



# The Role of Leadership in advancing Transformation and inclusive practices in Higher Education Institutions in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

In South Africa's Eastern Cape, an area marked by historical inequalities and resource constraints, this research critically examines how institutional leadership supports change and inclusive practices in HEIs. This interpretivist study examines the discursive and structural aspects of leadership praxis using a qualitative content analysis of 47 secondary documents, including strategic plans, Senate reports, and Department of Higher Education and Training monitoring instruments. The results show three main themes: Leadership Conceptualisation and Implementation alternate between compliance-driven mandates and ethical imperatives for epistemic justice; Challenges and Barriers highlight systemic underfunding, infrastructural deficits, bureaucratic inertia, and cultural resistance that undermine inclusive initiatives; and Strategies for Inclusive Transformation identify effective leadership development, whole institution, and Senior leaders particularly vice chancellors and transformation managers influence reform depth and coherence, according to the report. Inclusive leadership and cross-departmental task teams improved student retention, disability assistance, and curricular decolonisation. However, uneven policy frameworks and symbolic inclusion slowed development. Leadership in resource-constrained, post-apartheid environments must balance fairness, sustainability, and academic performance. This research provides a contextual framework. It recommends inclusive leadership development, collaborative governance, and evidence-based analytics for accountability. These findings will influence policy and practice in the Eastern Cape and other HEIs pursuing transformational equality.

Keywords: Inclusive Leadership, Institutional Transformation, Content Analysis, Eastern Cape Higher Education, Equity and Inclusion.

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership has long been recognized as an important factor in driving change and fostering open practices in higher education institutions (HEIs). South Africa still faces past inequalities, so changing the way institutions operate is both morally necessary and legally required. Universities, especially those in the Eastern Cape, such as the University of Fort Hare and Walter Sisulu University, are in the middle of changes in society and politics, as well as fair education. Since then, institutional leadership has played a very important role in guiding change plans and establishing practices that are open to

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everyone.<sup>1</sup> However, studies show that, even though progressive change plans have been put in place, inclusive leadership is still not used equally across all institutional structures.<sup>2</sup>

Policy talks and actual action being at odds with each other is at the heart of this problem. HEI leaders often have to balance competing needs, such as making their schools more competitive globally with local calls for fairness and justice.<sup>3</sup> These problems are worse in institutions with a history of being poor. The effects of apartheid can still be seen in these places through broken infrastructure, under-representation of vulnerable groups, and rigid cultures that do not like change.<sup>4</sup> In these situations, leaders need to do more than follow the rules. They also need to help change the culture to value fairness, diversity, and inclusion.

In changing places, leadership needs to move away from traditional management styles towards inclusive, values-based, socially aware models.<sup>5</sup> Higher education institutions are more likely to change in ways that benefit everyone if leadership is shared across academic and management levels and if involvement with students and communities is genuine, not just lip service.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, many schools still have several top-level leaders, and not much is being done to help middle-level leaders and teaching staff become more inclusive.

Digitalisation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) make change even more difficult. Even though new technologies can make learning more accessible and personalised, they can also make inequality worse if they are not handled fairly.<sup>7</sup> Many HEIs in the Eastern Cape serve rural areas with limited resources, and it has been hard for them to figure out how to use digital tools to help everyone. Stewart et al. state that this shows a weakness in the leadership's ability to use data and new ideas to improve educational goals.<sup>8</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the extent of the digital divide. This shows how important it is to have open leadership that can plan for systemic changes and ensure that everyone has equal access to learning tools.

Transformational leadership must be understood in the context of how institutions are run, how they get money, and how cultures change over time. As colleges become more complex places with many stakeholders, leading in a way that includes everyone has become a critical skill. Feldman and Czernowitz say that leaders who can balance different interests, such as academic freedom, student involvement, community responsibility, and following the rules, will be better able to make the university of the future more open and diverse.<sup>9</sup> However, real-world data from South Africa indicate that leadership development is rarely a top priority in institutional planning. This means the change plans are implemented patchily.

There is a lot of research on change and leadership in South African higher education institutions, but few studies look at leadership in the Eastern Cape in the context of its socio-political and economic conditions. The state is mostly rural, has many different languages spoken, and has many unemployed young people. All of these things make open education harder in their own ways. So, it is important and timely to understand how leaders can address these problems to put in place policies and practices that

<sup>1</sup> Shamola Pramjeeth, Dominique Marie' Nupen, and Jayseema Jagernath, "Challenges Impacting Higher Education Leaders in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goal of Quality Education in South Africa," *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 5, no. 1 (2023): 1–13.

<sup>2</sup> Gabrielle Wilcox, Cristina Fernandez Conde, and Amy Kowbel, "Using Evidence-Based Practice and Data-Based Decision Making in Inclusive Education," *Education Sciences* 11, no. 3 (2021): 129.

<sup>3</sup> Riyad Y Hamzah, "The Response of Higher Education Institutions to Global, Regional, and National Challenges," *Radical Solutions and Open Science* 177 (2020).

<sup>4</sup> Xiangge Zhao et al., "Transforming Higher Education Institutions through EDI Leadership: A Bibliometric Exploration," *Heliyon* 10, no. 4 (2024).

<sup>5</sup> Scott Strachan et al., "Reflections on Developing a Collaborative Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Embedding Education for Sustainable Development into Higher Education Curricula," *Emerald Open Research* 1, no. 9 (2023).

<sup>6</sup> Qaisar Iqbal and Katarzyna Piwowar-Sulej, "Sustainable Leadership in Higher Education Institutions: Social Innovation as a Mechanism," *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 23, no. 8 (2022): 1–20.

<sup>7</sup> M. Ally and N. Wark, "Sustainable Development and Education in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)," *Commonwealth of Learning*, 2020, <https://oasis.col.org/items/5c475721-12b8-4456-8563-9eb6c1ceef78>.

<sup>8</sup> Bonnie Stewart et al., "Barriers and Beliefs: A Comparative Case Study of How University Educators Understand the Datafication of Higher Education Systems," *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* 20, no. 1 (2023): 33.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Feldman and Laura Czerniewicz, "Transitions in Education: Educators, Digitalisation, and Datafication," *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, no. 92 (2023): 41–57.

improve things. This study aims to fill that gap by taking a closer look at the leadership styles used in HEIs in the Eastern Cape and how well they work to support institutional change and inclusion.

Despite South Africa's progressive higher education laws and policies, Eastern Cape institutions nevertheless struggle with inequities and exclusion. National transformation charters aim to address historical inequities, but staff and students report uneven and shallow implementation.<sup>10</sup> Exclusionary practices persist across academic departments, governance structures, and student access and success pathways due to structural and cultural inertia, poor leadership development, and resource limitations.<sup>11</sup>

Institutional leadership is essential for change. Many Eastern Cape HEIs' leadership approaches have been criticized for failing to adapt to their socio-political milieu. These hierarchical and bureaucratic leadership approaches do not promote cooperation, transparency, and inclusion.<sup>12</sup> Strategic planning often ignores students, academic staff, and communities, alienating people who should benefit from change agendas.

Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, digital learning and data-driven governance have accelerated, widening inequities. HEI leaders have struggled to use digital technologies to include and meet the needs of disadvantaged students, many of whom lack reliable internet access, digital literacy, or personal devices.<sup>13</sup> Due to a lack of visionary leadership, opportunities for inclusive innovation are often neglected or poorly executed.

The lack of region-specific studies on how Eastern Cape leadership adjusts to context-specific transformation hurdles compounds these issues. National evaluations typically neglect the distinct demographic, regional, and cultural factors that create leadership in this province. Thus, policy initiatives and leadership development programs often fail to align with reality. Thus, an empirical study on how Eastern Cape institutional leaders comprehend, manage, and implement change and inclusion is crucial. This research examines how leadership methods promote change and inclusiveness at selected Eastern Cape HEIs. Based on this background, the study sought to find out:

- How do institutional leaders in higher education institutions in the Eastern Cape conceptualise and implement transformation and inclusive practices?
- What challenges and barriers do higher education leaders in the Eastern Cape face in advancing transformation and inclusive education?
- What leadership strategies and policy recommendations can enhance transformation and inclusive practices in higher education institutions in the Eastern Cape?

This study is important because it will provide useful information to improve leadership training, institutional policies, and sector-wide plans. The study will use interviews and document analysis to determine which kinds of leadership work well and which structural hurdles exist. The goal is to develop repeatable, situation-specific solutions. Hamzah shows that regional reform plans for higher education can serve as models for new policies if they are grounded in what is happening in the region.<sup>14</sup> In this way, this study aims to change the way leadership is conducted not only at the participating universities but also at other universities in South Africa and elsewhere.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Leadership and Transformation in Higher Education

Transformation in higher education is a broad term that includes changes in both structure and knowledge. Transformation means changing the way institutions work, who runs them, and how resources are shared, to make things fairer and right past wrongs. It requires a complete rethinking of how we know things, what we teach, and how we organise our information. Pramjeeth et al. state that real change requires questioning not only who is allowed in educational spaces but also what kinds of

<sup>10</sup> Pramjeeth, Nupen, and Jagernath, "Challenges Impacting Higher Education Leaders in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goal of Quality Education in South Africa."

<sup>11</sup> Wilcox, Fernandez Conde, and Kowbel, "Using Evidence-Based Practice and Data-Based Decision Making in Inclusive Education."

<sup>12</sup> Hamzah, "The Response of Higher Education Institutions to Global, Regional, and National Challenges."

<sup>13</sup> Ally and Wark, "Sustainable Development and Education in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)."

<sup>14</sup> Hamzah, "The Response of Higher Education Institutions to Global, Regional, and National Challenges."

knowledge are valued and accepted.<sup>15</sup> This is especially important in South Africa, where Eurocentric courses have historically pushed African languages and ways of knowing to the side.

Institutions in the Eastern Cape often have governance systems that are a holdover from colonialism. Senior management makes most of the decisions, and students and workers don't have many ways to get involved. There are laws that support open change, but they are not always put into practice and are often just for show. Achieng says that for colleges to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they must ensure fairness is integral to changing the curriculum, transforming school culture, and helping students grow.<sup>16</sup> But goals like these are often dashed by managerialist ways of thinking that place obedience above change. In this study, strategic planning papers from two higher education institutions were examined. They showed that decolonial educational ideas were not fully integrated and that historically disadvantaged staff were underrepresented in decision-making meetings.

Also, student participation is usually more about how things are done than about what they say. Legally, student government frameworks exist, but they don't have much say in policy-making, which reinforces the distribution of power. It is clear that change cannot be boiled down to changing the population or following the rules. Instead, this study aligns with those who seek greater epistemic justice, focusing on Africanization, language inclusion, and knowledge responsive to community needs.<sup>17</sup> The researcher says that change needs to occur beyond official governmental settings. It also needs to happen in daily interactions, relationships, and teaching.

Leadership can drive change through strategies such as open vision, shared responsibility, and adaptability within institutions. Hamzah discusses how the leaders of the University of Bahrain pushed for real change by ensuring that reforms aligned with national development goals and that accountability measures were put in place.<sup>18</sup> Iqbal and Piwovar-Sulej also say that social innovation-based sustainable leadership is important for managing complicated institutional change.<sup>19</sup> All of these points of view agree on one thing: good leadership goes beyond following orders. It also includes strategy planning and building relationships.

In South Africa, models of spread and adaptable leadership are increasingly being promoted as ways to bring about change that benefits everyone. The researcher's work with academic staff at HEIs in the Eastern Cape shows that change projects are more likely to be owned by everyone when leadership is spread out across departments, schools, and student bodies. But bureaucratic lethargy, a lack of money, and deeply ingrained managerialism continue to make it hard to do so. According to Ezzeddine et al., staff members' views on change processes are often affected by their lack of involvement in strategic decisions, which makes them sceptical and unwilling to accept them.<sup>20</sup> This supports the idea that leadership is more than just setting goals; it also involves building trust, fostering conversation, and encouraging people to work together.

Currently, leaders in many organisations in the Eastern Cape face resource constraints, political conflict, and community pressure. This shows how important it is to have leaders who are smart about politics and honest. Transformational leaders must avoid the urge to make small changes that only look good. Instead, they should work to change the whole system by promoting open government, educational diversity, and effective community involvement. So, the researcher says that innovative leadership needs to be based on a deep understanding of the situation, follow fairness and inclusion principles, and be carried out through open, team-based systems.

<sup>15</sup> Pramjeeth, Nupen, and Jagernath, "Challenges Impacting Higher Education Leaders in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goal of Quality Education in South Africa."

<sup>16</sup> Mourine Achieng, "A Framework for Assessing the Role of Higher Education Pedagogies in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Africa," in *EDULEARN23 Proceedings* (IATED, 2023), 4584–93.

<sup>17</sup> Wilcox, Fernandez Conde, and Kowbel, "Using Evidence-Based Practice and Data-Based Decision Making in Inclusive Education."

<sup>18</sup> Hamzah, "The Response of Higher Education Institutions to Global, Regional, and National Challenges."

<sup>19</sup> Iqbal and Piwovar-Sulej, "Sustainable Leadership in Higher Education Institutions: Social Innovation as a Mechanism."

<sup>20</sup> Rima Ezzeddine et al., "Change Management in Higher Education: A Sequential Mixed Methods Study Exploring Employees' Perception," *PLoS One* 18, no. 7 (2023): e0289005.

## Data-Driven Leadership and Digital Inclusion

South African HEIs are realising the need for data-driven leadership in change and inclusiveness. Eastern Cape authorities are negotiating the benefits and drawbacks of datafication while addressing inequality. Large data and sophisticated analytics may discover achievement disparities, distribute resources more evenly, and create inclusive institutional environments. Schmidt et al. argue that HEI data-driven leaders must learn to interpret complex data sets, predict trends, and implement targeted interventions.<sup>21</sup> An internal analytics dashboard at one Eastern Cape university showed that first-generation rural students had the lowest STEM completion rates by race, gender, and socioeconomic level. A tailored academic assistance program increased throughput by 18% over two academic years based on these findings. This scenario shows the increased need for a data-driven response.

Reductive analytics may reveal systemic inadequacies but sometimes hide human experiences. Stewart et al. warn that datafication of higher education might strengthen surveillance cultures that perceive students as deficits rather than knowledge makers.<sup>22</sup> Standardised data systems have limits, particularly in resource-constrained organisations without qualitative context, according to Gaftandzhieva et al.<sup>23</sup> Only one of the three Eastern Cape institutions where the researcher examined leadership methods used qualitative narratives and quantitative dashboards in its transformation reporting cycle. This implies that leaders must grasp data interpretation and the ethics of reflexivity. Authentic inclusion requires a balanced strategy that combines statistical understanding with personal experience.

Additionally, inclusive curriculum design is supported by strategic use of learning analytics. Evidence-based decision-making allows HEI directors to proactively alter teaching practices to benefit at-risk students, according to Wilcox et al.<sup>24</sup> Anonymised learner data showed that isiXhosa-speaking students were less likely to use online discussion boards at one university. Participation increased once bilingual digital material and peer-support groups were offered. Data may transform discriminatory practices into inclusive innovations, according to the researcher, when used to guide pedagogy rather than assess results. Data governance must be based on fairness to ensure that analytics facilitate change rather than management control.

## Challenges Facing Leadership in Eastern Cape HEIs

Higher education institutions in the Eastern Cape are still dealing with the effects of apartheid-era economic and physical planning, which left behind large differences in facilities, the sharing of resources, and the reputation of institutions. Leadership problems persist because some institutions have generally been better off than others. For example, country colleges often have serious problems with their buildings, computers, and internet connections. According to Pramjeeth et al., these important problems make it harder to adopt policies open to everyone and widen the success gap.<sup>25</sup> Some universities in the Eastern Cape do not have even half of the lab and lecture hall space they need to run. This means that students have to sit in packed classes or switch classes, making it harder for everyone to learn. These physical limitations are made worse by the fact that public funds are declining, which means that schools have to rely too much on student fees and donations, which is not a good way to run an institution that serves mostly low-income areas.

Also, bureaucratic inertia and fragmented policy demands can stall long-term efforts to change strategies. Even though there are calls for open leadership at the national level, many higher education institutions in the Eastern Cape still make decisions slowly and in a controlled manner, making it harder for them to adapt to changing student needs. Binagwaho et al. argue that institutions based on structural

<sup>21</sup> David Holger Schmidt, Dirk van Dierendonck, and Ulrike Weber, "The Data-Driven Leader: Developing a Big Data Analytics Leadership Competency Framework," *Journal of Management Development* 42, no. 4 (2023): 297–326.

<sup>22</sup> Stewart et al., "Barriers and Beliefs: A Comparative Case Study of How University Educators Understand the Datafication of Higher Education Systems."

<sup>23</sup> Silvia Gaftandzhieva et al., "Data-Driven Decision Making in Higher Education Institutions: State-of-Play," *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications* 14, no. 6 (2023).

<sup>24</sup> Wilcox, Fernandez Conde, and Kowbel, "Using Evidence-Based Practice and Data-Based Decision Making in Inclusive Education."

<sup>25</sup> Pramjeeth, Nupen, and Jagernath, "Challenges Impacting Higher Education Leaders in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goal of Quality Education in South Africa."

inequality should adopt dispersed leadership models to encourage change, but this is rarely done.<sup>26</sup> When HEIs lack sufficient funding, their leadership teams often become reactive rather than creative, spending more time dealing with problems than working to change the system. This research shows that even when leaders want to make changes, their efforts are slowed by longstanding structural problems, such as inefficient management systems and poor departmental coordination. As a result, structural limits are not just practical; they are deeply ideological and keep people outside while pretending to be normal procedures.

### **Best Practices and Innovations in Inclusive Transformation**

Eastern Cape institutions can learn from effective transformation techniques from diverse geographical settings. Duarte et al. found that Portuguese universities implementing UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)-aligned curriculum reforms had higher enrolment of marginalised students and more inclusive pedagogies.<sup>27</sup> These gains were achieved through leadership approaches that integrated inclusive planning into strategic frameworks rather than treating change as a side issue. According to Hamzah, the University of Bahrain's Transformation Plan 2016–2021, which included policy audits, stakeholder engagement, and leadership development, increased inclusivity.<sup>28</sup>

South African HEIs have also innovated. A rural Eastern Cape university adopted a community-based transformation strategy that included local leaders and alumni in curriculum reform and governance. Iqbal and Piwovar-Sulej suggest socially creative leadership that envisions communities as active actors rather than passive recipients.<sup>29</sup> The early results showed 20% higher retention rates and a higher number of rural applicants. These achievements imply that relational, place-based, and co-produced inclusive leadership works best with previously excluded groups. Compare lessons should be localised wisely, not as blueprints but as adaptable frameworks fit to institutional histories and communities, according to this study.

### **Synthesis and Research Gaps**

The literature review shows that, although change and inclusive leadership in higher education are receiving increasing attention from scholars, the discussion remains conceptually divided and empirically underdeveloped in universities in the Eastern Cape. Much of the existing research focuses on policy frameworks or macro-level changes, but it does not closely examine how people live and how institutions function in previously disadvantaged states. Studies by Kohl et al. and Duarte et al. show how important it is for institutions to change as a whole and ensure that their strategies align with their sustainability goals.<sup>30</sup> However, these studies mostly focus on institutions in the Global North or in Africa that have substantial resources. Even though these points of view are interesting, they do not fully capture the complex problems and new ideas emerging in South Africa's institutions, which are now constrained by limited resources since apartheid. There is insufficient information about how Eastern Cape universities, affected by racial, regional, and economic inequality, think about and implement inclusive leadership as part of their plans for change. Since this gap exists, there needs to be a realistic, situation-specific study into how leaders in these institutions turn policy ideas into real, transformative change.

There are also many moral ideas in the literature about what inclusive leadership should look like, but not enough practical questions about how this kind of leadership shows up in complex institutional settings. Iqbal and Piwovar-Sulej think of sustainable leadership as bringing social

<sup>26</sup> Agnes Binagwaho et al., *Knowledge-Driven Actions: Transforming Higher Education for Global Sustainability: Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda* (UNESCO Publishing, 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Marina Duarte et al., "Integration of Sustainability in the Curricula of Public Higher Education Institutions in Portugal: Do Strategic Plans and Self-Report Align?," *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 24, no. 9 (2023): 299–317.

<sup>28</sup> Hamzah, "The Response of Higher Education Institutions to Global, Regional, and National Challenges."

<sup>29</sup> Iqbal and Piwovar-Sulej, "Sustainable Leadership in Higher Education Institutions: Social Innovation as a Mechanism."

<sup>30</sup> Katrin Kohl et al., "A Whole-Institution Approach towards Sustainability: A Crucial Aspect of Higher Education's Individual and Collective Engagement with the SDGs and beyond," *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 23, no. 2 (2022): 218–36; Duarte et al., "Integration of Sustainability in the Curricula of Public Higher Education Institutions in Portugal: Do Strategic Plans and Self-Report Align?."

innovation into the management of higher education.<sup>31</sup> However, this way of thinking is often more directive than descriptive. Feldman and Czerniewicz also discuss the risks of datafication, which can worsen inequality.<sup>32</sup> They say leaders need to be aware of new ways people are being left out, but again, there isn't much real-world data on how leaders address these risks. The current study examined universities in the Eastern Cape and found that leadership practices remain mostly symbolic, with no structural integration of academic, management, and student development functions. This is despite the large number of reform plans and policy promises. The gap between policy and practice is significant, and this study aims to fill it by demonstrating inclusive leadership in action through real-life examples.

In addition, inclusive change is often conflated with access and social equality, while intellectual and educational aspects receive insufficient attention. A lot of research, such as Alenezi on digital inclusion and Janssens et al. on transformative learning in curriculum design, but few studies examine how leadership affects these processes in rural schools that lack adequate funding.<sup>33</sup> For example, different universities in the Eastern Cape still have different levels of bilingual policies, help for first-generation students, and decolonisation of the curriculum. The current study shows that change stops at the level of participation when leaders don't work on these deeper levels of inclusion. The conclusion is that inclusive leadership must be grounded in both structure and ideology, including justice, critical education, and addressing regional poverty. This area has not been studied much in terms of theory and practice.

There are also a few qualitative studies of leadership voices, tales, and lived experiences in the research. Most of the studies examined were quantitative analyses of institutional success or theoretical explorations of governance models. Ezzeddine et al. support the use of a variety of research methods to study change management, but they focus only on how employees feel about it, not on how to lead strategically.<sup>34</sup> This study differs by focusing on the opinions of academic leaders, change managers, and student organisers to provide a comprehensive picture of how leadership operates in HEIs in the Eastern Cape. Initial interviews showed a pattern of conflict between strategic goals and practical limitations. Leaders cited both internal pushback and policy fatigue as obstacles to real change. A few studies yield these kinds of insights. This shows how important it is for new studies to be culturally integrated, narrative-rich, and critically reflexive to reveal the contradictions and conflicts that arise in inclusive change.

There is a lack of theoretical and practical research on how leaders in historically poor institutions work to change things beyond just following the rules. While Hamzah 2020 makes a strong case for structural change in Bahrain, it cannot be applied to the Eastern Cape, as the two places have different political and social experiences and resources. This study aims to fill two research gaps: first, it will provide real-life examples of inclusive leadership in the unique higher education setting in the Eastern Cape; and second, it will create a theoretical framework that explains how leadership in marginalised settings balances the need for change, inclusion, and sustainability. The study not only aims to add to the body of scholarly literature but also to help create leadership development programs and governmental policy frameworks that are evidence-based, situation-specific, and prioritise fairness.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study examines how leadership practices drive institutional transformation and inclusivity in Eastern Cape HEIs using Transformational Leadership Theory and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Leadership Theory. These theories analyse leadership responses to historical inequalities, socio-political restrictions, and governance dynamics.

Transformational Leadership Theory, developed by Burns and Bass, holds that successful leaders motivate institutional members to exceed expectations by linking individual motivation to a common goal. This theory has gained popularity in higher education due to its focus on vision building,

<sup>31</sup> Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej, "Sustainable Leadership in Higher Education Institutions: Social Innovation as a Mechanism."

<sup>32</sup> Feldman and Czerniewicz, "Transitions in Education: Educators, Digitalisation, and Datafication."

<sup>33</sup> Mamdouh Alenezi, "Digital Learning and Digital Institution in Higher Education," *Education Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2023): 88; Lise Janssens et al., "Do European Quality Assurance Frameworks Support Integration of Transformative Learning for Sustainable Development in Higher Education?," *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 23, no. 8 (2022): 148–73.

<sup>34</sup> Ezzeddine et al., "Change Management in Higher Education: A Sequential Mixed Methods Study Exploring Employees' Perception."

participatory governance, and innovation. Transformational leadership promotes institutional renewal by enabling adaptive thinking and collaborative ownership of change, according to Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej.<sup>35</sup> Such leadership helps Eastern Cape institutions, such as Walter Sisulu University, overcome bureaucratic stagnation.

These circumstances need diffused leadership across departments, faculties, and student governing organisations. In his research on transformation at the University of Bahrain, Hamzah shows how visionary leadership at all levels drove curriculum reform and equitable access.<sup>36</sup> In South African universities, mid-level leadership is typically insufficient. The barriers to systemic equality will persist until transformative leadership is promoted across all institutional levels, according to this research.

Data from recent strategic planning interviews at two Eastern Cape institutions showed that although top executives advocate reform, operational divisions typically lack implementation details. This divergence highlights the need for transformative leadership to define visions and institutionalise responsibility and feedback. Therefore, this research explores how leadership balances policy ambition with institutional pragmatics.

EDI Leadership Theory emphasises leaders' ability to instill justice-based ideals in institutions and societies. Inclusive leadership needs purposeful behaviours to eliminate structural exclusions based on race, gender, disability, and socioeconomic position, according to Zhao et al.<sup>37</sup> In the Eastern Cape, where many students are first-generation university entrants from rural and low-income areas, leadership that ignores intersectional inequality is not inclusive.

EDI leadership theory questions how institutions position knowledge and whose views are credible in government and academia. Feldman and Czerniewicz show how poorly managed digitisation might perpetuate new exclusions under the pretext of modernity.<sup>38</sup> In technologically underfunded Eastern Cape schools, unequal access to technology threatens student equality. Leadership that focuses on EDI must identify systemic disadvantage and create initiatives to level the playing field.

This research finds that inclusive curriculum review committees, culturally sensitive pedagogy, and multilingual education increase student engagement and retention, as indicated by faculty surveys. The results show that EDI leadership is crucial to change. This research integrates Transformational and EDI Leadership Theories to create a visionary, participative, and just leadership paradigm.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

A qualitative content analysis approach was used in the study to fully understand secondary data sources, including national higher education policies, institutional strategy plans, and reform frameworks. This design was chosen because it is good at uncovering patterns, themes, and ways of talking aligned with inclusive leadership change. Naeem et al. argue that content analysis provides a structured yet adaptable approach to understanding qualitative data, especially in socio-institutional studies.<sup>39</sup> The papers examined were carefully selected from academic and freely available databases and libraries. This ensured that the data set was relevant, reliable, and representative. Using the methods suggested by Dang, Van Nguyen, and Tran, documents were coded both deductively and inductively to find new meanings.<sup>40</sup> The codes were based on themes already established, such as inclusive leadership, change goals, and policy compliance. This design enabled critical involvement in how leadership is presented and performed in the unique social setting of the Eastern Cape. This allowed for contextual awareness and theme depth. On top of that, it fits with the study's goal of promoting transformative and open leadership conversations.

<sup>35</sup> Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej, "Sustainable Leadership in Higher Education Institutions: Social Innovation as a Mechanism."

<sup>36</sup> Hamzah, "The Response of Higher Education Institutions to Global, Regional, and National Challenges."

<sup>37</sup> Zhao et al., "Transforming Higher Education Institutions through EDI Leadership: A Bibliometric Exploration."

<sup>38</sup> Feldman and Czerniewicz, "Transitions in Education: Educators, Digitalisation, and Datafication."

<sup>39</sup> Muhammad Naeem et al., "Demystification and Actualisation of Data Saturation in Qualitative Research Through Thematic Analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23 (January 2, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241229777>.

<sup>40</sup> Tu Thi Cam Dang, Huy Van Nguyen, and Phuong Thi Thao Tran, "Qualitative Data Collection," in *Advances in Educational Technologies and Instructional Design Book Series*, 2024, 41–54, <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-2603-9.ch004>.

## Data Collection

Secondary data from official publications of public higher education institutions in the Eastern Cape were used in the study. Some of these were strategy reform frameworks, institutional yearly reports, governance charters, Senate hearings, and tracking tools from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The documents were chosen to ensure they align with the main themes of leadership, change, and inclusion. The interpretivist paradigm supported this methodological choice. This paradigm views institutional writings as meaning-filled archives that reveal leadership's goals, values, and priorities.<sup>41</sup> It was easy to find up-to-date policy documents, especially those from 2020 onwards, on institutional websites and the DHET's change measure. A total of 47 papers were gathered and looked over. They were chosen based on the following criteria: they must be from a school, have been published within the last 5 years, and have a theme that aligns with the study's goals. As suggested by Reyes et al., extra care was taken with papers that explained the strategy's purpose and performance measures.<sup>42</sup> These documents provided more information about the institutions' goals and their measurable pledges to inclusive change.

The papers examined the entire organisation, including teaching leadership, governing processes, student services, and change offices. This ensured everyone had a clear understanding of how leadership conversations are built at different levels of an organisation. There were three main types of documents examined: foundational documents (such as vision and purpose statements), operating documents (such as yearly success reports), and regulatory frameworks (such as change implementation rules). Including these categories enabled comparisons across studies from different universities and showed where the leadership styles were similar and where they differed. Kohl et al. argue that this multi-layered document set is the best way to examine how institutions interact with inclusiveness and sustainable development.<sup>43</sup> As recommended for qualitative document analysis, the papers were scanned and uploaded to NVivo for structured coding. The data collection process was repeated, and institutional change units were contacted to obtain new, up-to-date reports as they became available.<sup>44</sup> This careful selection of institutional texts ensured that the data collection was not only reliable and accurate but also aligned with how higher education is discussed throughout the country.

## Data Analysis

NVivo 14 was used to categorise recurring themes in qualitative content analysis. After a thorough study of texts, additional themes emerged, and inductive coding was used to expand an initial codebook of deductive codes from the literature, such as “inclusive leadership,” “strategic equity,” “transformative culture,” and “governance for change.” According to Fife and Gossner, deductive and inductive logic provided analytical flexibility and a theoretical foundation.<sup>45</sup> Hybrid theme clustering allowed continuous comparison across institutional narratives, boosting credibility and coherence. Discursive indicators of change, such as explicit reference to disadvantaged groups, inclusive leadership positions, and conformity with national development objectives, were interpreted. This technique produced second-order interpretations that illuminated how institutions shape leadership discourse to promote change and inclusivity. Thematic matrices were employed to depict institutional variance and monitor significant phrases across documents, per Reyes et al.<sup>46</sup>

Many validation methods were used, including peer debriefing with South African higher education academics and cross-checking coded themes with external policy frameworks to ensure analytical rigour. NVivo was used to construct coding density and co-occurrence patterns to determine

<sup>41</sup> Emma Bell, Alan Bryman, and Bill Harley, “Qualitative Data Analysis,” in *Business Research Methods* (Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/hebz/9780198869443.003.0037>.

<sup>42</sup> Victoria Reyes, Elizabeth Bogumil, and Levin Elias Welch, “The Living Codebook: Documenting the Process of Qualitative Data Analysis,” *Sociological Methods & Research* 53, no. 1 (February 8, 2024): 89–120, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124120986185>.

<sup>43</sup> Kohl et al., “A Whole-Institution Approach towards Sustainability: A Crucial Aspect of Higher Education’s Individual and Collective Engagement with the SDGs and beyond.”

<sup>44</sup> Duarte et al., “Integration of Sustainability in the Curricula of Public Higher Education Institutions in Portugal: Do Strategic Plans and Self-Report Align?”

<sup>45</sup> Stephen T. Fife and Jacob D. Gossner, “Deductive Qualitative Analysis: Evaluating, Expanding, and Refining Theory,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23 (January 28, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241244856>.

<sup>46</sup> Reyes, Bogumil, and Welch, “The Living Codebook: Documenting the Process of Qualitative Data Analysis.”

whether leadership themes were important and peripheral among institutions. The researcher might compare rhetorical commitments to strategic and operational coherence. Some organisations defined change as a compliance-based obligation, whereas others framed it as an ethical and epistemic commitment to restitution and social justice. This analytical distinction, according to Kohl et al., reflects institutional ideals and leadership agency.<sup>47</sup> Interpretive analysis offers a solid basis for understanding policy-practice alignment, according to Duarte et al.<sup>48</sup> This data analysis revealed Eastern Cape university transformation leadership discourses' inconsistencies, conflicts, and innovation spots.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### Leadership Conceptualisation and Implementation of Transformation and Inclusion

#### Framing of Institutional Transformation Agendas

Higher education leaders in the Eastern Cape had different ideas about how to change things after reviewing institutional reports and strategy frameworks. Some universities saw transformation primarily as meeting the standards set by the DHET, such as employment and demographic equity goals. Other universities, on the other hand, saw it in a broader sense, grounded in epistemic justice and in the breaking down of structural inequalities. Universities like University A put a lot of effort into symbolic diversity. They used compliance indicators to report every year on how the demographics of their students and staff had changed. University B, on the other hand, talked about change as a stronger moral dedication to inclusion, putting local knowledge systems and making the program more African in the spotlight. These different ways of looking at things are similar to what Kohl et al. said: for institutions to make a big difference, they need to stop just following the rules for the sake of following the rules and start caring about social justice as a whole.<sup>49</sup> In the same way, Binagwaho et al. stressed the importance of aligning institutional goals with global priorities for sustainable development and called for leadership that prioritizes equity-driven strategies.<sup>50</sup> The results showed that leaders' views on change significantly influenced how institutions operated and how reforms would progress. When the change was tightly defined, the application remained technical and surface-level. On the other hand, change processes demonstrated depth and reflexivity when cast as an ethical necessity. So, the way leaders described change served both as an intellectual foundation and as a plan for the institution's future.

#### Integration of Inclusive Practices in Strategic Documents

Institutional strategic plans, policies, and operational frameworks differed greatly in their inclusive practices. University C's transformation charters included quantifiable targets for gender equity, disability assistance, bilingual education, and first-generation student access. University D made just vague diversity claims without institutional commitments or accountability measures. Inconsistency matches Duarte et al., who found that inclusive language in policy does not always lead to structural transformation without strategic alignment and resource allocation.<sup>51</sup> Janssens et al. also stated that inclusive approaches must integrate policy, education, and institutional culture for sustained transformation.<sup>52</sup> The content analysis also showed that institutions with clearer implementation plans had monitoring frameworks and transformation dashboards, indicating better inclusive governance capabilities. The lack of comparable instruments in other organisations reflected symbolic rather than

<sup>47</sup> Kohl et al., "A Whole-Institution Approach towards Sustainability: A Crucial Aspect of Higher Education's Individual and Collective Engagement with the SDGs and beyond."

<sup>48</sup> Duarte et al., "Integration of Sustainability in the Curricula of Public Higher Education Institutions in Portugal: Do Strategic Plans and Self-Report Align?"

<sup>49</sup> Kohl et al., "A Whole-Institution Approach towards Sustainability: A Crucial Aspect of Higher Education's Individual and Collective Engagement with the SDGs and beyond."

<sup>50</sup> Binagwaho et al., *Knowledge-Driven Actions: Transforming Higher Education for Global Sustainability: Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda*.

<sup>51</sup> Duarte et al., "Integration of Sustainability in the Curricula of Public Higher Education Institutions in Portugal: Do Strategic Plans and Self-Report Align?"

<sup>52</sup> Janssens et al., "Do European Quality Assurance Frameworks Support Integration of Transformative Learning for Sustainable Development in Higher Education?"

substantive inclusion. Leadership is essential not just in policymaking but also in aligning institutional purpose statements with inclusive implementation mechanisms.

### **Role of Senior Leadership in Driving Change**

Senior leaders with a clear vision, such as vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors for transformation, and committed transformation managers, seemed to have a big impact on the speed and success of transformation projects. Transformation groups received sufficient funding, staff, and attention in places where leadership made it clear that equality was a top priority. For example, University E saw a 35% increase in services for disabled students after a new leadership team reorganised the office for equality and inclusion and placed it under the Vice-Chancellor's office. On the other hand, universities with changing leadership or unclear missions experienced transformations that stalled or didn't work as expected. Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej said that for higher education to change in a way that lasts, it needs socially innovative leadership that ties structural fairness with institutional strategies.<sup>53</sup> Strachan et al. supported this idea by showing that collaborative leadership teams with members from different fields make it easier for organisations to support changes that promote inclusion.<sup>54</sup> The results showed that change remains highly dependent on the person, indicating that stable, creative leadership is crucial for success. Without support from the top, policies and institutions stayed the same. This shows how important it is to include inclusive leadership skills in succession planning and executive hiring to keep change initiatives moving forward.

### **Challenges and Barriers to Advancing Transformation and Inclusivity**

#### **Structural and Resource Constraints**

Systemic structural issues hindered reform and inclusive practices in higher education institutions in the Eastern Cape. Several institutions were chronically underfunded, with annual budgets prioritising research over social development. The transformation offices at the three institutions assessed had few permanent personnel and relied mainly on part-time coordinators, reducing program consistency. Infrastructure audits conducted in 2022 indicated that only 32% of lecture rooms across the selected campuses were accessible to students with physical impairments, underscoring the gap between inclusiveness policy goals and actual infrastructure development.<sup>55</sup> Such hurdles disproportionately affected historically disadvantaged campuses, especially in rural areas, where inadequate connectivity and outdated infrastructure hampered digital inclusion initiatives.<sup>56</sup> The lack of ring-fenced funding for inclusive education made the problem worse, since most inclusiveness projects are donor-driven and have short funding cycles. These results supported the literature criticism that underinvestment in institutional equity frameworks did not end systemic exclusion.<sup>57</sup> Without continuous resource commitment, leadership transformation goals were rhetorical.

#### **Institutional Resistance and Organisational Culture**

When leaders tried to embed change, they often encountered resistance from within, especially in academic areas and middle management. Looking at the minutes of the faculty council and private emails from 2020 to 2023, we found strong ideological opposition to decolonising the curriculum and to making teaching more inclusive. Senior leaders in charge of change said that department heads either delayed implementing progressive inclusion policies or used them only in some cases, even when university senates approved them. Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej found that cultural lethargy in higher education institutions often hindered the adoption of socially novel leadership strategies.<sup>58</sup> This behaviour was in line with their results. Also, conversations with staff from two universities' student

<sup>53</sup> Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej, "Sustainable Leadership in Higher Education Institutions: Social Innovation as a Mechanism."

<sup>54</sup> Strachan et al., "Reflections on Developing a Collaborative Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Embedding Education for Sustainable Development into Higher Education Curricula."

<sup>55</sup> Pramjeeth, Nupen, and Jagernath, "Challenges Impacting Higher Education Leaders in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goal of Quality Education in South Africa."

<sup>56</sup> Hamzah, "The Response of Higher Education Institutions to Global, Regional, and National Challenges."

<sup>57</sup> Wilcox, Fernandez Conde, and Kowbel, "Using Evidence-Based Practice and Data-Based Decision Making in Inclusive Education."

<sup>58</sup> Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej, "Sustainable Leadership in Higher Education Institutions: Social Innovation as a Mechanism."

affairs departments showed that disability units were left out of the planning stages of academic programs, which suggests that departments are not working together. One of the biggest problems was still the organisational culture. Some schools thought that including everyone meant lowering academic standards, leading to subtle forms of rejection.<sup>59</sup> Since then, leadership has often reacted rather than acted strategically, stuck between what the institution said they had to do and what the culture expected. These factors showed that transformation needed both policy and cultural adjustment, which many organisations were not ready to handle without thorough change management plans.

### **Ambiguity in Policy Implementation Frameworks**

Policy texts and the actual implementation tools were inconsistent, a problem identified in the documentary analysis. Most institutions had transformation charters and equity plans, but they often lacked milestones, baseline metrics, and timetables. One institution's 2021–2025 strategy plan referenced “inclusive excellence” without identifying measures or accountability. Kohl et al. warned that revolutionary agendas could be incorporated into symbolic compliance cultures without integrated monitoring mechanisms.<sup>60</sup> The leadership reports from council meetings showed that the performance reviews of senior staff lacked clear inclusion criteria, hindering policy enforcement. The Department of Higher Education and Training received reports from institutions that said “progress made” or “ongoing consultation” without proof. Therefore, leadership responsibility for the transformation results was unclear. Duarte et al. also argued that transformation objectives without institutional performance mechanisms failed to maintain organisational change.<sup>61</sup> This research showed that poorly operationalised policy tools were structural omissions that reduced leadership influence.

### **Strategies and Policy Recommendations to Advance Inclusive Transformation**

#### **Development of Inclusive Leadership Capacities**

Institutions that made significant progress in reform invested in leadership development focused on skills open to everyone, moral qualities, and openness to change. Senior managers at some universities in the Eastern Cape began developing custom training programs with the help of external social justice experts and workplace psychologists. The programs were meant to help leadership teams develop empathy, cultural competence, and strategic response. This was similar to what was happening around the world, where higher education institutions encouraged long-lasting leadership grounded in fairness and new ideas.<sup>62</sup> For instance, 47 middle and senior managers participated in a two-semester leadership workshop series that changed the way leaders communicate, as evidenced by post-workshop reviews. These results agreed with Hamzah's findings about the role of ongoing professional growth in plans to change universities.<sup>63</sup> In the same way, the University of Bahrain's reform case showed how leadership training led to changes in behaviour and the implementation of policies. Still, some institutions quickly adopted models to build their employees' leadership skills, while others took longer because they lacked the resources or management willpower, a problem similar to those identified by Pramjeeth et al.<sup>64</sup> It was clear that leaders who believed in open ethics and systems thinking were better at getting everyone on board with the change. This made it even more important to build inclusiveness into leadership development as a built-in feature instead of an additional.

#### **Whole-Institution Approaches and Interdepartmental Collaboration**

Institutions that integrated inclusion into their culture through cross-departmental tactics had more transformative effects. University audits showed that whole-institution approaches—aligning student

<sup>59</sup> Strachan et al., “Reflections on Developing a Collaborative Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Embedding Education for Sustainable Development into Higher Education Curricula.”

<sup>60</sup> Kohl et al., “A Whole-Institution Approach towards Sustainability: A Crucial Aspect of Higher Education’s Individual and Collective Engagement with the SDGs and beyond.”

<sup>61</sup> Duarte et al., “Integration of Sustainability in the Curricula of Public Higher Education Institutions in Portugal: Do Strategic Plans and Self-Report Align?”

<sup>62</sup> Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej, “Sustainable Leadership in Higher Education Institutions: Social Innovation as a Mechanism.”

<sup>63</sup> Hamzah, “The Response of Higher Education Institutions to Global, Regional, and National Challenges.”

<sup>64</sup> Pramjeeth, Nupen, and Jagernath, “Challenges Impacting Higher Education Leaders in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goal of Quality Education in South Africa.”

services, academic units, HR departments, and research offices—improved implementation coherence and decreased duplication. Sustainable and transformative higher education policies should be institution-wide, not departmental, according to Kohl et al.<sup>65</sup> Quarterly interfaculty transformation meetings with student leaders and administrative stakeholders improved alignment of diversity goals with curricular reform and employment practices in the Eastern Cape. Strachan et al. found that cross-functional cooperation helped academic programming include Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).<sup>66</sup> On several campuses, institutional silos and uncoordinated reporting mechanisms remained obstacles. Success required clarity of policy and structures for continuous cooperation and shared responsibility. Thus, interdepartmental task teams drove top-down transformation demands into institutional practice.

### **Data-Driven Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms**

When institutions used data analytics to oversee reform, they were better able to react and make real-time strategy changes. Leaders could accurately track progress toward various goals with the help of transformation tools, equity indices, and feedback systems. In one school, racial and gender representation in hiring, student output, and curriculum decolonisation measures were watched weekly on digital screens. This allowed changes to be made based on facts. Wilcox et al. said that open education works best when making decisions based on facts is normal in the school's mindset.<sup>67</sup> In the same way, Gaftandzhieva et al. discussed how institutions' ability to see data trends affects policy outcomes.<sup>68</sup> These activities helped identify gaps between what was promised and what actually happened, especially regarding issues such as including people with disabilities or providing language access in course materials. The use of real-time analytics was similar to what Schmidt et al. argued for, namely, the need to make big data leadership skills a permanent part of higher education.<sup>69</sup> Despite this, some organisations still use outdated or incorrect information, making it harder for them to act quickly. There was a lot of proof that change without data was just a show. Inclusion could only be measured and held responsible through uniform, disaggregated, and inclusive data methods.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Strengthening Inclusive Leadership Capacities**

HEIs in the Eastern Cape were told to put leadership skills development that are clearly inclusive and transformation-oriented at the top of their list of priorities. Leaders who used data-driven training programs and models that accounted for diversity were better at transforming institutions and making them more welcoming. These results showed that leadership development programs should be built into institutional plans. These programs should focus on top management, deans, and middle-level managers to help everyone understand what inclusive change means. When leaders were taught about gender and inclusive practices, they were better able to make changes that addressed both real and symbolic exclusion. So, it was suggested that universities establish leadership schools in collaboration with national and international groups to teach leadership skills, including fairness, ethics, and decision-making grounded in facts. These schools should ensure that groups are not the only ones in charge of change; all faculties should be involved through clear, responsible leadership.

### **Institutionalising Whole-University and Interdepartmental Collaboration**

Organised, whole-university methods that foster interdepartmental cooperation were also suggested to minimise fragmented or siloed implementation of inclusive policies. Transformation goals were generally isolated in offices or equity units in the Eastern Cape, with little impact on institutional

<sup>65</sup> Kohl et al., "A Whole-Institution Approach towards Sustainability: A Crucial Aspect of Higher Education's Individual and Collective Engagement with the SDGs and beyond."

<sup>66</sup> Strachan et al., "Reflections on Developing a Collaborative Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Embedding Education for Sustainable Development into Higher Education Curricula."

<sup>67</sup> Wilcox, Fernandez Conde, and Kowbel, "Using Evidence-Based Practice and Data-Based Decision Making in Inclusive Education."

<sup>68</sup> Gaftandzhieva et al., "Data-Driven Decision Making in Higher Education Institutions: State-of-Play."

<sup>69</sup> Schmidt, van Dierendonck, and Weber, "The Data-Driven Leader: Developing a Big Data Analytics Leadership Competency Framework."

planning. Therefore, institutional strategic plans, curriculum design, and human resource development frameworks should include transformation objectives. Regular cross-functional workshops and communities of practice might also break down departmental silos and promote shared responsibility. Creating inclusive transformation task teams reporting to vice-chancellors to coordinate academic and administrative activities was also suggested. Integrated methods would accelerate institutional transformation and improve its sustainability by promoting internal alignment and shared ownership of change processes.

### **Advancing Data-Driven Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms**

Lastly, the study called for the creation of robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems grounded in data to track the progress and impact of change efforts. It was pointed out that HEIs cannot precisely meet change goals because they lack sufficient, accurate data on issues such as equality, student progress, staff demographics, and resource sharing. The findings suggested that higher education institutions invest in interdisciplinary research units whose job it is to regularly gather, examine, and share data related to change. These groups should have access to the appropriate scientific and human resources, as well as records separated by race, gender, disability, and socioeconomic position. People also said that change measures should be connected to performance reviews at institutions and staff key performance areas. This would ensure that promises to change are kept through measured actions, with regular reports and public statements that improve openness and trust in institutions.

### **CONCLUSION**

Leadership affected the direction, intensity, and inclusiveness of reform in Eastern Cape higher education institutions, according to this research. Different conceptions of change among institutional leaders affected the depth and consistency of departmental transformation. Some university leaders aligned their transformation goals with national imperatives such as social justice and epistemological decolonisation, while others prioritised compliance over systemic change. The research examined policy papers and strategic frameworks from three major Eastern Cape institutions. Only one showed a fully integrated transformation plan that connected leadership action to student performance, inclusive staffing, and decolonised courses. These results showed that visionary and cohesive leadership is essential for institutional transformation.

The research indicated that transformation initiatives did not overcome substantial hurdles to inclusive practices. Equity offices were understaffed, inclusive education funding was low, and monitoring methods were lacking. Without accountability structures and clear performance indicators, leaders' commitment to change stopped, according to the study's content analysis. These findings highlighted the alignment among leadership intent, resource allocation, and institutional culture.

The study also found that inclusive leadership capacities, whole-institution approaches, and data-driven monitoring and evaluation frameworks were key to successful transformation initiatives. The Eastern Cape university that fared best in this research featured a university-wide transformation office that coordinated faculty-wide efforts, included student and staff input, and tracked progress via analytics dashboards. These findings suggest that inclusive change requires comprehensive, participative, and data-informed leadership.

This research found that higher education change and inclusion are leadership-driven processes that need coherence, intentionality, and structural support. Despite limitations, this study showed that Eastern Cape institutions can promote equity and social justice in South African higher education through strategic alignment, inclusive leadership development, and data utilisation.

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