

The Unfinished Business of Fees Must Fall: Challenges in South Africa's Higher Education System



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ABSTRACT

The #FeesMustFall protests of 2015 to 2016 marked a watershed moment in South Africa's higher education landscape, bringing attention to longstanding issues of access, equity, and transformation. While the movement led to some policy adjustments, such as increased financial aid through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), significant challenges remain unresolved. This paper examined the "unfinished business" of #FeesMustFall, focusing on systemic issues such as access and affordability, infrastructure disparities, curriculum decolonisation, governance inefficiencies, and underfunded research. The paper used a qualitative research methodology because it allowed for an in-depth and detailed analysis of a research phenomenon. The methodology utilised in the paper involved collecting and analysing data from both primary and secondary sources. The findings show that the historical legacy of apartheid continues to shape inequalities, particularly between historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) and historically white institutions (HWIs). Despite efforts to transform the higher education sector, progress has been uneven. Periodisation theory, which conceptualises and frames development or change and transformation of historical phenomena as unfolding in terms of distinctive time periods, was used to provide historical insight into the unfinished business of #FeesMustFall. The paper concludes that addressing these challenges requires collaborative action from students, universities, the government, and private industry to ensure that higher education fulfils its transformative potential in South Africa. State the contribution of this study to scholarship.

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 promised a radical break from the apartheid past, including the transformation of its higher education system into a site of equity, access, and social justice. However, over three decades later, the sector remains a stark reflection of the country's enduring socio-economic inequalities.¹ The #FeesMustFall (FMF) was an educational and economic issue that captured the attention of South Africans and the entire world. It highlighted the challenges faced by poor South African students, some of whom fall into deep debt and are financially excluded by the universities. FMF sparked debate regarding whether post-apartheid South Africa is 'post' apartheid given that the students most affected

¹ S. Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa* (Johannesburg: HSRC Press, 2016); Anna. L. Cloete, "Living in a Digital Culture: The Need for Theological Reflection.," *HTS Theological Studies*, 71 No 2 (2015): 1–7. 71, no. 2 (2015): 1–7.

were from lower-class families who did not have access to privileged roles during Apartheid South Africa. The movement began in mid-October 2015 at WITS, sparked by an anticipated increase in tuition fees that garnered support from other tertiary institutions.² Volunteers took to the streets in militant protests that included occupation of schools, physical confrontations with the management of the universities and with government officials, which lasted for a whole year.³ Both sides had supporters, with people viewing the students as either imprisoned activists or a group brainwashed by unfocused militancy that openly attacked educational institutions.⁴ FMF demanded education free of colonial imposition and reiterated the need to grant quality education.⁵ Enhancements in working and learning conditions for staff and students were also proposed.

The imperative for tuition-free higher education in South Africa has been extensively debated and researched over numerous years, yet insufficient governmental action has been taken to substantively address this systemic challenge.⁶ Despite South Africa's transition from an apartheid regime to a democratic governance structure in 1994, the enduring legacies of racial segregation remain starkly evident, particularly in the persistent inequities limiting Black South Africans' access to quality education.⁷ Such structural inequalities perpetuate South Africa's status as one of the world's most socioeconomically unequal societies, a distinction underlined by systemic disparities in resource distribution, opportunity, and social mobility.⁸ These inequities have catalysed widespread civil unrest, including grassroots student-led movements such as #FeesMustFall (#FMF) and Rhodes Must Fall (RMF), which directly confront historical injustices and demand transformative reforms in education and decolonial representation.⁹ The sustained failure to dismantle apartheid-era hierarchies in educational access and equity highlights a critical misalignment between policy rhetoric and tangible structural change, exacerbating social fragmentation and reinforcing cycles of marginalisation.¹⁰

While limited policy interventions such as the suspension of proposed tuition fee escalations and the transition of the NSFAS from a loan-based system to a fully subsidised bursary model have been introduced, persistent structural inequities continue to undermine South Africa's higher education sector.¹¹ A critical concern is the "missing middle" demographic: students from middle-class households who neither qualify for NSFAS support nor possess the financial capacity to meet escalating tuition costs. Further systemic challenges include entrenched Eurocentric curricula that marginalise indigenous knowledge systems, disparities in institutional resourcing that perpetuate underdevelopment in HDIs, systemic inefficiencies within NSFAS administration, and chronic underfunding of postgraduate research programs.¹² These issues collectively reflect a fragmented policy framework that fails to address the intersectional barriers to equitable education access.¹³ The persistence of such challenges underlines the inadequacy of incremental reforms and highlights the urgent need for comprehensive, decolonial approaches to redress apartheid-era inequities and align institutional practices with the transformative imperatives demanded by student movements like #FeesMustFall and Rhodes Must Fall.¹⁴

² G. Godsell, R. Chikane, and S. Mpofu-Walsh, *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa* (NYU Press, 2016).

³ Rebecca Hodes, "Questioning 'Fees Must Fall,'" *African Affairs* 116, no. 462 (2017): 140–50.

⁴ Godsell, Chikane, and Mpofu-Walsh, *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*.

⁵ Thierry Luescher, Lacea Loader, and Taabo Mugume, "# FeesMustFall: An Internet-Age Student Movement in South Africa and the Case of the University of the Free State," *Politikon* 44, no. 2 (2017): 231–45.

⁶ Mphathisi Ndlovu, "Facing History in the Aftermath of Gukurahundi Atrocities: New Media, Memory and the Discourses on Forgiveness on Selected Zimbabwean News Websites," *Peace and Conflict Studies* 24, no. 2 (2017): 3.

⁷ Godsell, Chikane, and Mpofu-Walsh, *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*.

⁸ Matthew McKeever, "Social Stratification and Inequality in South Africa," *Sociology Compass* 18, no. 2 (2024): e13173.

⁹ Luescher, Loader, and Mugume, "# FeesMustFall: An Internet-Age Student Movement in South Africa and the Case of the University of the Free State."

¹⁰ Godsell, Chikane, and Mpofu-Walsh, *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*.

¹¹ Ndlovu, "Facing History in the Aftermath of Gukurahundi Atrocities: New Media, Memory and the Discourses on Forgiveness on Selected Zimbabwean News Websites."

¹² Hodes, "Questioning 'Fees Must Fall.'"

¹³ Siphon Seepe, "Higher Education Transformation in South Africa," in *Knowledge and Change in African Universities: Volume 1—Current Debates* (Springer, 2017), 121–43.

¹⁴ Seepe, "Higher Education Transformation in South Africa."

Existing scholarship has extensively documented the events of FMF, its immediate causes, and its symbolic achievements.¹⁵ However, a significant gap in the literature persists in comprehensively synthesising and periodising the systemic and interconnected challenges that constitute the ‘unfinished business’ of the movement. Much of the current research offers a fragmented analysis, often focusing on singular issues such as fees, decolonisation, or state violence in isolation, without critically examining their interdependence and their rootedness in a longer historical trajectory of exclusion.

This study is therefore designed to fill this gap by providing a holistic and critical examination of the unresolved systemic issues in South African higher education post-FMF. The primary objective of this paper is to examine the ‘unfinished business’ of the #FeesMustFall movement, arguing that despite surface-level reforms, core challenges related to financial exclusion, institutional inequality, stalled decolonisation, governance inefficiencies, and the criminalisation of dissent continue to undermine the transformative potential of higher education. To achieve this, the study employs periodisation theory to contextualise these contemporary struggles within South Africa’s colonial and apartheid history, framing FMF not as an isolated event but as a manifestation of enduring historical inequities.

To this end, the paper is structured as follows. First, it presents a review of the extant literature on FMF and the South African higher education landscape. It then outlines the periodisation theoretical framework that guides the analysis. The methodology section details the qualitative, desktop approach used to collect and thematically analyse data from primary and secondary sources. The subsequent sections present the findings and discussion, which are organised around different key themes. Finally, the paper concludes by synthesising the argument that without addressing the identified interconnected issues through collaborative and transformative action, the emancipatory promise of #FeesMustFall will remain unfulfilled.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The #FeesMustFall (FMF) movement, which emerged in 2015, has been extensively analysed in scholarly discourse as a pivotal moment in South Africa’s post-apartheid higher education landscape. This literature review synthesises existing research on the movement’s origins, achievements, and unresolved challenges, contextualising its demands for equity, decolonisation, and systemic reform.

South Africa’s higher education system remains deeply shaped by apartheid-era inequities, perpetuating disparities between HDIs and HWIs.¹⁶ These structural imbalances, rooted in differential funding, infrastructure, and academic prestige, have entrenched racial and class-based exclusion.¹⁷ The FMF movement emerged against this backdrop, driven by rising tuition fees, student debt, and the financial exclusion of the “missing middle”, students from households earning above the NSFAS threshold but unable to afford fees.¹⁸ Scholars such as Jansen and Langa et al. argue that FMF’s demands for free education and decolonisation were not merely economic but also a critique of the enduring coloniality of knowledge and institutional governance.¹⁹

The NSFAS, initially a loan system, has been criticised for its inefficiencies and failure to address the needs of marginalised students.²⁰ While its conversion to a bursary model in 2017 marked progress, systemic issues such as administrative delays, defunding of students, and exclusion of postgraduates persist.²¹ Badat highlights how neoliberal funding models prioritise HWIs, exacerbating resource gaps

¹⁵ Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*; Jonathan D Jansen, “As by Fire: The End of the South African University,” 2017; Malose Langa et al., “# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities,” 2017.

¹⁶ Vivienne Bozalek and Chrissie Boughey, “(Mis) Framing Higher Education in South Africa,” *Social Policy & Administration* 46, no. 6 (2012): 688–703; Cloete, “Living in a Digital Culture: The Need for Theological Reflection. ”

¹⁷ Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*; Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning over a New Leaf* (Routledge, 2020).

¹⁸ Iribe Joseph Warui, “Challenges Facing Teaching and Learning of Integrated Business Studies in Day Secondary Schools in Kirinyaga West District, Kirinyaga County, Kenya,” *International Journal of Education and Research* 3, no. 2 (2015): 1–12.

¹⁹ Andre Jansen, *Heart, Hands and Voices: God’s Mission: Integrating Word and Deeds* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2017); Langa et al., “# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities.”

²⁰ N. Cloete, *Higher Education and Economic Inequality in South Africa* (Cape Town: African Minds, 2015); J. S. Mkhize and L. Ramrathan, “Cultural Signals in Understanding First-Year Student Engagement: How Can Universities Become More Culturally Sensitive? The Case of a Rural South African University,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 35, no. 3 (July 2021), <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-3-3878>.

²¹ N G Mtshali et al., “Postgraduate Students’ Experiences with Learning Management Systems at a Selected Nursing Education Institution in KwaZulu-Natal Province,” *African Journal of Health Professions Education* 14, no. 2 (2022): 89–97.

between institutions.²² The “missing middle” crisis, as explored by and Parliamentary Monitoring Group, underlines the inadequacy of incremental reforms, with middle-class students often forced into debt or part-time work, compromising academic outcomes.²³

The FMF movement reinvigorated debates on curriculum decolonisation, demanding the centring of African epistemologies and languages.²⁴ However, scholars note that decolonial efforts remain superficial, limited to elective courses or symbolic gestures rather than overhauling Eurocentric pedagogies.²⁵ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s critique of colonial languages as tools of epistemic violence resonates in South Africa, where English and Afrikaans dominate academia despite 12 official languages. The reluctance of Universities to integrate indigenous knowledge systems into core curricula reflects a broader institutional inertia.²⁶

Persistent inequalities between HDIs and HWIs illustrate the apartheid legacy’s intractability.²⁷ HDIs, such as the University of Limpopo, grapple with overcrowding, underfunded research, and poor infrastructure, while HWIs like Wits and UCT benefit from global partnerships and state-of-the-art facilities.²⁸ Governance inefficiencies, including corruption and mismanagement at HDIs, further marginalise Black students.²⁹ These disparities perpetuate cycles of disadvantage, limiting graduate employability and academic mobility.³⁰

The state’s response to FMF protests marked by police brutality, militarised campuses, and criminalisation of activists echoes apartheid-era repression.³¹ Incidents such as the killing of Mthokozisi Ntumba and Khayaletu Magwaza underline the state’s prioritisation of order over dialogue.³² Private security firms’ role in suppressing protests, as documented by Dlamini and Molefe, highlights the commodification of campus safety and the erosion of democratic engagement.³³

Existing literature reveals FMF’s role in exposing systemic failures but also reveals gaps in addressing structural inequities. While policy shifts like the NSFAS bursary system and fee freezes are

²² Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*.

²³ Mduzuzi J K Bophela and Njabulo Khumalo, “The Role of Stokvels in South Africa: A Case of Economic Transformation of a Municipality,” *Problems and Perspectives in Management* 17, no. 4 (2019): 26–37; P. Fihlani, “We Are Students Thanks to South Africa’s #FeesMustFall Protests,” BBC News, 2019; Chris Marsden and Trisha Meyer, *Regulating Disinformation with Artificial Intelligence: Effects of Disinformation Initiatives on Freedom of Expression and Media Pluralism* (European Parliament, 2019). Parliamentary Monitoring Group, “Higher Education and Training Briefing: 2017 University Fees,” 2016, <https://pmg.org.za/>.

²⁴ A. Mbembe, *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the University in Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2015); M.K. Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

²⁵ Busani Maseko, “Teachers’ Language Ideologies, Conflicting Language Policy and Practices in Zimbabwean Education System,” *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 39, no. 1 (2021): 30–42.

²⁶ Msizi Vitalis Mkhize, “Mathematics Anxiety among Pre-Service Accounting Teachers,” *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. (August 31, 2019):1–14, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v39n3a1516>; Mathew Moyo and Ezra Ondari Okemwa, “Students’ Perceptions of Information Literacy at Two South African Universities,” 2022.

²⁷ Steven Darryl Jacobs, “A History and Analysis of the Evolution of Action and Participatory Action Research,” *The Canadian Journal of Action Research* 19, no. 3 (2018): 34–52.

²⁸ S. J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning over a New Leaf* (London: Routledge, 2020); T. Phiri and L. Maseko, “Inmate Voice and Feedback in Rehabilitation Programming: Enhancing Accountability and Responsiveness,” *Journal of Penological Research in Africa*, 2024; S. Maseko, “Surveillance and Student Repression: A Growing Concern in Higher Education,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 2 (2021): 75–90.

²⁹ S. Ndlovu and K. Sithole, “Reviving Indigenous Wisdom: Youth Perspectives on Cultural Identity,” *Journal of African Cultural Resilience* 10, no. 1 (2022): 51–65; Kongqi Li et al., “How and When Resilience Can Boost Student Academic Performance: A Weekly Diary Study on the Roles of Self-Regulation Behaviors, Grit, and Social Support,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 25, no. 4 (April 30, 2024): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-024-00749-4>.

³⁰ Bonginkosi Hardy Mutongoza, “Nothing but Noise: Challenges Impeding the Transformation of Higher Education in South Africa,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research* 7, no. 1 (2025): a06–a06.

³¹ Amnesty International, *South Africa: Police Brutality against Students Must End* (London: Amnesty International, 2016); South African Human Rights Commission, *The SAHRC. Impact of COVID-19 on Human Rights in South Africa* (Pretoria: SAHRC, 2021).

³² Human Rights Watch, *Student Protesters and State Violence in South Africa* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017); S. Mthembu and D. Khumalo, “Institutional Trust and Justice Transformation in Post-Apartheid Correctional Services.,” *South African Review of Sociology* 49, no. 1 (2023): 101–20; Mthokozisi Mthembu, “The Role of Student Support Programmes in Assisting Black Students to Navigate the Institutional Culture at the University of Witwatersrand” (University of the Witwatersrand, 2022).

³³ Reuben Dlamini and Ngobile Ndzinisa, “Universities Trailing behind: Unquestioned Epistemological Foundations Constraining the Transition to Online Instructional Delivery and Learning,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 6 (2020): 52–64; S. Molefe, “Gender Equality in South African Leadership: A Critical Analysis,” *South African Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (2022): 231–47.

notable, they fail to resolve deeper issues of decolonisation, institutional parity, and governance.³⁴ This article contributes to these debates by periodising FMF's challenges and advocating for collaborative, transformative reforms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Periodisation theory, which conceptualises historical phenomena as unfolding through distinct temporal phases marked by structural shifts, offers a critical lens to analyse the evolution of South Africa's higher education system and the #FeesMustFall movement's role within it. This framework aligns with the study's focus on systemic inequities rooted in apartheid legacies, incremental reforms, and unresolved demands for decolonisation. By periodising South Africa's higher education history, this article reveals how past policies and power relations continue to shape contemporary challenges, justifying the theory's utility in contextualising FMF as both a rupture and continuity in the struggle for educational justice.

Periodisation theory, as articulated by scholars like Braudel and Koselleck, emphasises the division of history into eras defined by socio-political, economic, and ideological transformations.³⁵ These periods are not neutral but reflect dominant power structures and contested narratives. In South Africa, periodisation has been employed to analyse apartheid's enduring impacts and post-1994 democratisation.³⁶ This study adopts a periodised approach to higher education, distinguishing four key phases, namely:

- Colonial and Apartheid Era (pre-1994): Characterised by legislated racial segregation, underfunding of Black institutions, and Eurocentric curricula designed to entrench white supremacy.
- Post-Apartheid Transition (1994 to 2015): Marked by neoliberal reforms, rising tuition fees, and insufficient redress policies that perpetuated apartheid-era inequities.
- FeesMustFall Era (2015 to 2017): A watershed period of student-led protests demanding free decolonised education, resulting in partial policy concessions.
- Post-FMF Stagnation (2017 to present): Defined by unresolved structural challenges, including governance failures, underfunded HDIs, and stalled decolonisation.

Periodisation reveals how apartheid-era resource allocation and epistemic violence persist in the post-1994 era, despite democratic reforms.³⁷ For instance, the underfunding of HDIs, a relic of apartheid's Bantu Education Act, remains unresolved, perpetuating racialised inequality.³⁸ FMF's demands, while disruptive, emerged within this continuum of exclusion, reflecting a rupture in student tolerance for incrementalism. By framing FMF as part of a longer struggle against coloniality, periodisation links the movement to earlier resistance efforts, such as the 1976 Soweto Uprising.³⁹ This approach counters narratives that reduce FMF to a spontaneous protest, instead positioning it as a culmination of decades of marginalisation.⁴⁰ The post-1994 phase's neoliberal policies, such as cost-sharing models and privatisation aggravated financial exclusion, creating the conditions for FMF's emergence.⁴¹ Periodisation elucidates how these policies, rather than addressing apartheid's legacy, entrenched class and racial divides, necessitating student activism as a corrective force.

The post-FMF stagnation phase illustrates the gap between symbolic reforms (e.g., curriculum) and substantive decolonisation. Periodisation theory underlines how institutional inertia and neoliberal

³⁴ Langa et al., "# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities"; Mubanga Mpundu, Thomas Assan, and Mamolahluwa Mokoena, "An Analysis of High Teacher Turnover and Attrition in the North-West Province of South Africa," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 4, no. 4 (April 5, 2023): 404–14, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20234413>.

³⁵ Fernand Braudel, "Histoire et Sciences Sociales: La Longue Durée," in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, vol. 13 (Cambridge University Press, 1958), 725–53; R. Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

³⁶ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning over a New Leaf*, 2020; Jansen, "As by Fire: The End of the South African University."

³⁷ Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*.

³⁸ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning over a New Leaf*, 2020.

³⁹ Mbembe, *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the University in Africa*.

⁴⁰ Langa et al., "# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities."

⁴¹ Anita L Cloete, "Unstoppable: A Critical Reflection on the Socio-Economic Embeddedness of Technology and the Implications for the Human Agenda," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, no. 2 (2019).

governance have stifled transformative change, aligning with FMF's critique of "reformist" approaches.⁴² By periodising South Africa's higher education history, the study demonstrates that FMF is not an isolated event but a manifestation of unresolved historical inequities. This framework strengthens the argument for transformative, rather than incremental, solutions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, utilising a desktop research design to examine the systemic challenges in South Africa's higher education system post-#FeesMustFall. Data was drawn from primary and secondary sources to ensure a robust, multi-perspective analysis. Primary sources included government policy documents, such as the NSFAS frameworks,⁴³ Parliamentary Reports⁴⁴ and archival materials detailing protest actions and institutional governance records. Secondary sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, news media (e.g., The Guardian, Business Day), televised news transcripts, and digital content from social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube), which captured real-time narratives of student activism and public discourse.⁴⁵

Thematic content analysis was employed to systematically identify, code, and interpret recurring themes, such as financial exclusion, governance inefficiencies, and curriculum decolonisation.⁴⁶ Data were analysed inductively (allowing themes to emerge organically) and deductively (guided by existing literature on decolonisation and institutional inequities).⁴⁷ This methodology enabled a synthesis of historical and contemporary perspectives, aligning with the paper's periodisation framework. Triangulation of diverse sources ensured analytical rigor, contextualising the #FeesMustFall movement within broader socio-political and historical trajectories.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Economic Conditions: Rising Tuition Fees, Growing Student Debt, and Financial Exclusion

By 2015, escalating tuition fees emerged as a critical barrier to accessing and succeeding in tertiary education, disproportionately affecting students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.⁴⁸ Despite the NSFAS, designed as a loan-based system to assist low-income students, structural inefficiencies and South Africa's high unemployment rates rendered repayment untenable for many graduates.⁴⁹ Consequently, a growing cohort of graduates faced insurmountable debt, exacerbating financial precarity before securing stable employment.⁵⁰

The crisis extended beyond the poorest students to the "missing middle", a demographic excluded from NSFAS eligibility due to household incomes marginally above the threshold yet insufficient to afford fees without significant strain.⁵¹ For these students, reliance on bank loans or part-time work became inevitable, often compromising academic performance and completion rates.⁵² Compounding this exclusion, universities enforced upfront payment policies, mandating partial fee settlements prior to registration, which further restricted access for financially vulnerable groups.⁵³

⁴² Siphamandla Zondi, "Protests and Pursuits: The South African University in Turmoil and the Search for a Decolonial Turn," *The Responsive University and the Crisis in South Africa*, 2021, 243–71.

⁴³ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), *Annual Review of University Finances* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2017).

⁴⁴ Parliamentary Monitoring Group, "Higher Education and Training Briefing: 2017 University Fees."

⁴⁵ Langa et al., "# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities"; S. Allison, "South African Students Score Tuition Fee Protest Victory," *The Guardian*, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/23/south-african-students-protest-pretoria-tuition-fees-rise>.

⁴⁶ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no.2(2006):77–101.

⁴⁷ Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*; Mbembe, *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the University in Africa*.

⁴⁸ Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*.

⁴⁹ Cloete, *Higher Education and Economic Inequality in South Africa*; Bophela and Khumalo, "The Role of Stokvels in South Africa: A Case of Economic Transformation of a Municipality."

⁵⁰ Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*.

⁵¹ Warui, "Challenges Facing Teaching and Learning of Integrated Business Studies in Day Secondary Schools in Kirinyaga West District, Kirinyaga County, Kenya."

⁵² Bophela and Khumalo, "The Role of Stokvels in South Africa: A Case of Economic Transformation of a Municipality"; Fihlani, "We Are Students Thanks to South Africa's #FeesMustFall Protests."

⁵³ Mkhize and Ramathan, "Cultural Signals in Understanding First-Year Student Engagement: How Can Universities Become More Culturally Sensitive? The Case of a Rural South African University."

These economic pressures intersected with broader dissatisfaction over sluggish institutional transformation, fostering widespread student disillusionment.⁵⁴ The announcement of a 10.5% fee increase for 2016 became the immediate catalyst for nationwide protests, as students rejected policies perpetuating systemic inequities.⁵⁵ The protests revealed the urgency of addressing structural financial exclusion and reimagining funding models to align with South Africa's transformative aspirations.

Wits University as the Starting Point, Later Spreading Nationwide

The #FeesMustFall movement was catalysed by protests at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in October 2015, following the institution's announcement of a 10.5% tuition fee increase for the 2016 academic year.⁵⁶ Students mobilised rapidly, organising mass demonstrations, occupying campus facilities, and disrupting academic activities to pressure university management into negotiations.⁵⁷ The protests emerged after a three-day campus lockdown, reflecting widespread opposition to financial exclusion and systemic inequities in South African higher education.⁵⁸

Momentum from Wits quickly galvanised nationwide solidarity, with protests spreading to institutions such as the University of Cape Town (UCT), Stellenbosch University, and the University of Pretoria (UP).⁵⁹ Students across these campuses articulated shared grievances, including unaffordable fees, racialised disparities in resource allocation, and inadequate governmental support for historically marginalised groups.⁶⁰ Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook proved pivotal in amplifying demands, coordinating actions, and fostering solidarity among diverse socio-economic and political cohorts.⁶¹

The state and university administrations responded with securitisation tactics, deploying private security forces and police to suppress dissent.⁶² Violent clashes ensued, marked by arrests, rubber bullets, and tear gas, reflecting a broader pattern of criminalising youth activism to stifle political dissent.⁶³ This repression echoed apartheid-era strategies of controlling dissent, underlining continuities in state violence against marginalised communities.⁶⁴ Despite these challenges, the protests revealed the resilience of student activism in challenging structural inequities and redefining South Africa's higher education landscape.

The turning point occurred on 23 October 2015, when thousands of students mobilised to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, intensifying demands for systemic reform in higher education funding.⁶⁵ Faced with escalating public pressure, then-President Jacob Zuma conceded to a 0% fee increase for the 2016 academic year, marking a symbolic victory for the #FeesMustFall movement.⁶⁶ However, this concession failed to address the movement's foundational demand for universally free higher education, exposing the limitations of short-term policy fixes.⁶⁷ The government's narrow focus on fee suspensions, rather than structural overhauls, perpetuated financial exclusion for marginalised groups, particularly the "missing middle," and galvanised sustained protests in subsequent years.⁶⁸ This revealed the dissonance between

⁵⁴ Langa et al., "# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities."

⁵⁵ Allison, "South African Students Score Tuition Fee Protest Victory"; J. Zuma, "Statement by President Jacob Zuma at the Conclusion of Consultation with Representatives of the University Community," The Presidency, 2015, <https://www.presidency.gov.za/node/6070>.

⁵⁶ Allison, "South African Students Score Tuition Fee Protest Victory."

⁵⁷ Langa et al., "# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities."

⁵⁸ M. Greeff et al., "The #FeesMustFall Protests in South Africa: Exploring First-Year Students' Experiences at a Peri-Urban University Campus," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 35, no. 4 (September 2021), <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-4-4219>.

⁵⁹ Godsell, Chikane, and Mpofu-Walsh, *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*.

⁶⁰ Ndlovu, "Facing History in the Aftermath of Gukurahundi Atrocities: New Media, Memory and the Discourses on Forgiveness on Selected Zimbabwean News Websites."

⁶¹ Langa et al., "# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities."

⁶² Maseko, "Surveillance and Student Repression: A Growing Concern in Higher Education"; Dlamini and Ndzinisa, "Universities Trailing behind: Unquestioned Epistemological Foundations Constraining the Transition to Online Instructional Delivery and Learning."

⁶³ Ndlovu, "Facing History in the Aftermath of Gukurahundi Atrocities: New Media, Memory and the Discourses on Forgiveness on Selected Zimbabwean News Websites"; Human Rights Watch, *Student Protesters and State Violence in South Africa*.

⁶⁴ Amnesty International, *South Africa: Police Brutality against Students Must End*.

⁶⁵ Langa et al., "# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities."

⁶⁶ Allison, "South African Students Score Tuition Fee Protest Victory"; Zuma, "Statement by President Jacob Zuma at the Conclusion of Consultation with Representatives of the University Community."

⁶⁷ Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*.

⁶⁸ Langa et al., "# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities"; Fihlani, "We Are Students Thanks to South Africa's #FeesMustFall Protests."

temporary political appeasement and the urgent need for transformative equity in South Africa's post-apartheid education landscape.

Achievements of #FeesMustFall

The #FeesMustFall movement catalysed transformative outcomes beyond the immediate suspension of fee increases. A landmark achievement was the government's 2017 policy shift, under then-President Jacob Zuma, to provide free higher education for students from households earning below R350,000 annually, converting the NSFAS from a loan-based to a grant-based system.⁶⁹ This policy marked a critical response to systemic financial exclusion, though its implementation faced logistical and bureaucratic challenges, limiting its efficacy.⁷⁰ Additionally, tuition fees, which had risen by 9.8% in 2015, were frozen in 2016 and capped at 8% in 2017, reflecting concessions to student demands.⁷¹

However, the policy excluded the "missing middle" students from households marginally above the NSFAS threshold, yet unable to afford fees, a demographic constituting 65% of Wits University's student body by 2019.⁷² Despite later partial bursary models, financial precarity persisted for this group, showing the limitations of incremental reforms.⁷³ The movement also reinvigorated decolonisation debates, compelling universities to address curricular Eurocentrism and institutional culture.⁷⁴ Institutions such as the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University introduced measures to integrate African epistemologies and diversify faculty, though critics argue these efforts remained superficial.⁷⁵ As Langa et al. note, the movement's enduring legacy lies in recentering "decolonisation and transformation" within national discourse.⁷⁶ Furthermore, #FeesMustFall reveals the potency of student activism in shaping policy and holding institutions accountable, fostering sustained political engagement among youth.⁷⁷ This legacy highlights the movement's role in redefining activism as a catalyst for equity in post-apartheid South Africa.

The Unfinished Business of Fees Must Fall: The Myth of "Free Education"

The #FeesMustFall movement's central demand for universally free higher education remains unmet, as systemic flaws in South Africa's financial aid architecture perpetuate exclusion and inequity. While the NSFAS transitioned from loans to grants for households earning below R350,000 annually, its implementation has been marred by bureaucratic inefficiencies and exclusionary thresholds.⁷⁸ For instance, the "missing middle" students from households marginally above the NSFAS income cap constitute a significant proportion of those excluded, despite lacking the financial capacity to afford tuition.⁷⁹ A family earning R350,000 annually, for example, faces severe strain when supporting multiple dependents in higher education, as tuition, accommodation, and ancillary costs often exceed household income. This funding model also rigidly assesses household income, disregarding contextual realities such as non-contributory stepparents or absent guardians, further alienating vulnerable students.

Administrative failures exacerbate these challenges. In 2023, NSFAS's abrupt defunding of thousands of students, attributed to procedural errors, forced many to abandon studies or incur emergency

⁶⁹ Zuma, "Statement by President Jacob Zuma at the Conclusion of Consultation with Representatives of the University Community"; J. Zuma, "Interview on Higher Education, ENCA," The Presidency, 2017, <https://www.presidency.gov.za/node/6070>.

⁷⁰ Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*; Mkhize and Ramathan, "Cultural Signals in Understanding First-Year Student Engagement: How Can Universities Become More Culturally Sensitive? The Case of a Rural South African University."

⁷¹ Parliamentary Monitoring Group, "Higher Education and Training Briefing: 2017 University Fees."

⁷² Parliamentary Monitoring Group, "Higher Education and Training Briefing: 2017 University Fees."

⁷³ Bophela and Khumalo, "The Role of Stokvels in South Africa: A Case of Economic Transformation of a Municipality."; Maseko, "Surveillance and Student Repression: A Growing Concern in Higher Education."

⁷⁴ Hodes, "Questioning 'Fees Must Fall.'"

⁷⁵ Mbembe, *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the University in Africa*; Jansen, "As by Fire: The End of the South African University."

⁷⁶ Langa et al., "# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities." 147

⁷⁷ Langa et al., "# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities;" A. Lissoni, "Youth Politics: The Political Role of Youth in South Africa," in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, ed. South African Democracy Education Trust, 1st ed., vol. 4 (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010), 315–50.

⁷⁸ DHET., "National Policy on Community Colleges.," 2015; Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*.

⁷⁹ Fihlani, "We Are Students Thanks to South Africa's #FeesMustFall Protests"; Phiri and Maseko, "Inmate Voice and Feedback in Rehabilitation Programming: Enhancing Accountability and Responsiveness."

debt, revealing systemic fragility.⁸⁰ Even funded students face institutional debt traps, as those unable to repay loans post-graduation are barred from accessing academic records or graduating, perpetuating cycles of financial precarity.⁸¹ Concurrently, enrolment caps imposed by underfunded universities restrict access, contradicting the ethos of “free education” and entrenching exclusion.⁸²

Postgraduate education exemplifies systemic neglect. The National Research Foundation (NRF) allocates limited grants, disproportionately excluding Black aspirant scholars and stifling demographic transformation in academia.⁸³ These underfunding delays South Africa’s need for high-level skills, entrenches racialised academic hierarchies, and undermines decolonisation efforts.⁸⁴ Consequently, the higher education system remains dominated by historically advantaged scholars, perpetuating epistemic colonialism.⁸⁵

These contradictions reveal the dissonance between policy rhetoric and reality. While the state touts “free education,” exclusionary means-testing, bureaucratic incompetence, and under-resourced institutions render the promise illusory for many.⁸⁶ The failure to address these gaps perpetuates poverty, unemployment, and inequality, as economically active individuals remain excluded from skill development.⁸⁷ Until structural reforms such as expanded funding for the missing middle, debt relief, and equitable postgraduate support are prioritised, the transformative potential of South Africa’s higher education system will remain unrealised.

Governance Inefficiencies and Corruption in South African Higher Education: Implications for the #FeesMustFall Movement

Corruption and systemic governance inefficiencies have emerged as critical impediments to resolving unmet commitments linked to South Africa’s #FeesMustFall movement. Despite incremental policy reforms and increased financial allocations to student aid programmes, persistent fraud, mismanagement, and bureaucratic inefficiencies continue to undermine the higher education sector.⁸⁸ These governance failures manifest in poor financial oversight at universities, administrative incompetence within the NSFAS, and a lack of accountability among institutional leadership.⁸⁹ Such inefficiencies exacerbate student grievances, often escalating protests rather than addressing systemic academic and financial challenges.⁹⁰

Historically Disadvantaged Institutions, such as the University of Fort Hare, the University of Limpopo, and Walter Sisulu University, are disproportionately affected by financial mismanagement.⁹¹ Reports reveal that funds designated for student support, infrastructure, and academic programmes have been misappropriated or squandered through corrupt practices. For example, the University of Fort Hare, one of South Africa’s oldest universities, has faced recurrent scandals involving the diversion of millions of rands intended for student development.⁹² Similarly, the University of Limpopo and Walter Sisulu

⁸⁰ William Brederode, “ Tinker Townships: Informal Mechanics the Big Winners in SA’s e-Hailing Boom,” News24, July 15, 2023, <https://www.news24.com/news24/tech-and-trends/news/tinker-townships-informal-mechanics-the-big-winners-in-sas-e-hailing-boom-20230715>.

⁸¹ Mthembu and Khumalo, “Institutional Trust and Justice Transformation in Post-Apartheid Correctional Services”; L. Ncube, *Protests for Free Education: A Fight for Justice* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria Press, 2017).

⁸² R. Khumalo and N. Mthethwa, “Digital Inclusion and Human Rights in South Africa’s Post-COVID Recovery.” *Technology in Society* 72, no. 1 (2023).

⁸³ Mandlenkosi Richard Mphatheni, Witness Maluleke, and Sphamandla Lindani Nkosi, “The Nature of Sexual Offences Against Children in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa,” *ADRRRI Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 18, no.3 (6)October-December (2021): 66–81.

⁸⁴ Mbembe, *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the University in Africa*.

⁸⁵ Jansen, “As by Fire: The End of the South African University.”

⁸⁶ Langa et al., “# Hashtag: An Analysis of The# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities.”

⁸⁷ Cloete, *Higher Education and Economic Inequality in South Africa*.

⁸⁸ Saleem Badat, “Reproduction, Transformation and Public South African Higher Education during and beyond Covid-19,” *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 104, no. 1 (2020): 24–42.

⁸⁹ Mandisi Matyana and Xolani Thusi, “Unemployment and Poverty in South Africa: Assessing the National Development Plan 2030 Predictions,” *International Journal of Development and Sustainability* 12, no. 6 (2023): 212–26.

⁹⁰ Luescher, Loader, and Mugume, “# FeesMustFall: An Internet-Age Student Movement in South Africa and the Case of the University of the Free State.”

⁹¹ Jonathan D. Jansen, *Corrupted* (Wits University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.18772/12023037946>.

⁹² Jansen, *Corrupted*.

University have grappled with fiscal crises, resulting in inadequate student housing, insufficient learning resources, and operational instability.⁹³

These governance failures have direct consequences for students, many of whom rely on universities for housing, meal programmes, and financial stipends. Chronic mismanagement and administrative red tape frequently disrupt these services, intensifying student vulnerability and frustration.⁹⁴ In response, protests demanding institutional accountability and transparent financial governance have become a recurring feature of South Africa's higher education landscape.⁹⁵ The persistence of these issues highlights the urgent need for systemic governance reforms, including enhanced oversight mechanisms, anti-corruption measures, and greater institutional accountability. Without addressing these structural inefficiencies, South Africa's higher education sector risks perpetuating cycles of instability and inequity.

The Paradox of Decolonisation in South African Higher Education: A Critical Analysis

South African universities have increasingly adopted decolonisation as a rhetorical framework, yet their implementation remains superficial, revealing systemic contradictions between ideology and practice. A central critique lies in the Eurocentric epistemological foundations underlying curricula, even within modules ostensibly dedicated to Afrocentrism and decoloniality. For instance, African philosophy is frequently relegated to elective status, while core disciplines such as economics, law, and history remain dominated by Western theorists like Keynes, Marx, and Foucault.⁹⁶ This marginalises African scholars such as Molefi Kete Asante, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Archie Mafeje, whose contributions are seldom integrated into mainstream syllabi.⁹⁷ Such curricular hierarchies perpetuate the notion of Western knowledge as universal, while framing African epistemologies as peripheral or supplementary.⁹⁸

Linguistic colonialism further entrenches these asymmetries. Despite South Africa's 12 official languages, English and Afrikaans retain hegemony as primary mediums of instruction.⁹⁹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues that language is not merely a communicative tool but a vehicle for cultural imperialism, shaping thought and worldviews.¹⁰⁰ The expectation that students engage decolonial theory through colonial languages illustrates this paradox, alienating rural learners whose fluency in English is limited.¹⁰¹ Consequently, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) remain excluded from academic discourse, despite their relevance to disciplines such as economics, medicine, and law.¹⁰²

Institutional structures further entrench Western paradigms. Research by the Council on Higher Education reveals that Black academics face systemic barriers in securing funding and publishing in "prestigious" journals, which privilege Eurocentric methodologies.¹⁰³ Senior faculty demographics reflect enduring racial inequities, with Black scholars constituting a minority and often being compelled to conform to Western academic norms.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, reforms such as renaming buildings or adding African texts to reading lists are performative, failing to address structural biases in funding, staffing, and research.¹⁰⁵

⁹³ M. Ndlovu, *Social Media and Fake News in the Post-Truth Era: The Manipulation of Politics in the Election Process* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); N. Mkhize and T. Gumede, "Revisiting Zulu Initiation Rites in Youth Moral Development," *African Journal of Indigenous Studies* 6, no. 1 (2022): 44–59.

⁹⁴ Jansen, *Corrupted*.

⁹⁵ S. Booysen, *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016).

⁹⁶ Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (Routledge, 2018).

⁹⁷ Mbembe, *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the University in Africa*.

⁹⁸ Francis B Nyamnjoh, "Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52, no. 3 (2017): 253–70.

⁹⁹ Savo Heleta, "Decolonisation of Higher Education: Dismantling Epistemic Violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa," *Transformation in Higher Education* 1, no. 1 (2016): 1–8.

¹⁰⁰ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey, 1986), 4.

¹⁰¹ Leketi Makalela, "Translanguaging as a Vehicle for Epistemic Access: Cases for Reading Comprehension and Multilingual Interactions," *Per Linguam: A Journal of Language Learning = Per Linguam: Tydskrif Vir Taalaanleer* 31, no. 1 (2015): 15–29.

¹⁰² Neo Lekgotla Laga Ramoupi, "African Research and Scholarship: 20 Years of Lost Opportunities to Transform Higher Education in South Africa," *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 38, no. 1 (2014).

¹⁰³ Council on Higher Education (CHE), *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy* (Pretoria: CHE, 2016).

¹⁰⁴ R. Mabokela and Y. Mlambo, *Transformation of Higher Education in South Africa: Voices from the Academy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017).

¹⁰⁵ J. Jansen, *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019).

Ultimately, decolonisation remains aspirational rather than operational. Universities prioritise rhetorical gestures over substantive curricular overhauls, citing logistical challenges while lacking political will.¹⁰⁶ Without dismantling the epistemic and linguistic hierarchies that sustain Western hegemony, South African higher education will continue to reproduce coloniality, rendering Afrocentrism an empty signifier rather than a transformative praxis.

Persistent Structural Inequalities in South African Higher Education: A Critical Examination of HDIs and HWIs

The enduring inequality between Historically Disadvantaged Institutions and Historically White Institutions remains a critical barrier to equitable transformation in South Africa's higher education landscape. Despite post-apartheid policy commitments to redress historical imbalances, HWIs such as the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Stellenbosch University retain disproportionate access to research funding, infrastructure, and global academic networks, while HDIs like the University of Limpopo and Walter Sisulu University grapple with systemic underdevelopment.¹⁰⁷ These disparities, entrenched by apartheid-era resource allocation, perpetuate a two-tier system in which HWIs dominate academic prestige and output, and HDIs struggle with overcrowded facilities, limited research capacity, and lower graduate employability.¹⁰⁸

The apartheid legacy is starkly evident in infrastructure disparities. HWIs, bolstered by decades of state investment, offer state-of-the-art laboratories, libraries, and student housing, whereas HDIs face chronic underfunding. For instance, the University of Venda's overcrowded lecture halls and inadequate accommodation contrast sharply with UCT's internationally benchmarked facilities.¹⁰⁹ Such inequities directly undermine teaching and research quality at HDIs, entrenching cycles of disadvantage for students from rural and working-class backgrounds.¹¹⁰

Research funding models further exacerbate these gaps. South Africa's performance-based funding framework, which rewards institutions for existing research output and postgraduate enrolments, disproportionately benefits HWIs.¹¹¹ In 2018, Stellenbosch University secured over ZAR 1.2 billion in research grants, while the University of Fort Hare, serving predominantly Black students, received less than ZAR 50 million.¹¹² This systemic bias stifles HDIs' capacity to build postgraduate programmes or compete for high-impact research partnerships, relegating them to peripheral roles in knowledge production.¹¹³

Student outcomes further reflect institutional hierarchies. HWIs boast graduation rates exceeding 80%, compared to HDIs' 55–60%, with financial precarity and inadequate academic support driving higher dropout rates among HDI students.¹¹⁴ Graduates from HWIs also dominate access to elite employment and international opportunities, while HDI alumni face stigmatisation in labour markets.¹¹⁵

Despite the #FeesMustFall movement's spotlight on these inequities, policy interventions remain fragmented. HWIs retain outsized influence over national higher education governance, marginalising HDIs in decision-making forums.¹¹⁶ While the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)

¹⁰⁶ Roxanne Bailey et al., *The Decolonisation of the Curriculum Project: The Affordances of Indigenous Knowledge for Self-Directed Learning* (AOSIS, 2019).

¹⁰⁷ G. Wangenge-Ouma, "Higher Education and Development in Africa: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 18, no. 1 (2020): 1–18.

¹⁰⁸ Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*.

¹⁰⁹ Moeketsi Letseka, "How Convincing Is the Claim That Coexistence between Traditional African Values and Liberal Democratic Values in South Africa Is a Contradiction?," *Pensee* 76, no. 9 (2014).

¹¹⁰ Council on Higher Education (CHE), *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy*.

¹¹¹ Anita L Cloete, "Mediated Religion: Implications for Religious Authority," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 1 (2016): 1–6.

¹¹² Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), *Annual Report on the State of Higher Education* (Pretoria: DHET, 2019).

¹¹³ Hlengiwe Mabizela and Noluthando S. Matsiliza, "Uncovering the Gaps in the Provision of Services in the Rural Okhahlamba Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal Province," *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 8, no. 1 (December 21, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v8i1.390>.

¹¹⁴ Servaas Van der Berg et al., "The Impact of the Introduction of Grade R on Learning Outcomes," *University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch*, 2013.

¹¹⁵ Pryah Mahabeer, Nomkhosi Nzimande, and Makhosi Shoba, "Academics of Colour: Experiences of Emerging Black Women Academics in Curriculum Studies at a University in South Africa," *Agenda* 32, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 28–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2018.1460139>.

¹¹⁶ Jansen, "As by Fire: The End of the South African University."

has introduced redress funding, implementation gaps and bureaucratic inertia hinder meaningful transformation.¹¹⁷ Without systemic reforms to reallocate resources, decolonise funding models, and prioritise HDI capacity-building, South Africa's higher education system risks entrenching apartheid-era divisions indefinitely.

State Violence and the Criminalisation of Dissent: Policing the #FeesMustFall Movement in South Africa

The #FeesMustFall protests underline systemic inequities in South African higher education, but also revealed the state's reliance on apartheid-era tactics to suppress dissent through police brutality and the criminalisation of activism. Despite the legitimacy of student demands recognised even by government commissions, authorities responded with disproportionate force, mass arrests, and judicial harassment, framing protests as threats to public order rather than engaging with structural grievances.¹¹⁸ This repression reflects a continuity of state violence, mirroring strategies historically deployed to quell anti-apartheid resistance.¹¹⁹

Excessive force became a hallmark of policing during the protests. At the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in 2021, police fired rubber bullets, tear gas, and stun grenades at largely peaceful demonstrators, resulting in the death of Mthokozisi Ntumba, a bystander unrelated to the protests.¹²⁰ Similarly, Khayaletu Magwaza, a University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) student, was fatally shot during a 2016 demonstration, exposing the lethal consequences of militarised policing.¹²¹ Investigations into these deaths have yielded minimal accountability, perpetuating a culture of impunity.¹²²

Student leaders faced systematic criminalisation. Mcebo Dlamini, a Wits activist, was repeatedly detained on charges of incitement and public violence, despite advocating non-violent protest. Vuyani Pambo, another prominent figure, endured protracted legal battles, illustrating the state's use of judicial systems to stifle dissent.¹²³ These tactics echo apartheid-era strategies to delegitimise activism, framing demands for equity as criminal rather than constitutional.¹²⁴ Even passive participants were targeted: students uninvolved in violence faced arbitrary charges, fostering a climate of fear and self-censorship.¹²⁵

The militarisation of campuses exacerbated these dynamics. Institutions like Wits, UCT, and the University of Pretoria deployed private security firms with quasi-police powers, transforming campuses into securitised spaces.¹²⁶ At HDIs, such as Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), security personnel assaulted students with impunity, often under institutional complicity.¹²⁷ A UKZN student recounted how guards "humiliated and beat us as if we were criminals, not scholars."¹²⁸ Despite video evidence and public outcry, universities rarely held perpetrators accountable, normalising violence as a governance tool.¹²⁹ These practices reveal a state-university nexus intent on preserving the status quo. By criminalising dissent and outsourcing repression, authorities evade addressing systemic underfunding, fee

¹¹⁷ Bozalek and Boughey, "(Mis) Framing Higher Education in South Africa."

¹¹⁸ Ndlovu, "Facing History in the Aftermath of Gukurahundi Atrocities: New Media, Memory and the Discourses on Forgiveness on Selected Zimbabwean News Websites."

¹¹⁹ Godsell, Chikane, and Mpofo-Walsh, *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*.

¹²⁰ S. Mohamed, "South Africa: COVID-19 Pushes Inequality in Schools to Crippling New Level, Risks a Lost Generation of Learners," *Amnesty International Press Release 15 February 2021*, 2021.

¹²¹ Rachel Mahloko Matshoba, *Investigating the Articulation of National Qualifications Framework Level 4 Engineering Vocational and Academic Qualifications with Higher Education Qualifications* (University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2019).

¹²² Nokwazi Nompumelelo Magwaza, "The Use of Force by the Police as a Human Security Issue, with Specific Reference to the Marikana Massacre," 2020.

¹²³ Camalita Naicker, "From Marikana To# Feesmustfall: The Praxis of Popular Politics in South Africa," *Urbanisation* 1, no. 1 (2016): 53–61.

¹²⁴ Godsell, Chikane, and Mpofo-Walsh, *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*.

¹²⁵ Booyesen, *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*.

¹²⁶ N. Bohler-Muller and C. Fombad, "Securitisation and Student Protests in South Africa," *South African Crime Quarterly* 56 (2016):25–34.

¹²⁷ Ndlovu, "Facing History in the Aftermath of Gukurahundi Atrocities: New Media, Memory and the Discourses on Forgiveness on Selected Zimbabwean News Websites."

¹²⁸ I Gusti Agung Paramitha Eka Putri, "Critical Environmental Education in Tertiary English Language Teaching (ELT): A Collaborative Digital Storytelling Project," *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 8, no. 2 (September 30, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v8i2.13280>; S. Ndelu, "Criminalising Black Pain: State Violence against #FeesMustFall Activists," *Agenda* 34, no. 1 (2020): 29–39, 34

¹²⁹ Jansen, "As by Fire: The End of the South African University."

inequalities, and racialised access.¹³⁰ Until South Africa confronts this legacy of securitisation and centres restorative justice over retribution, its higher education system will remain a site of contested freedoms rather than transformative equity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To move forward, a collaborative approach involving government, universities, students, and civil society is essential. Policymakers must prioritise sustainable funding models, equitable resource distribution, and genuine curriculum decolonisation. Universities, meanwhile, must confront institutional biases and foster inclusive environments that reflect South Africa's diverse knowledge systems.

CONCLUSION

The #FeesMustFall movement emerged as a powerful catalyst for change in South Africa's higher education system, shedding light on deep-seated inequalities rooted in the country's apartheid past. While the movement achieved notable successes, such as the suspension of fee increases and the expansion of financial aid through NSFAS, its core demands for free, decolonised, and equitable education remain largely unfulfilled. The persistent challenges of financial exclusion for the "missing middle," inadequate funding for postgraduate studies, governance inefficiencies, and the slow pace of curriculum decolonisation underline the unfinished business of the movement.

The disparities between Historically Disadvantaged Institutions and Historically White Institutions further highlight systemic inequities in resource allocation, infrastructure, and research opportunities. These gaps perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage for Black students and scholars, reinforcing the need for transformative policies that address historical injustices. Additionally, the criminalisation of student activism and police brutality during protests reveals a troubling continuity of state violence, stifling dissent and undermining democratic engagement.

The legacy of #FeesMustFall serves as a reminder that education is not merely a commodity but a fundamental right and a tool for social justice. Until these systemic issues are addressed, the transformative potential of higher education in South Africa will remain unrealised. The struggle for equitable access to quality education is far from over, and the voices of students continue to demand accountability and action. The unfinished business of #FeesMustFall calls for renewed commitment to building an education system that is truly free, decolonised, and accessible to all.

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¹³⁰ Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*.

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