Sustaining the quality of higher education system in South Africa: Perspectives and prospects

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of Higher Education (HE) in South Africa has emerged as an urgent national priority, driven by persistent concerns regarding the quality, equity, relevance, and sustainability of the sector. In response, policies and strategic frameworks continue to be reviewed and reconfigured. However, the implications and complexities of these reforms warrant deeper scholarly interrogation. Therefore, this position paper provides a blend of the author's perspectives and the extant literature on the purpose, quality, and sustainability of HE in South Africa; the challenges militating against its quality and sustainability; strategies for its sustenance; and the prospects thereof. HE systems, irrespective of their context, are expected to provide a critical space for contesting ideas, creativity, and innovation, and to promote and sustain social justice in and through education. One of the responsibilities of the 21st-century university is to provide equal access to HE and lifelong learning opportunities that align with the Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, in the current geopolitical climate, it is more important than ever to educate students to understand global issues and to serve as role models and active participants in putting sustainability concepts into practice. This reflective paper, underpinned by the Fitness of Purpose Theory, provides viable strategies and prospects for achieving HE quality and sustainability in South Africa. It concludes that HE is the lifeline of nations and economies, and calls for a cohesive, diversified Higher Education ecosystem that prioritises student access, success, and social impact.

Keywords: higher education quality, higher education sustainability, perspectives, diversified higher education ecosystem, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) underscores the importance of quality education for all and its sustainability. According to Ndebele et al (2024), education is crucial for sustaining societal dynamics, describing it as a catalyst for achieving the SDGs. Most countries of the world (whether developing or developed) continue to explore ways to ensure that the quality of education for their citizens is high and transformative. The HE system in South Africa, for example, is presently being aligned to improve its quality and ensured sustainability (Uleanya and Yassim 2025). Addressing past injustices, enhancing students' academic

achievement, and developing a fair, sensitive system that is responsive to the national education and economic needs are all within the purview of Higher Education (Pramjeeth, Nupe and Jagernath 2023). Numerous frameworks and policies, including the National Development Plan 2030, the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training, and the National Plan for Higher Education (2001), have served as a roadmap for the reorganisation and transformation of the country's HE system (National Planning Commission 2012; 2013). To support South Africa's social and economic development, these frameworks and policies seek to establish a more responsive, diversified, equitable, and quality-driven HE system (Pramjeeth et al 2023).

"Education is a key driver of economic growth and sustainable development for both developed and developing nations" (Mbaleki and Mbodila 2023, 21). Uleanya and Yassim (2025) further assert that education is a crucial contributor to nations' sustainable development. According to Mutongoza (2025), HE in South Africa could be positively transformed and made sustainable with the implementation of equity-driven finance models, decolonised curricula, inclusive leadership, and governance reforms that encourage significant stakeholder participation. However, a systematic review by Uleanya and Yassim (2025) reveals that several factors can either support or hinder the quality of education and, consequently, its sustainable development. These factors include collaboration, institutional independence, capacity-building programmes, funding constraints, deteriorating infrastructure, and leadership issues. According to Barnett (2019, 283–284), HE faces challenges regarding democracy (a citizenry and society that can engage with ever-increasing knowledge and super complexity), partition (who has access), and discourse (how the many understandings of a modern contemporary Higher Education institution (HEI) are articulated and understood by the nation's populace).

Over time, several factors have been identified as constraints to improving the quality of HE. These include the absence of a robust educational innovation ecosystem, in which diverse stakeholders collaboratively contribute their respective strengths, as well as the limited facility exposure to real-world industrial contexts, and the limited access to state-of-the-art industry expertise. This can be attributed to several factors that affect the quality of HE, such as the massification of the sector itself, an inadequate faculty−student ratio, inadequate facilities for education, or the pro-research evaluation mechanism for faculty members (Granstrand and Holgersson 2020, 90; Tewari and Ilesanmi 2021; Zhuang and Huang 2021).

The rise of knowledge economies, which have increasingly commodified knowledge and its acquisition, alongside the processes of massification and knowledge commercialisation, have placed HE in a compromised position, thereby threatening the quality it can deliver (Benrouina and Malki 2023; Mathew 2023). Quality education requires a relevant curriculum that is responsive to local contexts, can be taught and learned in local languages, and builds

upon the knowledge and experience of both teachers and learners. It further necessitates meaningful engagement with local communities and cultures, irrespective of gender, socioeconomic status, geographical location, language, or ethnic origin; well-trained teachers, who actively employ learning techniques; adequate facilities and learning materials; and students who are healthy, well-nourished, and motivated (UNESCO 2002). In addition, quality Higher Education must be underpinned by democratic governance and effective administration; a gender-sensitive, inclusive, safe, and healthy environment; and clearly assessed learning outcomes encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values (Tewari and Ilesanmi 2021).

The Fitness for Purpose Theory (FPT) serves as the foundation for this paper. According to the theory, quality is determined by how successfully an organisation, or its programmes, fulfil their declared goals, objectives, or intended purpose (Aithal and Maiya 2023, 1; Rodny-Gumede and Chasi 2020). In addition to requiring institutions to adhere to consistent external standards, it provides them with the freedom to define quality in relation to their own objectives. The FPT examines whether educational programmes fulfil the requirements they purport to address, such as producing graduates with the necessary abilities to function in specific political, social, cultural, or economic environments (Rodny-Gumede and Chasi 2020). In line with this theory, HEIs should meet their stated goals to enable context-sensitive, personalised assessments of quality, rather than relying on standard external benchmarks. However, HEIs also need to align with the students' desires and aspirations, while they maintain the quality education of their institutions. Therefore, context-specific and mission-aligned mechanisms should be encouraged, funded and monitored, embracing an internally integrated quality advancement culture and fostering continuous improvement. By so doing, quality stops being a compliance matter that is periodically prioritised and instead, it becomes a value that is embedded within the institution.

In South Africa, especially after the student-led *FeesMustFall#* movement, amid the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the accelerating development of artificial intelligence, ensuring and sustaining quality, alongside the ongoing changes and adaptations in HE, has become a herculean task (Ülker 2023). Also, there is no consensus on what the term 'quality' denotes in the extant literature (Dwaikat 2021, 1756; Francis, Fisher, and Song 2021, 285), and aiming to evaluate quality in the context of HE can be problematic (Carnerud 2018, 212), with Tomlinson (2022) calling for further inquiry into its connotations. The intent of this position paper, therefore, is to interrogate the extant literature on the purpose, quality, and sustainability of Higher Education in South Africa; the challenges militating against HE quality and sustainability; the strategies for its sustenance; and the prospects thereof. This paper begins

with an overview of HE, its purpose, and the challenges of quality and sustainable HE in South Africa. This is followed by a highlight of strategies to improve HE quality and sustainability. Subsequently, the paper offers the prospects for South African HE.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN CONTEXT

Higher Education plays a crucial role in sustainability, as it prepares the next generation of leaders who can help to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Chankseliani, Qoraboyev, and Gimranova 2021; Žalėnienė and Pereira 2021). The HE sector is a transformative agency that greatly influences students' habits, life engagements, and contributions to society. Therefore, sustainability principles must be at the core of HE's strategies, including the modifications made to the curricula and evaluation, as well as enhancements made to the organisational, managerial, and administrative culture, aimed at ensuring the transformation that HE should bring (Žalėnienė and Pereira 2021).

Ideally, HE should be guided by policy frameworks and strategic goals that address the persistent historical and structural inequalities in education. For example, the National Development Plan (NDP) of South Africa states that by 2030, all South Africans must have access to high-quality education and training, expanded employment opportunities exceeding 24 million jobs, and equitable access to improved HE (Buys 2018; Meyer 2025; National Development Planning 2013). As HEIs continue to function as centres of excellence, innovation, productivity, and development, a simultaneous emphasis on research and development, alongside the quality of teaching and learning, is essential for enhancing the overall standard of HE in South Africa (Chankseliani et al 2021).

PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

HEIs have benefited society throughout human history by educating people and producing scientific and humanistic accomplishments (Chankseliani 2022, 456), and the educational and knowledge advancement of individuals and the broader society depends on the outcomes from these HEIs. In-depth knowledge and specialised skills in a range of fields, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, presentation, communication, teamwork, and leadership, can be acquired at and through these HEIs. These skills are highly sought after in the contemporary labour market (Aboderin and Havenga 2024). According to Cheng, Adekola, Albia, and Cai (2022:18) and Mainga et al (2022), HE provides graduates with training and credentials that are crucial for entering and achieving a fulfilling career and improving their chances of success in their chosen endeavours.

Brooks et al (2020, 5–6), Chan (2016, 6–7), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2013), and UNESCO (2025) indicate the purpose of HE to include:

- Intellectual and Personal Development: HE fosters individuals' critical thinking, intellectual prowess, and reflective capacity, and paves the way for lifelong learning and personal development. It enables individuals to pursue self-fulfilment, develop moral and civic responsibility, and optimise their talents.
- Labour Market Preparation: One of the main goals is to provide graduates with the advanced skills and specialised knowledge needed for professional careers in a contemporary, knowledge-driven economy. This encompasses transferable abilities, such as problem-solving, communication, and teamwork, as well as technical and domain-specific skills.
- Social and Civic Contribution: Education aims to make individuals more responsible and knowledgeable. It promotes the exchange of knowledge and moral reasoning, values, and attitudes that support engaged and productive social engagement.
- Promoting Information and Innovation: Research and scholarship conducted by HEIs produce and share new information that advances society across the fields of science, technology, the arts, humanities, and education.
- Addressing Social Needs and Mobility: HE promotes equity and equality, and it meets society's development needs, based on uplifted individuals, enhanced knowledge, and individuals' improved economic opportunities. It facilitates social mobility, reducing inequality, and ensuring a fairer distribution of opportunities and success.

Furthermore, the key purposes of HE are summarised by Nørgård, Mor, and Bengtsen (2019: 73) as follows:

> "The HE is positioned to generate the workforce of the future by utilising professional competencies and transferable abilities. The university must demonstrate that it is meeting societal expectations and maintaining a strong position in the international spaces and competitiveness. Performance, production, benchmarking, and societal use-value are all fundamental to the HE's mandate".

Ideally, HE systems, irrespective of context, are expected to contribute to knowledge creation, social and economic development, and lifelong learning, while serving as equalisers and enablers of social mobility. They are also expected to advance social justice and shape cultural, socioeconomic, and citizenship change. HE should also function as a critical space for the contestation of ideas, fostering creativity and innovation, and promoting and sustaining social justice through education. These purposes are neither fixed nor universal; rather, they are

shaped by regional/contextual conditions, cultural imperatives, and prevailing legislative and policy frameworks.

HIGHER EDUCATION SUSTAINABILITY

HE is supposed to encourage sustainability and be actively involved in educating students, preparing them to comprehend global matters, and function as role models and active participants in putting sustainability ideas into practice. These functions are further facilitated by reducing the institution's environmental impact, fostering close community relationships, and practising good governance (UNESCO 2020). Recent studies offer a framework for implementing campus policies, outreach initiatives, and a sustainability curriculum in HE (Hallinger and Chatpinyakoop 2019; Menon and Suresh 2020). Integrating sustainability concepts into a university's curricula and strategies is essential to enhancing the university's reputation, image, and research outputs (Žalėnienė and Pereira 2021). Establishing a sustainable culture and a sustainable vision for student development are essential, if South African Higher Education is to remain globally competitive and rank among the finest in the world (Salvioni, Franzoni and Cassano 2017).

According to Žalėnienė and Pereira (2021), HE's sustainability can be facilitated by developing projects and incorporating sustainability principles across disciplines; improving teaching, research, and innovation centres in HEIs; and conducting outreach activities. It also includes the universities having an institutional culture of sustainability that raises awareness among HE staff and the broader communities; maintaining professional contexts and social engagements with HE contexts; and by implementing sustainable campus practices. To achieve these goals, investing in HE is essential for creating a sustainable culture (Rosati and Faria 2019). Institutional structures, evaluation, research, instruction, experiences, and outreach should take all these factors into account (Findler et al 2019, 59). According to Sidiropoulos (2014), incorporating sustainability principles into the academic curricula in HEIs will enhance students' knowledge, perspectives, awareness, and attitudes regarding sustainability. Therefore, effectively conveying sustainability initiatives is essential for influencing the attitudes of aspiring functional professionals (Lertpratchya et al 2017).

African HEIs, specifically those in South Africa, will have to ensure that SDG 4, which calls for equal access to quality tertiary education as part of promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, will be achieved. HEIs are a driver of the achievement of these SDGs and they play a role in human formation, knowledge production, and innovation (Chankseliani and McCowan 2021, 3; Chankseliani and McCowan 2021, 111). These SDGs are embedded in a set of political, moral, and epistemic assumptions, as well as in the continuing existence of

global capitalism, which requires urgent attention (Chankseliani and McCowan 2021, 5). Acknowledging, promoting and enhancing Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions has also been advocated (Allais and Wedekind 2020).

GAPS IN NATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL-LEVEL POLICIES CONCERNING HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) quality policy has evolved from a narrow focus on accountability and fitness for purpose toward a broader understanding of quality. The evolution of the CHE's quality assurance policy reflects broader debates concerning accountability, transformation, social justice, and institutional effectiveness in post-apartheid HE (Cloete 2000; Cloete et al 2002; Jansen 2004; Lange 2010). The transition from institutional audits and programme accreditation toward qualification standards, quality enhancement, and the Quality Assurance Framework mirrors a shift from compliance-based quality assurance to a more developmental and transformative approach, focused on student success, institutional improvement, and societal responsiveness (CHE 2013, 2021; Lange 2012).

Tensions between HE's rapid massification and structural socioeconomic disparities are the main cause of gaps in South Africa's HE policies. Policies at both the national and institutional levels frequently place a high priority on expanding student access, but they falter on implementation, long-term financial viability, and genuine academic excellence (Essop 2008; Raciti and Motala 2025). While the admirable goal of national programmes and initiatives is to raise gross enrolment rates, available state finance and infrastructure have not kept up with the increasing massification. The ensuing high student-to-lecturer ratios reduce the quality of instruction and leave scholars with little time for research (Segneda, Kone and Hongde 2025). In addition, HE policies and national frameworks for skills development are not aggressively aligned with the demands made by the 21st-century industry.

This disparity has increased the level of graduates' unemployment by producing an excess of graduates with degrees that do not match market demands (Kefelegn, Admassie and Getahun 2026). The National Student Financial Aid Scheme is another example of how the South African government tries to subsidise education for underprivileged students, but the policies often fail to take into account the institutions' and students' mounting historical debt and insufficient funding for "the missing middle"(Albertus and Makoza 2025). The fundamental differences between historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged institutions also have not been resolved by these policies, and the latter continue to face significant administrative and resource limitations.

Many South African institutions enrol significant numbers of underprepared students in order to satisfy national equality targets; however, attributable to the lack of comprehensive, well-funded foundation policies to support these students through to graduation, this leads to high dropout rates (Raciti and Motala 2025). Learning support services are frequently viewed by institutional frameworks as ancillary rather than essential. Additionally, massification makes it difficult for campus housing plans and student welfare rules to keep up, which frequently results in student protest (Mateko, Dowelani, and Sinamano 2025). Internal resilience is lacking in many institutions to deal with these resource limitations, load shedding, and digital inequality. The quality of institutional planning and curricular change is further jeopardised by excessive bureaucracy and governance shortcomings (Pramjeeth et al 2023). Internal academic policies also frequently fall short of industry norms. This implies that these HEIs continue to provide out-of-date, highly theoretical content in the absence of proactive methods to involve industry professionals in curriculum creation (Maama 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a reflective research methodology that emphasises critical self-examination and the explicit articulation of the researcher's positionality in relation to the topic under investigation. The researcher thus enters into a thoughtful relationship with the world and thus becomes aware of her lived experience (Mortari 2015). Therefore, the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions influence this investigation. Through critical reflection, the researcher pursues a transformative goal of solving problems, and improving practice and empowerment (Mortari 2015). This reflexive analysis is intended to generate a deeper understanding and new insights into an underexplored phenomenon through systematic introspection and critical reflection (Holmes 2020).

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Challenges of quality and sustainable higher education in South Africa

The readiness of students to learn and be academically engaged, the student-to-staff ratio, the accessibility of local resources or inputs, relevant and effective student support services, sufficient funding from both the public and the private sectors, and the appropriate number of faculty all have a major impact on the quality of HE in South Africa (Republic of South Africa 2012; Scott and Ivala 2019; Tewari and Ilesanmi 2020). A study by Pramjeeth et al (2023) shows that a complex sociopolitical environment, resourcing, outdated curricula, values, and a lack of strong leadership are the primary factors influencing the sustainability of quality education in South Africa. According to Tewari and Ilesanmi (2020), a high proportion of

students who are not appropriately prepared for university or, better yet, a gap or inconsistency between their previous education and what is expected of them in HE; superficial learning and grade inflation; large class size; a lack of resources and qualified staff; poor reading, communication, and mathematics skills among students all limit the quality of HE in the context. The Council on Higher Education oversees the quality of teaching and learning in HE in South Africa, but systemic problems persist, including management and governance failures, and institutional cultures that struggle to meet the transformational goals (CHE, 2022; HSRC, 2023).

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY

Ülker (2023) argues that it is vital to maintain the quality of HE, as lowering the quality standards will have serious short- and long-term repercussions. Businesses or job offers, for example, favour graduates from institutions renowned for offering high-quality education (Jackson et al. 2024; Mainga et al 2022). Thus, it may be more difficult for students attending HEIs with ineffective quality control mechanisms to find employment after graduation (Graham et al 2019, 366; Jackson et al 2024), which highlights the serious consequences of persistently poor and highly unequal educational outcomes (Branson and Zuze 2012, 71). The potential of HE to act as an equaliser thus becomes even more important, as does the reason why HE quality is non-negotiable. Further impeding their professional prospects is the possibility that graduates from underperforming institutions lack the information and skills employers seek (Moeng and Osiesi 2025, 150). Institutions that neglect quality and relevance risk a poor reputation, which can have serious repercussions for both the students and the institution as a whole (Bettinson et al 2024). Thus, promoting a culture of excellence in teaching, research, innovation, and community engagement is paramount for the HE context in South Africa (and elsewhere).

According to Bettinson et al (2024), who cited Dwaikat (2021), there are three primary methods for comprehending quality in HE: (a) an input perspective that emphasises infrastructure, students, academic staff, and resources (typically adopted by accrediting bodies); (b) an output perspective that emphasises employability, skills, and competencies of graduates (typically adopted by international ranking bodies); and (c) a process perspective that emphasises assessments, teaching methods, policies, and procedures (typically adopted by the HEIs themselves).

The quality of HE can be raised by implementing the following strategies:

- The curriculum should be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure it stays current and satisfies the demands of the workplace today (Osiesi, Moeng and Blignaut 2025). Combining interdisciplinary methods, real-world applications, and experiential learning opportunities can be helpful in achieving this objective. Providing students with the opportunity to work on real-world projects or in internships is one way to include practical applications in the curriculum (Banker and Borchardt 2025). Through these exposures, students gain experiences that prepare them for future employment and help them understand how best to apply all they have learned in real-world situations (O'Neill and Short 2023).
- Attracting and keeping highly qualified faculty members is crucial to maintaining a high standard of HE. These experts are leaders in their fields and play a key role in shaping an institution's research and academic culture. An institution can provide competitive pay and other incentives to entice highly qualified faculty members. Institutions can also provide faculty members with opportunities to participate in professional development programmes, attend conferences, and conduct research. Faculty members can improve their pedagogical approaches, research capabilities, and teaching talents through these professional development programmes (Fernandes et al 2023, 310; Osiesi et al 2025; Owusu-Agyeman 2024).
- Fostering critical consciousness, which is underpinned by problem-posing and problem-solving approaches that require students and faculty members to reflect on the world and thereby engage with it to transform it. Students should be prepared to be critically conscious (conscientisation), so that they can question teachings and learn to understand, rather than regurgitate information for tests and examinations (Freire, 1970). This implies that the educator is constantly engaged in dialogue with students. Through dialogue and problem-posing, students develop an awareness of the structures within their society that may contribute to inequality and injustice (Freire 1990). Therefore, active learning in the classroom is crucial for helping students acquire the skills needed to succeed in the modern world (Golden 2023, 954; Osiesi and Blignaut 2025). A student-centred approach, a humanising pedagogy, and increased student engagement also can be accomplished through the use of technology and interactive tools (Kerimbayev et al 2023, 62; Pandita and Kiran 2023). These also enhance the quality of HEIs.
- An institution's success depends on fostering a culture of innovation and research. Establishing research centres, allocating funds for research activities, and motivating

faculty and students to undertake research projects will enhance HE quality (AlQhtani 2025, 24; Benítez-Núñez et al 2024, 2). Furthermore, the scholarship of teaching and learning will help academics reflect on their teaching and the learning of their students with the intention to improve their teaching methods.

- The underpreparedness of many high school learners who access HE results in low academic performance and unsatisfactory throughput rates (Mbangi et al 2024). Comprehensive support services that address students' diverse needs must be offered to encourage students' success. Key elements of these support services should include career counselling, academic advising, mentoring, and counselling (De Klerk, Jadhav, and Hundermark 2024, 223). Furthermore, the strengthening of academic and psychosocial support to address students' underpreparedness for HE is important. By providing these services, students will be better prepared to meet their academic and professional aspirations and successfully negotiate the demands of HE and eventually, the world of work.
- Mechanisms for effective assessment and feedback are essential for tracking students' learning outcomes, and promoting ongoing development and active participation in the learning process. Programmes should provide opportunities to teach students more challenging content and design authentic assessments that encourage problem-based inquiry and accurately gauge students' learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond and Snyder 2000).
- Another crucial component of ensuring the quality of HE is government and the private sector making the appropriate investments in resources and infrastructure. The teaching and learning process requires sufficient classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and up-to-date technology. Investment in HEIs is essential to achieve national development, as they are crucial for research, technological innovation, and the development of human capital (Machumu and Kisanga 2014; Moyo and McKenna 2021).
- In this modern era, another key component of HE is the emphasis on ethical ideals. These entail modules, cultures, and tenets that encourage moral behaviour, cultural awareness, and social interaction.
- Stakeholder participation also plays an important role in any institution's decision-making process that could promote the quality of HE. The institution can gain from the viewpoints and insights of its stakeholders (students, staff, employers, alumni, and the local community) by incorporating them into decision-making, soliciting their input, and ensuring the implementation of all relevant, achievable, and sustainable proposals.

- Technology is an essential tool for raising educational standards. HE's technological innovation and progress offer the institution the opportunity to create creative teaching and learning methods (Naude and Sutherland 2024). By adopting digital learning and technology, HE administrators and students may improve their productivity and outcomes by streamlining technology across their teaching, learning, and working spaces. This offers more adaptable and accessible learning opportunities.
- Quality assurance is another significant strategy for HE programmes, and ensuring that the curricula are meeting the needs of all the stakeholders and delivering on their objectives. This is best achieved by monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of HEIs' programmes and working mechanisms. Effective quality assurance is required for all HEIs in South Africa. Hence, the long-term viability of these institutions will depend on the establishment of a quality assurance structure that involves academics, students, and management (Dirkse van Schalkwyk and Steenkamp 2019, 578; Stander and Herman 2017).

PROSPECTS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The future of HE in South Africa is likely to be shaped by the expanded adoption of open and distance learning (ODL), the evolving balance between public and private education providers, and deliberate efforts to enhance accessibility, affordability, and relevance to the job market. Central to these efforts are initiatives aimed at addressing persistent financial barriers, improving graduates' employability, and aligning HE with market needs and social transformation goals. Research employing strategic foresight has outlined possible scenarios for the next 10 years of HE, with an emphasis on the relative importance of public and private supply and whether demand will favour structured or unstructured learning (Kassar and Al-Saqal 2022; Naude and Sutherland 2024).

Continuous effort will be needed to increase and improve students' enrolment, participation, and throughput rates in post-secondary education. A deliberate, intentional focus on improving outcomes in the TVET sector will also be vital to make it more attractive to school leavers. In addition, more effort will need to be placed into implementing viable curriculum articulation pathways within the post-schooling education system to address the low participation rate in TVET colleges. TVET should feature prominently in the government's strategic and operational priorities, and this will require sustained transformation and revitalisation (Paryono 2017). Given the skills sets TVET graduates are meant to be equipped with, they should be gainfully employed upon graduation. It is understandable that not all

TVET graduates might be employable because of inadequate market opportunities; however, providing enabling spaces for their entrepreneurial skills to thrive would be appropriate.

It is imperative to address the funding constraints affecting HEIs. South Africa must revisit the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry into the feasibility of making HE and training fee-free (Klein 2024). Recent studies have highlighted the interplay among socioeconomic, political, and institutional factors to contextualise fee-free HE in South Africa (Ramasu and Kanakana-Katumba 2025). Their findings indicate that the negative administrative inefficiencies of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) perpetuate inequalities in quality and access.

South African HEIs must embrace the opportunities that AI brings for learning, teaching, research, and engagement. The potential of AI to support the agility and flexibility of student success systems and processes has been affirmed (Hanshaw, Vance, and Brewer 2024; Şimşek, Tepetaş, and Cengiz 2025; Vieriu and Petrea 2025; Walter 2025). Moreover, there is a need for a pedagogy rethink that is more critical and reflective to encourage higher-order thinking and critical consciousness. Universities as learning organisations could rethink the delivery and packaging of qualifications into stackable, bespoke micro-credentials. The impact of geopolitics on HE, including student and staff exchange, research collaborations and partnerships, and the funding prospects of research projects, should be considered as having serious consequences.

CONCLUSION

HE remains the lifeline of nations and economies, having historically contributed to societal advancement through the education of citizens and the generation of scientific and humanistic knowledge. This paper has buttressed the crucial role of HE in ensuring nations' sustainable development. It has demonstrated what HE quality and sustainability entail, the challenges they face, and the strategies for their improvement and sustainability. The prospects of HE quality and sustainability for the South African context have been highlighted. The rise of knowledge economies, which may have turned knowledge and its acquisition into a commodity, including the challenges caused by massification and knowledge commercialisation, has put HE in a compromised position, endangering the quality HEIs can offer.

Investing in HE and in the acceptance and adoption of emerging technologies in HE spaces for teaching, learning, and administrative purposes is essential for creating sustainable HEIs. To prevent a decline in HE quality and meet future demands, the HE sector needs to innovate, adapt, and work together. A call for a cohesive and diversified HE ecosystem is recommended that prioritises student success, accessibility, and social impact, rather than the

outdated dichotomy in HEIs' policies, systems, and structures, and unhealthy competition. Addressing graduates' currently poor level of employability, removing all forms of inequality, and developing entrepreneurial skills will be essential to the envisaged HE transformation agenda in South Africa.

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