Hornsby et al. (2013) stress that the overcrowding of classrooms in higher education institutions, that situation has brought enormous challenges such as inadequate funding and staffing, deteriorating standards, low-quality graduates, a high student-staff ratio, poor physical facilities, and insufficient equipment. The OECD (2008) and Jawitz (2013) have long projected a dramatic increase in demand for higher education, raising the alarm that such an increase will put more pressure on both developed and developing countries to enrol more students than the system can handle. According to Exeter et al. (2010), there has been a notable rise in the number of students attending universities in the last decade to fifteen years. They give the example of the student population at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, which has increased from 13,000 in 1986 to over 40,000 in 2008 (Exeter et al. 2010). Mohamedbhai (2014) stresses that the overpopulation of students affects not only the quality of education but also graduation rates in African higher education. They state that it remains low. That is the reason most commentators stressed that the manifestation of large classes is not a new phenomenon in higher education Jawitz et al., 2013; Hornsby et al., 2013). A study conducted by Carpenter (2006) at the University of South Carolina in an overcrowded classroom found that teaching in large classes is a new trend in higher education in the United States. In Uganda, overcrowded classrooms are identified as a major factor contributing to various challenges, including insufficient funding and staffing, declining educational standards, production of low-quality graduates, high student-teacher ratios, inadequate physical facilities, and a lack of necessary equipment (Matou, 2018). While this trend continues unabated, it caught many by surprise and was never anticipated in the current political climate in South Africa. It is unbecoming to note that many universities in South Africa face volumes of applicants trying to take advantage of free higher education, pushing the number per class very high (Alibach, et al., 2019). Generally, first-year classes are the ones with large numbers (Daniel, 2017). Inexperienced first-year students often struggle to navigate the complexities of large class sizes and established procedures, leading to feelings of confusion and discomfort (Lynch & Pappas, 2017). The high enrolment rate of students in the South African HEIs has reached an alarming proportion never anticipated in the initial configuration (Mohammedbhai, 2014). The pressure exceeds expectations as the competition for limited spaces outweighs the enrollment targets, leading to overcrowded classes (Mohammedbhai, 2017; Alibach et al. 2019; Lynch & Pappas (2017). The study by Cowling (2013) found that the gross tertiary enrollment ratio in South Africa from 2013 to 2022 increased by 1.8 percentage points (+7.1 percent) in 2022 compared to the



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previous year. With 27.17 percent, the gross tertiary enrollment ratio reached its highest value in the observed period. Notably, the gross tertiary enrollment ratio has continuously increased over the last few years. Such influx has also exacerbated the accommodation of students. Most of them stay in rented places that are not secured. The lack of proper accommodation leads to the vulnerability of students (Cowling, 2013). They are easily harassed by the thugs and miscreants and end up not paying much attention to their studies. The above narrative is supported by University World News (2023) in their comment, when they say, “The massive growth in student numbers has exacerbated a dire shortage of quality, affordable student housing in Africa. It has become one of the major challenges facing the higher education sector on the continent” (UWN, 2023). The crisis is affecting the academic success of students who have shared their experiences with University World News. Apart from a few plans and public-private partnerships, governments and institutions appear to lack the appetite to act. In essence, this high demand for accessing higher education poses a serious threat to funding for basic infrastructure by the national government. Moreover, large classes have negative impacts on the entire institutions of higher learning communities. West & Meier (2020) contend that the faculties where the real implementation of academic programmes takes place are constrained by the shortage of both human and physical resources. Most faculties should contend with a massive increase in enrollment numbers while inadvertently forced to teach in overcrowded venues, exposing shame and suffering.

1.1 Research question

The article reviews the challenges facing higher education institutions in South Africa and aims to develop strategies to mitigate these challenges. The following research questions were posed to understand the gist of the problem:

What challenges are higher education institutions in South Africa facing?

What strategies could be implemented to mitigate these challenges?

1.2. Human capital theory

Theodore Schultz (1902–1928) and Garry Backer (1930–2014) are the two theorists who are credited with establishing human capital theory. This theory posits that human beings can increase their productive capacity through greater education and skills training. Human capital theory views education as an investment in people that increases their productivity and earning potential (Mlambo et al., 2021). To improve their workforce, governments and organisations must make investments in education, training and healthcare. The theory suggests that an educated population is more productive and that the more and better an individual's education, the better their financial rewards and the better the economy will do (Mlambo et al., 2021). Schultz (1960) in Holden & Biddle (2017) reframed education as an investment in human capital, and his theories regarding the connection between the accumulation of human capital and overall economic growth served as the foundation for claims that the government should be in charge of providing the additional funds for education.



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2. Implementation Method

Qualitative methods were employed to answer research questions for the study. Google Scholar database was used to collect and analyse data by examining previous studies dealing with university challenges and crises. This approach involves scrutinising various documents including magazines, books, articles, academic journals, and institutional reports (Musundire, et al., 2020). According to Bowen (2009), every document that contains information can be used for qualitative analysis. The research adopted the READ strategy as an organised technique for reviewing documents and extracting essential data for the study, which may be modified for diverse research inquiries. The four main steps of the READ technique are (i) reading materials, (ii) extracting data, (iii) analysing data, and (iv) distilling conclusions, according to Dalglish et al. (2020). To determine the difficulties South African universities face, a sample of publications was reviewed line by line.

- Read materials: Comprehensive searches were conducted in Google Scholar using pre-defined keywords, and inclusion and exclusion criteria to determine the relevance of each study. Two rounds of pre-testing were carried out before the final sample of articles was coded. Several documents were read until the authors felt enough information was captured.

- Extract data: Data was extracted using Excel spreadsheets where each row was a document and each column was a category of information. Titles, abstracts and full-text articles were screened for relevance and eligibility to the study. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to selected articles.

- Analyse data: Data collection and analysis are iterative and characterized by emergent. The collected data were then analysed using content analysis, a qualitative research method. Data coding was done by assigning codes to the extracted data to identify patterns and themes and identifying recurring themes and concepts that emerged from the coded data.

- Distil findings: The findings were interpreted in the context of the research question and objectives. The findings highlighted several challenges discussed under the following identified themes (Dalglish, et al., 2020).

3. Results and Discussion

The nexus challenges facing institutions of higher learning identified in the review process, some emanate from the past and others from the advent of democracy. South Africa's higher education remains in a state of flux as her institutions of higher learning recalibrate their practices to meet the aims of social, financial, and political equity (Chetty, et al., 2015). There are various significant challenges confronting Higher Education Institutions in South Africa. The study specifically identified inadequate funding and insufficient infrastructure, understaffing, technology integration, online teaching and learning, student debt, inadequate student accommodation, campus unrest and protests, as well as issues related to overcrowding.



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3.1. Inadequate funding and lack of infrastructure

The consensus is that investing in higher education is crucial for a nation's economic growth. The knowledge and skills gained provide substantial lifelong advantages for graduates who succeed (Musundire et al., 2020). Adequate funding is essential for the effective operation of any organization. The institutions of higher learning need more funds for them to operate at their peak level and be able to compete with other institutions globally. Funds are of importance to provide for relevant infrastructure like adequate as well as suitable lecture halls for students to admire their education as well as offices for academics to perform their duties in an enabling environment. Funds are also necessary to provide for the appropriate accommodation of students. Students are coming from different environments. Some come from well-to-do families who can be disturbed if they are housed in an environment that is not conducive to their stay. Thus, the management of higher learning should ensure that they entice both academics and students in all ways so that they can be committed to their work, which is education. By so doing, their morale can be boosted. The results of the research conducted by Ogunode & Jegede (2021) indicate that insufficient infrastructural facilities have a detrimental impact on students' academic performance. This includes overcrowded lecture halls, the delay of lectures due to low morale among academics, a reduction in learning efficiency, and an increase in learning expenses. HEIs are advised to ensure that their institution's facilities are up to par if they want their graduates to successfully compete in the global job market (Isa & Yusoff, 2015). The statements of both Ogunode & Jegede (2021) and Yusoff et al. 2015) prove that higher education funding needs to be taken seriously to avoid demoralising both academics and students. Hence, the main purpose of teaching is to bring fundamental change to students, and that change requires the facilitation of the process of knowledge transmission. In addition, educators must implement suitable instructional strategies that align with specific learning goals. These objectives require appropriate funds to provide necessary learning, teaching, and support materials (Ganyaupfu, 2013). From the above narrative, it is evident that South African education will be a tragedy once this challenge of not providing adequate funds for higher education is resolved.

3.2. Understaffing

The higher education sector currently finds itself in a crisis regarding the size, composition, and capacity of its academic staff. The challenge is multifaceted, involving the slow pace of transformation, regeneration, and change, as well as the ageing workforce and developments in higher education worldwide. Moreover, national growth projections for student numbers over the next five years point to the need to rapidly upscale the recruitment of academic staff. It is calculated that the sector will need to recruit at least 1 200 new academics per annum to respond to historical backlogs, cater or staff attrition and to accommodate planned growth (Department of Higher Education & Training, 2015). In 2021 academic year the student, permanent academic staff ratio was 1:52 (Council on Higher Education, 2021)



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while 1:50,9 in 2016. However, the academic staff student ratios vary greatly between South African Universities being in the better established and endowed universities, and the least adequate being in the universities which serve larger numbers of students from the most educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

The success of any educational institution relies mainly on its human resources, which are expected to be of high quality. For instance, the number of qualified academics should be adequate to render the expected services to produce students of high calibre who can compete in the international world. Yanezawa & Shimmi (2017) stress that it is the people with their relevant qualifications, skills, commitment, aspirations, and work that make up the success of a university. This assertion is corroborated by Fan et al. (2016) highlighting that human resources are the most valuable assets an organization can have to thrive in a competitive landscape and align with the contemporary entrepreneurial model. It is of paramount importance that universities capitalise more on the employment of academic staff because their core business is learning and teaching (Fan et al., 2016). That does not mean that non-academic staff should not be considered. The non-academic staff provide the secondary function of the institution, and they are also important because they have their parts to play. For instance, the cleaners are also important because students should be accommodated in a hygienic environment for them to be able to learn in a relaxed atmosphere without being exposed to diseases that are exacerbated by different viruses. Provision of adequate learning and teaching workshops: Students are whole people with different learning styles. Therefore, differentiation should transpire holistically (Turner et al., 2017). Thus, academics need to apply different teaching styles that fit the needs of every student. They need to be capacitated on how to implement alternative teaching styles to accommodate all students. Identifying the learning styles of students allows educators to develop a more effective and appealing approach to teaching (Benaddi et al., 2015). Students have different learning styles. For instance, the use of a visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinaesthetic (VARK) style of teaching accommodates learners with their different learning styles. This VARK learning style means that there are students who understand easily when what is taught is displayed (visual). While others comprehend the lesson better if they listen (auditory), Others grasp easily when they are reading or writing, and some prefer lessons to be practical (kinaesthetic). Besides the workshops to be provided for the academics, the study conducted by Dunlosky et al. (2013) came up with another strategy to assist academics in dealing with challenges they encounter in their teaching environment. They concluded that students should be exposed to critical thinking skills by employing strategies that guide learning. They further argue that those strategies should include a combination of factors such as student motivation and the instructor's rapport with students, which ultimately will influence the effectiveness of any teaching strategies (Kelly, 2017). Bart [(2011) states that the active learning method is effective because it has fewer lectures, more use of multimedia, and more collaboration with peers. Some students understand better if they are allowed to share knowledge and experiences with their peers using the More Knowledgeable Others (MKO) technique or cooperative learning, whereby students are divided into small groups, with each student in a group being responsible for teaching others.

3.3. Poor investment in technology



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The incorporation of technology as a pedagogy has many benefits. For instance, improvement in pedagogy, learning, and teaching can take place outside the four walls of lecture halls. This means that technology is one of the solutions to dealing with large classes because learning and teaching can take place without students being confined in one hall. Technology helps lecturers become innovative when teaching (Kelly, 2017). Institutions of higher learning should keep in mind that students should be provided with personal laptops. Universities need to provide students with laptops, computer labs, adequate learning technology, efficient internet services, and adequate ICT training for both academics and students. Qashou (2022) argues that Online learning requires necessary hardware and software, programs to manage and track usage and the necessary infrastructure. When one looks at the above information, there are strong sentiments that are in favour of the incorporation of technology as a pedagogy to provide opportunities to establish positive lecturer-student and student-peer relationships (Bascia & Faubert, 2012). It has also to be noted that all the above-mentioned teaching strategies require comprehensive planning. Additionally, Mulryan-Kyne (2010) states that large classes can be overcome through the commitment and cooperation of academics, students, and administrators alike and collegial support, as well as the provision of adequate and appropriate resources. The acknowledgement of technology's capacity to improve teaching and learning must be accompanied by an awareness of its potential to create disadvantages, stigmatize, and marginalize individuals in multiple ways (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010; Czerniewics et al., 2004).

3.4. Unrests and protests

Universities often experience protests and disruptions due to various issues, including governance, fees, and transformation. The phenomenon of African nationalism gaining momentum across the continent and globally is not a recent development but rather dates back to the 1940s. During this period, the pursuit of independence and democracy saw African countries taking varying approaches toward achieving these goals (Balsvik, 1998; Fomunyan, 2017). Since 1994, when democracy was established, South African students have had their struggles and in recent years, there has been a wave of student protest action (SAHO, 2022). According to Radina (2013), student-led protests were instrumental in challenging racial segregation and discrimination on a global scale. In recent times, students have taken to protesting and striking to address concerns surrounding student funding, institutional governance, and racial inequalities. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle, asserts that young people have played a pivotal role in combating racial discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance from the Soweto Uprising in South Africa to the present day globally (UN, 2023). Youth can be regarded as the agents of change. The most remarkable strike of the twenty-first century was #fees must fall in 2016. However, the # Fees Must Fall (#FeesMustFall) was a student-led protest movement that erupted in late 2015 and progressed in 2016 in South African universities. The inception of this initiative arose from a bid to combat the disparities brought about by the escalating fees and decreasing government subsidies (Rramaghu et al., 2020). The rationale for the movement was to force the government to provide "free education for all" as encapsulated in the



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Freedom Charter (1955). The protest ended up violent, causing trauma, depression and anxiety to students and some were even killed. Many students were unable to complete their academic year (Gon, 2016). Not only students were affected, employees as well, as destruction of the infrastructure. However, the protests helped to shape the current higher education landscape in South Africa. The initiative brought about various benefits in tertiary education establishments, such as the rechristening of university structures and academic departments, the overhaul of study programmes, and the internal hiring of support staff (du Plessis, 2021).

3.5. Online Teaching and Learning

Online learning, also known as e-learning, has progressed significantly in developed nations, while its implementation in developing countries (Gon, 2016) like South Africa is still in its early phases. It is a new concept in many universities especially the universities in the previous homelands in South Africa. The majority of universities traditionally deliver tuition via in-person lectures, with e-learning platforms serving as a supplementary tool (Dai & Xia, 2020). Not until the crisis of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic prompted many countries and governments to close schools and universities. Universities globally were coerced to turn to online learning, however, students were not prepared even the lecturers and there was no time to prepare them. As per the research conducted by Almanthari et al. (2020) and Naveed et al. (2017) lecturers face various challenges concerning E-learning. These challenges encompass the level of trust that lecturers have in E-learning, their openness to change, their awareness of the benefits and advantages of E-learning, their attitudes toward technology, as well as their knowledge and practical experience in the field. Sackstein et al. (2019) add the following obstacles: inadequate training for lecturers in utilizing the Learning Management System (LMS), limited technical assistance, inadequate resources, extra workload due to LMS implementation, students' reluctance and opposition to LMS usage, and criticism from colleagues who are users of the LMS. Online learning is experiencing rapid growth in South Africa, with institutions adopting e-learning in various ways. Some universities, such as the University of South Africa, have embraced e-learning as their primary mode of instruction, while others utilize it as a supplementary tool to enhance traditional teaching methods.

3.6. Insufficient affordable student accommodation

The lack of suitable and cost-effective housing options for university students is now a significant issue plaguing the higher education sector in Sub-Saharan Africa (Sotomayor, et al. 2022 and UWN, 2023). This is because universities' enrolment rates are growing much faster than the institution's carrying capacity for on-campus student accommodation. In recent years, South African universities have been grappling with a severe lack of student accommodation. The implementation of public-private partnerships is considered a viable approach to alleviate this shortage (Rensburg, 2011; Mugume and Luescher, 2015).



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Many universities have engaged in public-private partnerships in an attempt to accommodate their students (Mugume and Luescher, 2015). Some universities, especially rural universities also have safety issues both in-campus and in-private accommodations. Lack of affordable accommodation and safety issues exacerbate the student's marginalisation and have negatively impacted their academic attainment. Therefore, institutions of higher education must provide proper accommodation to all students enrolled.

3.7. Student Debts

Due to insufficient support from the Department of Higher Education and Training, student debt has been a persistent issue for the higher education industry and the economy of South Africa (Hansen and Rhodes, 1998). Funding every student enrolled in postsecondary institutions is impossible and universities could collapse if the status quo persists. Many students are excluded from registering at universities to continue their studies due to outstanding debt from prior years (Du Toit, 2023; Van der Merwe, 2022). Du Toit (2023) adds that by the end of 2021, the total historical debt at public universities in South Africa had escalated to R16.5 billion. University sustainability is at the very heart of this problem. Several factors are causing the rise in student debts, including students failing more than 50% of their academic year modules which results in NSFAS discontinuing its funding. Additionally, student failures extend study periods way beyond the minimum period required to accomplish the specific qualifications. Universities have employed several strategies to collect outstanding debts from students. These strategies include withholding results or qualifications and blocking those with high amounts of outstanding debt from re-registering without making payment (Du Toit, 2023). According to Van der Merwe, (2022) this exacerbates the youth unemployment crisis in South Africa and hinders the country from filling crucial vacancies that require specific skills.

3.8. Overcrowding Lecture Halls

Overcrowding is one of the main challenges in higher education institutions identified by many researchers including (Isa and Yusoff, 2015; Hornsby et al., 2013; Ntshangase et al., 2022). Overcrowding of students in Higher Education Institutions has a negative influence on the quality of education provided in those institutions (Isa and Yusoff, 2015; Hornsby et al., 2013). Consequently, institutions endure inadequate funding, understaffing, deteriorating standards, poorly prepared graduates, poor physical facilities, and insufficient equipment (Isa and Yusoff, 2015; Hornsby et al., 2013, Ntshangase et al., 2022). Most South African students enter universities with already overcrowded classes as a result of government-funded schemes such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Also, the South African Constitution



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enforces the notion of the right to access education, whereas the current policy on broadening access to quality education contradicts the ideals envisaged in the statutes of most of these universities. Therefore, higher education (HE) institutions are caught between complex provisions set out to ease the same burden but unintentionally create contestation between politicians and strife in the management of these universities (Mohammedbhai, 2014; Alibach et al., 2019).

4. Conclusion

The above deliberations depict that quality education is critical to producing students of high calibre and quality services. South African universities face significant constraints regarding funding, staffing, technology, affordable student accommodation, and overcrowding, which limit their ability to provide quality education. In addressing these constraints, firstly, the government and private sector must increase funding for higher education, meanwhile, universities must explore alternative funding models and cost-saving models. Secondly, universities can proactively consider eradicating students' debts or prolonging the repayment period. Enhancing digital literacy is vital for the success of all students. Many South African students are struggling with online learning using technology. Thirdly, higher education institutions must invest in technological infrastructure, laptop roll-out and provision of training and support for students and lecturers. Many government-funded graduates remain jobless due to factors such as limited job opportunities, oversaturation of the job market, and qualifications that don't align with industry needs. Further research is needed to investigate whether government-targeted funding for in-demand qualifications could optimise resource allocation, alleviate the lack of funding, student debt, and enhance graduate employability.

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