

## **Rethinking Southern African Higher Education: Handling Policy, Opening Doors, and Overcoming Obstacles**

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**Abstract:** Due to emerging socio-political conditions, economic competition, and global trends, higher education in Southern Africa has undergone significant changes recently. Nonetheless, several policy concerns continue to impede the expansion and advancement of higher education establishments in Southern Africa. In light of this, this paper aimed to comprehend the policy concerns plaguing Southern African higher education. In this sense, a qualitative approach is the foundation for data generation, analysis, and discussion. This enables it to search for participants' experiences and opinions in the higher education reform process. This encompasses policy analysis to interrogate 112 peer reviewed papers selected from the Scopus, DOAJ, DHTE, Scielo SA, and WoS and written. Hence, content analysis is required to identify themes and trends in this paper. This makes it possible to seek out the experience and views of the stakeholders within the reform process in the higher education. This entails policy analysis to examine the government and institutional policies, international publications and reports. The necessity of this paper is to utilise content analysis to establish themes and trends in higher education policy and reforms in Southern Africa. Although the interrogation of these questions in the case of Southern African nations like South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, etc., the paper peaks top policy concerns in higher education, opening doors and overcoming obstacles of reform. From the above conclusion, a recommendation is made on sharpening the policy agenda in Southern Africa's higher education.

**Keywords:** Handling policy, higher education, rethinking, Southern Africa

The Southern African system of higher education has experienced a total overhaul, exemplifying the conflict of the region to combat historical injustice created through colonial and apartheid policy (Scott & Ivala, 2019). During the post-independence period, the urgent necessity was to expand access to education for the marginalised (Ojiambo, 2018). The necessity was so profound that policy re-engineering towards inclusivity, curriculum diversification, and crafting equitable representation in universities became a priority (Chakrabarty & Singh, 2025). Nonetheless, the efforts of the region in establishing higher education as a vehicle for social justice have been hindered by resource and structure difficulties, such as under-resourced institutions and structural limitations.

Despite challenges, higher education reforms in Southern Africa have posted gigantic milestones. Higher education institutions have leapfrogged efforts to raise proportions of enrolling the erstwhile disadvantaged groups, especially women and ethnic minorities. Efforts (Whittaker et al., 2015). These are

things such as regional cooperation, and international scholarship collaborations. The use of information and communication technologies in the education sector has provided room to improve the quality and applicability of education (Alenezi, Wardat & Akour, 2023). However, these achievements have been accompanied by perennial challenges such as high dropout rates, low output of research, and inefficiencies in matching academic programmes to the requirements of the labour market.

Thus, higher education in Southern Africa is deeply rooted in inequalities that continue to render access to university education in a complex process (Batisai et al., 2022; Du Preez et al., 2016; Habib, 2016; Kishun, 2007). Higher education is expected to evolve environment with structural and personal constraints (Chari, 2024; Mavuso & Olaitan, 2024) hindering global competitiveness. However, there is a dearth of literature concerning handling policy, opening doors, and overcoming obstacles in transforming higher education in Southern Africa. It is with this background that this paper sought to gain insight into transformational issues of policy directing higher education in Southern Africa.

## METHOD

The research utilises a systematic literature review as the study design that adheres to strict protocols for synthesising peer-reviewed papers on Southern African higher education policy. This review process was structured in the following phases: (1) search for sources, (2) eligibility criteria, and (3) information sources, and data collection and analysis (Adeoye & Ainnubi, 2023). For this paper, the word search string included terminology highlighted in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Database search string

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### Word search string

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((“Governance”)) AND (“obstacles” OR “challenges”) AND (“higher education” OR “universities”) AND (“rethinking”) AND (“handling policy”) AND (“opening doors”) OR (“opportunities”) AND (“Southern Africa”) AND (“transformation”)

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Thereafter, the eligibility criteria were applied to the sources that were predominantly written in English. The eligibility criteria that guided the inclusion or exclusion of a literature source in this paper included the following: Peer-reviewed papers and academic articles on higher education policy in Southern Africa. Exclusion Criteria: Research papers outside the regional view, dissertations, opinion pieces that were not empirical, and reports with poor methodological quality. Based on the selected sources were from databases like Scopus, DOAJ, DHTE, Scielo SA, and WoS. First, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined based on the research focus, this search stage produced a total of 350 articles obtained from Scopus (n = 150), DOAJ (n = 100), WoS (n = 50), DHTE (n = 20), and Scielo SA (n = 30). Thus, 350 articles were selected for their relevance to specific themes in this paper.

From these 350 articles, duplicates were eliminated leaving 180 articles. After the first screening, 50 sources such as conferences, theses, and dissertations were omitted, leaving 130 articles. A further 18 articles were excluded because they were not reported in English. The authors double-checked the full text of the 112 eligible articles to ascertain that they met the inclusion criteria This approach ensured that the selected articles were both justified and aligned with the paper's goal (Mekarisce, 2020). In this case, the PRISMA techniques provided a structured framework for documenting the process and enhancing

replicability. Qualitative thematic analysis was applied in synthesising the generated data. This approach provided methodological stringency while providing informative data on the policy environment in Southern Africa's higher education.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **RESULTS**

Southern African higher education also contributes to the development of the region by providing skilled professionals and driving research and innovation. Despite this, higher education is faced with a myriad of policy issues. These include uneven access to education, low graduation, inappropriate funding regimes, and poor governance processes. The paper investigates such policy issues and how they contribute to the regional higher education sector.

#### **Policy systems and their impact on the higher education of Southern Africa**

Higher education in Southern Africa is informed by an intricate interplay of policy systems. Therefore, understanding such policy matters is crucial to formulating strategic interventions that maximise institutional effectiveness and promote sustainable academic advancement in the region.

#### **Access and equity**

Post-school education in Southern Africa remains characterized by deep inequalities, despite increased participation rates over the decades. These disparities are especially stark between urban and rural communities, socioeconomic groups, and genders (Akala, 2021). Barriers such as high tuition costs, ineffective financial aid systems, and poor preparation at the secondary level continue to lock out many potential students (Arendale, 2010). However, a critical examination reveals that these issues stem from entrenched structural inequities and fragmented policy implementation. For instance, many students from under-resourced schools enter tertiary institutions inadequately prepared, which contributes to high dropout rates, particularly in countries like South Africa where access is not always matched by support or success (Spaull, 2015).

Although financial schemes like National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) have expanded access, they often lead to trade-offs that compromise institutional capacity, affecting education quality and student services. Gender disparities further complicate the picture: although women now outnumber men in higher education enrolments, their post-graduation outcomes in the labour market remain disproportionately poor (Chikuvadze et al., 2025). Additionally, the frequent shifts in educational policy, without sufficient time for consolidation, risk undermining long-term progress. Compounding these challenges is a misalignment between education and labour market needs, particularly in vocational and technical fields. Therefore, addressing inequality in post-school education requires not only financial and logistical solutions but also a rethinking of systemic structures and coherent, long-term policy strategies aimed at equity and relevance.

Equity in higher education also entails eliminating structural barriers that prevent students from achieving success when accessing it (Wanti et al., 2022). This encompasses offering financial assistance, educational assistance, and fashioning accommodating learning environments that address differing needs

(Debasu & Yitayew, 2024). While there has been some progress, i.e., affirmative action measures and scholarship schemes have been introduced, the region has a long way to go to achieve real equity (Gururaj et al., 2021). Khoyaled (2023) hypothesized that policymakers need to continue emphasising how to narrow the gap between access and attainment so that every student has the tools and resources to thrive in higher education.

### **Quality assurance and accreditation**

Quality assurance and accreditation are foundational policy concerns in Southern African higher education, serving to validate academic programs and ensure their international credibility (Chikuvadze, Damiyano & Davira, 2023). Countries in the region have implemented various mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the quality of education provided by higher learning institutions (Chinta, Kebritchi & Ellias, 2016). In South Africa, for example, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) plays a pivotal role in institutional audits and program accreditation, reinforcing accountability and academic integrity (Lange & Singh, 2013). These mechanisms aim to uphold rigorous standards, foster continuous improvement, and align qualifications with global benchmarks. However, a critical challenge lies in the uneven implementation of these systems across institutions, often exacerbated by resource constraints and inconsistent policy enforcement. As Pak et al. (2020) highlight, disparities in institutional capacity and the lack of harmonized standards undermine the effectiveness of quality assurance efforts. Without addressing these systemic gaps, particularly in under-resourced institutions, the region risks perpetuating educational inequities and compromising the transformative potential of higher education.

Accreditation policies in Southern Africa play a pivotal role in enhancing student mobility and employability by fostering regional integration through harmonized quality assurance systems. Initiatives such as the Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN) exemplify efforts to promote mutual recognition of qualifications, thereby enabling students to pursue academic and professional opportunities across borders (Hoosen, Chetty & Butcher, 2017; Jingura & Kamusoko, 2018). However, a critical concern lies in the uneven capacity of institutions to implement and benefit from these frameworks. Many higher education institutions, particularly in under-resourced areas, lack the infrastructure, expertise, and financial support necessary to align with regional standards. As Arbo and Benneworth (2007) emphasize, addressing these capacity gaps requires sustained investment in staff development, technological infrastructure, and strategic partnerships. Without such targeted interventions, accreditation efforts risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than mitigating them. Therefore, accreditation must be viewed not only as a technical process but as a strategic tool for inclusive development, demanding coordinated policy action that aligns educational outcomes with evolving societal and labour market needs.

### **Financing and financial sustainability**

Financing and financial sustainability remain pressing policy challenges in Southern African higher education, as institutions face mounting pressure to expand access and improve quality amid constrained

fiscal environments (Ayuk & Koma, 2019). With most universities heavily reliant on government grants that often fall short of covering operational and infrastructural costs (Schiller & Liefner, 2007), tuition fees have become a critical revenue stream yet they simultaneously serve as a barrier for disadvantaged students. The 'Fees Must Fall' movement in South Africa underscored the urgency of reimagining funding models that reconcile affordability with institutional viability (Williams, 2021). A critical concern, however, is that while calls for alternative finance models such as private sector partnerships and overseas funding are gaining traction (Callan & Davies, 2013), these approaches risk deepening inequalities if not guided by equity-focused frameworks. Without robust regulatory oversight and inclusive policy design, external funding sources may prioritize market-driven agendas over public good imperatives, thereby undermining the transformative potential of higher education in the region.

Financial sustainability in Southern African higher education hinges on strategic planning and effective resource management, as emphasized by Noor and Firdausi (2024). Institutions must adopt innovative solutions, such as investing in technology to streamline operations and reduce costs, thereby improving service delivery (Latupeirissa et al., 2024). Governments play a pivotal role by funding digital infrastructure and capacity-building initiatives that bolster institutional resilience. Regional cooperation, as Feiock (2013) suggests, offers a powerful mechanism for sharing best practices and pooling resources to tackle systemic funding challenges. However, a critical concern lies in the uneven implementation of these strategies across the region. Disparities in institutional capacity, governance, and access to technology risk creating a fragmented landscape where only well-resourced institutions benefit from innovation and collaboration. Without deliberate efforts to harmonize strategic planning and ensure equitable participation, regional initiatives may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities. Therefore, financial sustainability must be pursued not only through innovation and investment but also through inclusive policy frameworks that prioritize equity and long-term institutional viability.

### **Governance and institutional autonomy**

Governance and institutional autonomy are central policy concerns of Southern African higher education since they determine the capacity of institutions to operate independently but be responsive to stakeholders (Sebola, 2017). Operating governance systems must facilitate transparency, accountability, and strategic leadership in higher education (Elugbaju, Okeke & Alabi, 2024). Political interference, misgovernance, and weak stakeholder engagement normally corrode institutions of governance in Southern Africa (Dassah, 2018). Such threats subvert academic freedom, limit innovation, and breach institutional-societal trust. Mukoro and Ojeje (2024) hold that upholding the practice of governance through effective policies and better leadership development is necessary to guarantee stability as well as good institutions.

Autonomy in higher education is essential for fostering academic excellence, innovation, and institutional adaptability, enabling universities to pursue their academic, financial, and administrative agendas without undue external interference (Aberbach & Christensen, 2018). In Southern Africa, however, the tension between institutional autonomy and government intervention remains a persistent challenge,

with universities often struggling to strike a balance that supports both independence and accountability (Mohammed & Cai, 2025). While policymakers are urged to develop frameworks that safeguard autonomy and invest in oversight mechanisms, a critical concern is the risk of bureaucratic overreach and politicization of academic governance. Without clearly defined boundaries and participatory governance models, state involvement may inadvertently stifle institutional creativity and responsiveness. Therefore, autonomy must be protected not only through legal provisions but also through a culture of trust, transparency, and mutual respect between universities and the state ensuring that oversight enhances rather than constrains the transformative potential of higher education.

### **Regional integration and cooperation**

Regional integration and cooperation are the first policy concerns of higher education for Southern Africa, based on the enhancement of shared resources, sharing of knowledge, and international students (Kotecha, 2012). Regional programmes have placed great emphasis on system harmonisation of the education system with a vision to enhance regional cooperation through converging qualification frameworks (Mlambo, 2020). These initiatives not only improve the access and quality of higher education but also help develop the region through the provision of a competent populace that is capable of dealing with common issues, including economic inequality and unemployment. However, challenges such as regulatory disparities, limited finances, and infrastructural deficiencies tend to impede advancement.

Inter-institution collaboration also promotes innovation and research that tackles local priorities like climate change, public health, and sustainable development (Sedlacek, 2013). Policymakers need to facilitate collaboration among institutions, industries, and governments so that they can share resources and expertise. Institutionalisation of regional research centres and networks can further leverage the outcomes of collaborative efforts while ensuring institutions contribute to Southern Africa's socio-economic development (Kotecha, Walwyn & Pinto, 2011). Strengthening regional integration policies can provide a connected, adaptive, and internationally competitive higher education system that benefits society and students alike (Ul-Hassan, Murtaza & Rashid, 2025).

### **Chances of reform in Southern African Higher Education**

Southern African higher education is plagued by numerous obstacles, some of which are inequity, insufficient funding, and poor quality. Chances of reform offer solutions to these obstacles and make the sector more effective (Samuels & Singh 2025). All the above issues point to vestiges of colonialism that had barriers to accessing education. About this, there have been concerted efforts the opening up the education sector to an environment that is liberal for access by many who were previously deprived majority black population. A certain quality of education has been brought to perspective. This is confirmed through Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and SDG 4 highlights access to quality education (Dube, 2024). As mentioned earlier, several obstacles must be met so that opportunities for reform drive education to new heights. First of all, there must be curriculum development that addresses the needs of industry or industry-

aligned curriculum (Zuva & Zuva, 2020). For this purpose, there must be a proper liaison with the industry to ensure that what is being taught at institutions is as per industry needs. This is a move towards closing the gap between the curriculum and the work environment within institutions. Secondly, the curriculum must be an entrepreneurial start-up catalyst in higher education institutions by innovation centres creating a responsive curriculum for commercialisation and employability of innovation centres (Barton, 2009).

Another problem is the gender imbalance that was experienced in the form of male supremacy, particularly in leadership and key skills like engineering and medicine (Wheeler & Wiese, 2024). Accessible opportunities that can be used are giving women leadership positions, including women's participation in policy-making for lecturers and students. Banele, Gomera and Kabelele (2023) note that higher education has traditionally been characterised by patriarchal practices and structures that have entrenched gender inequalities. These academies have increasingly favoured male students and teachers while offering women fewer chances of accessing and progressing in technology and science. Some other options that could be undertaken on board include regional mobility and collaboration that can be reached through partnerships in the construction of harmonised qualifications extending above immigration and border control requirements (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024).

This provision would allow student and lecturer mobility. SADC has made efforts through the SADC Regional Qualification Framework, which is now in place. At the continental level, there are efforts to utilise such opportunities through initiatives such as Harmonisation Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Africa (HAQAA). Other opportunities that can be utilised include regional research conferences to widen the breadth and depth of the research partnerships. Such synergies are bound to create regional research hubs and centres of excellence in areas such as climate change, ICT and public health (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). Closely related is digital transformation and infrastructure, with available opportunities that include the expansion of electronic learning (e-learning) and leading to the creation of virtual labs through affordable internet (Badat, 2010).

### **Technology and innovation**

Technology and innovation open doors for reform in Southern African higher education, offering pathways to improve access, quality, and efficiency (Ng'ambi et al., 2016). By integrating digital learning platforms, institutions can expand access to education for students in remote or underserved areas, overcoming geographical and infrastructure obstacles. Online and blended learning models also provide flexibility for working students, making higher education more inclusive. Investment in technology infrastructure, such as high-speed internet and campus-wide digital tools, can enhance teaching and research capabilities (Sethi & Singh, 2024). Policymakers can support these efforts by fostering public-private partnerships to finance technological advancements and trainers in digital pedagogy (Jackson, 2016).

Innovation in curriculum and research are important areas of reform. Thus, higher education institutions must prepare their courses as per the newly emerging technologies and needs of industry so that

students are equipped with skills for the fourth industrial revolution (Southworth et al., 2023). This comprises the establishment of innovation centres and incubation complexes wherein students, researchers, and entrepreneurs are motivated to collaborate in co-creating solutions for regional challenges (Bodolica & Spraggon, 2021). Besides, the application of artificial intelligence, data analysis, and other advanced tools in research and management can optimise it and its decision-making efficiency (Kumar, Talukder & Dewangan, 2025). Through technology and innovation priorities, Southern African higher education can drive regional development as well as competitiveness in the world.

### **Public-Private Partnerships**

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) are a real prospect for resolving financing and resource constraints in Southern African higher education (Mabizela, 2005). Public-private partnerships among governments, universities, and the private sector can drive finance for infrastructure, research, and technological innovation (Goddard & Puukka, 2008). Private firms, for instance, can invest in the construction of cutting-edge facilities like laboratories and innovation centres while reaping the benefits of access to skilled graduates and research outcomes (Valavanidis, 2020). Governments can also develop enabling policies and incentives to draw private sector participation so that such partnerships are rewarding to both parties and by national development strategies.

PPPs can also advance innovation and close the gap between industry and academia. By collaborative research, internships, and curriculum development, universities and private enterprises can ensure that graduates possess the skills required for the job market (Comins & Kraemer-Mbula, 2016). Further, these partnerships can create regional development by resolving social concerns, including health, energy, and agriculture, via shared research (Saric et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the effective application of PPPs must include efficient governance mechanisms, openness, and accountability to prevent exploitation or disequilibrium. Strategically applying these partnerships, Southern African higher education can facilitate access, quality, and relevance in a sustainable fashion (Awuzie & Emuze, 2017).

### **Policy harmonisation within the region**

Southern African policy harmonisation needs to usher in a harmonised and efficient system of higher education to realise regional integration (Woldegiorgis, 2013). Quality assurance policy alignment, accreditation policy alignment, and qualification framework alignment enable the international recognition of qualifications and credits to allow students and academics mobility as well as cooperation (Hou et al., 2021). For example, efforts by Southern Africa focus on harmonising the higher education policy and collaboration among member states (Mwila et al., 2022). Harmonisation of policy, however, involves addressing challenges such as varying regulatory systems, limited resources, and irregular institutional growth in the region.

Harmonisation policies can be used to improve research, innovation, and cooperation in human resource development (Zhang et al., 2024). Institutions can join resources by embracing joint guidelines

and standards to deal with regional issues like climate change, public health, and unemployment. Governments should join hands to create frameworks to promote cross-border cooperation and fair sharing of resources and benefits (Kayyali, 2025). In addition, these can also have a significant role to play in the oversight of implementation and technical assistance to ensure efficient, harmonised policies (Munyoka & Maharaj, 2017). These functions can provide for the construction of an integrated competitive higher education system that contributes to socio-economic development in Southern Africa at large.

### **Obstacles facing reform in Southern African Higher Education**

Reform in Southern African higher education faces a serious array of obstacles, most of which emanate from resource constraints and socio-economic inequalities. Under-funding is an underlying obstacle that affects infrastructure development, faculty recruitment, and procurement of learning material (Zickafoose et al, 2024). It is hard for the majority of higher education institutions to be able to accommodate increased numbers of students while still guaranteeing quality education. This is worsened by deep poverty and high unemployment rates across the region, which restrict the capacity of students to cover tuition fees and other expenses of study. Such funding issues have to be addressed through creative funding instruments and increased government and private sector investment.

Another obstacle is the heterogeneity of socio-political and regulatory environments across Southern African nations, which could complicate regional integration (Sehoole & de Wit, 2014). Policy harmonisation between quality assurance, accreditation, and qualifications frameworks must be achieved to enhance collaboration, yet governance arrangements, differences and institutional capacities pose challenges. Political intervention in university management and academic freedom problems make the reform process more difficult (Dingge, 2024). The development of good governance structures and institutional autonomy will be critical to overcoming the challenges and creating a robust higher education system.

The digital divide remains a formidable obstacle to reforming higher education in Southern Africa, particularly as technology and innovation offer transformative potential for teaching and learning (Datta et al., 2018). Despite this promise, many institutions lack the digital infrastructure and capacity necessary to harness these tools effectively (Timotheou et al., 2023). Rural and disadvantaged students are disproportionately affected, often facing limited access to devices and reliable internet, which deepens existing educational inequalities (Graves et al., 2021). Addressing these disparities requires targeted investments in infrastructure and capacity development tailored to the unique needs of under-resourced communities. However, a critical concern lies in the risk of replicating existing hierarchies if digital expansion is not guided by inclusive policy frameworks. Without deliberate efforts to ensure equitable access and digital literacy, technology may inadvertently reinforce exclusion rather than alleviate it. Therefore, bridging the digital divide must be approached not merely as a technical challenge but as a justice-oriented imperative, demanding coordinated action from governments, institutions, and regional

bodies to build a higher education system that is both equitable and sustainable (Ticona Machaca et al., 2025).

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Access and equity**

The policy implications of equity and access to higher education in Southern Africa are profound, demanding coordinated efforts from governments, institutions, and stakeholders. While investments in technology, infrastructure, and staff development particularly in underserved regions are essential to expanding access (Al-Worafi, 2024), these efforts must be critically examined through the lens of sustainability and systemic reform. Increasing financial aid and maintaining affordable tuition are necessary steps to widen participation among disadvantaged groups (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021), yet without robust accountability mechanisms, such interventions risk becoming short-term fixes rather than transformative solutions. Moreover, the push for partnerships with the private sector and foreign collaborators (Syrty, 2023) must be guided by ethical frameworks that prioritize educational sovereignty and avoid dependency on external agendas. A critical concern is that many policy initiatives remain fragmented and reactive, lacking a cohesive strategy that aligns equity goals with long-term institutional resilience. Therefore, equity-focused policies must be embedded within a broader vision of inclusive development, one that not only expands access but also reconfigures the structural conditions that perpetuate exclusion.

Equity policies in higher education must extend beyond mere access to encompass student success and retention, as emphasized by Li and Jackson (2024). This necessitates the implementation of targeted interventions such as one-on-one mentorship, mental health counselling, and academic support programs to foster inclusive and nurturing learning environments (Pascua, 2023). However, a critical dimension often overlooked is the need to confront institutional discrimination and bias at their structural roots. As Küçüksüleymanoğlu (2025) argues, without dismantling entrenched systems of exclusion, equity efforts risk being superficial and unsustainable. Moreover, aligning equity policies with broader socioeconomic development goals can catalyze a virtuous cycle of prosperity, reducing poverty and inequality across the region (Zimm, Sperling & Busch, 2018). Yet, this integration demands a shift from reactive policy-making to proactive, systemic reform one that interrogates power dynamics within institutions and ensures that equity is not just a principle but a lived reality for all students.

### **Quality assurance and accreditation**

Assurance and accreditation of quality in Southern African higher education carry profound policy implications, influencing institutional credibility, student outcomes, and regional academic integration (Kisanga, 2014). To strengthen these processes, policymakers must prioritize institution-building and ensure adequate resource allocation to both national and regional quality assurance bodies (Robins, 2008). Establishing clear and coherent standards is vital for maintaining consistency across institutions, particularly when supporting smaller or under-resourced universities in meeting these benchmarks (Barton,

2009). Moreover, strategic investments in data systems and digital infrastructure can enhance monitoring and reporting, fostering transparency and public trust in accreditation mechanisms. However, a critical concern lies in the uneven implementation of these standards and technologies, which often reflects broader systemic inequalities. Without deliberate efforts to harmonize quality assurance frameworks and address disparities in institutional capacity, accreditation risks entrenching existing divides rather than promoting equitable development across the region. Thus, quality assurance must be approached not merely as a technical exercise but as a transformative policy tool for inclusive and sustainable higher education reform.

Regional cooperation is essential for maximizing the impact of quality assurance policies in Southern African higher education, particularly through harmonized accreditation systems that enable mutual recognition of qualifications (Yanfang & Mohd, 2024). Such alignment fosters student mobility and institutional collaboration, which in turn enhances graduate employability across borders (Schumann et al., 2019). Policymakers must actively promote cross-border partnerships, facilitate knowledge exchange, and ensure academic programs are responsive to the demands of regional economies (Van Den Broek, Benneworth & Rutten, 2019). However, a critical challenge lies in the uneven capacity and readiness of institutions across the region to implement and benefit from these cooperative frameworks. Without targeted investments in infrastructure, staff development, and policy harmonization, regional initiatives risk reinforcing existing disparities rather than bridging them. Therefore, regional cooperation must be underpinned by a commitment to equity and capacity building to ensure that quality assurance efforts translate into inclusive growth and global competitiveness.

### **Financing and financial sustainability**

The policy implications of Southern African higher education funding and financial sustainability are key in offering long-term stability and accessibility (Rambuda, 2023). Policymakers need to seek diversified funding sources, including public-private partnerships, endowments, and donations from outside donors, to minimise government subsidy and tuition fee weights (Ndebele et al., 2023). These options can free students from the weight of expenses while allowing institutions to invest in physical capital, research, and academic quality (Crowther, 2018). Governments will also need to come up with plans for regulation and monitoring tuition fee agreements to ensure they are not too expensive but not to the detriment of university finances.

Optimising resource use within higher education institutions in Southern Africa is a crucial area for policy intervention, particularly in the face of constrained budgets and rising operational demands. Policymakers must encourage universities to adopt cost-saving strategies such as energy conservation, digitalisation, and efficient procurement systems to enhance sustainability (Mohamed, Tlemsani, & Matthews, 2022). Equally important is the investment in training finance management personnel and institutional leaders to build resilience and improve strategic resource allocation. Regional collaboration offers a valuable avenue for sharing best practices, pooling resources, and establishing joint funding

mechanisms that can buffer institutions against financial shocks (Tan, 2016). However, a critical concern lies in the uneven capacity across institutions to implement these measures effectively. Without targeted support for under-resourced universities, optimisation efforts may deepen existing disparities rather than alleviate them. Therefore, funding and sustainability policies must be strategically positioned not only to promote efficiency but also to ensure equity, enabling all institutions to contribute meaningfully to the region's socio-economic development goals.

### **Governance and institutional autonomy**

Policy ramifications of Southern African higher education institution governance and autonomy are important to higher education institutions' effectiveness and independence building (Van Pletzen, 2015). There must be governance structures to be crafted by policymakers that encourage transparency, accountability, and stakeholder participation. These comprise training leaders for institutions, ethical decision-making, and building win-win partnership relations with external partners like governments, industries, and communities (Leal-Filho et al., 2025). To address issues such as political interference and mismanagement, policies that promote academic freedom while ensuring that universities operate according to national priorities are needed. Governance structures need to be strengthened to enable institutions to establish trust and stability, which will facilitate them to contribute significantly to socio-economic development (Thelma & Chitondo, 2024).

Institutional autonomy versus accountability remains a pivotal policy tension in Southern African higher education (Ahrens, 2011). Policymakers must craft frameworks that empower universities to innovate, conduct research, and manage resources independently, provided these activities align with national development priorities (Watkins et al., 2015). This balance can be achieved through mechanisms such as periodic appraisals, performance metrics, and outcome-based funding models. However, a critical concern lies in the risk of hyper-zealous external intervention, which can erode institutional autonomy and stifle academic freedom (King, 2015). Safeguarding autonomy requires not only legal protections but also a cultural commitment to respecting the distinct role of universities in society. Furthermore, regional cooperative policies offer a strategic avenue for enhancing governance by promoting the exchange of best practices and harmonizing standards across Southern African nations (Sithole et al., 2021). Yet, without equitable participation and capacity-building support, such regional efforts may inadvertently privilege stronger institutions, deepening existing disparities. Therefore, the pursuit of autonomy and accountability must be guided by inclusive, context-sensitive governance models that reinforce institutional resilience and global competitiveness.

### **Regional integration and cooperation**

The policy implications of regional cooperation and integration of Southern African higher education are revolutionary and can strengthen academic mobility, sharing of resources, and cooperative problem-solving (Tangwe & Benyin, 2025). Policymakers must target coordinating qualification frameworks and

accreditation systems throughout the region to facilitate mutual recognition of degrees and credits (Shabani & Okebukola, 2017). This will enable students to move between institutions within nations with ease, enhancing access to diverse educational doors. Investment in cross-border infrastructure, such as online platforms for collaborative learning and regional research centres, can accompany integration efforts (Vyshnevskiy, 2020). Furthermore, policy coordination with more extensive regional development objectives can generate synergies between higher education institutions and socio-economic development (Orr, 2016). Policy coordination should also aim to develop collaboration between universities, industries, and governments to tackle regional challenges such as unemployment, climate change, and public health (El-Jardali, Ataya, & Fadlallah, 2018).

Policymakers in Southern Africa must actively promote experience sharing, collaborative research, and dissemination of best practices among higher education institutions to cultivate a culture of innovation and problem-solving (Cairney & Toomey, 2024). Initiatives such as joint degree programmes where institutions co-develop curricula and share teaching responsibilities and regional scholarship schemes have the potential to significantly broaden access for historically marginalized groups (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). However, a critical concern lies in the uneven institutional capacity across the region, which may hinder equitable participation in such collaborative frameworks. Without targeted investments in infrastructure, faculty development, and policy harmonization, these initiatives risk reinforcing existing disparities rather than mitigating them. Therefore, cooperation and integration must be underpinned by inclusive governance and sustained support mechanisms to ensure that the envisioned interconnected and competitive higher education system benefits all member states equitably.

### **Chances of Reform in Southern African Higher Education**

The reform prospects in Southern African higher education demonstrate a strategic effort to overcome long-standing barriers rooted in historical inequities and systemic inefficiencies. Colonial legacies have left deep scars on access to education, making inclusivity and quality central themes in reform agendas. The emphasis on curriculum alignment with industry needs signifies a paradigm shift toward producing graduates who are not only academically competent but also employable. Through this alignment, higher education institutions are positioned as key players in bridging the gap between academia and the job market. Furthermore, the integration of entrepreneurship and innovation into the curriculum is instrumental in transforming universities into catalysts of economic growth. These reforms embody a broader vision aligned with SDG 4, ensuring that access to quality education becomes a tangible reality rather than a mere policy aspiration.

Gender equity remains a central challenge within the reform discourse, particularly in dismantling patriarchal structures that perpetuate male dominance in academia and technical disciplines. Addressing gender imbalance requires deliberate strategies, including women's inclusion in leadership and policymaking roles across institutions. Such measures foster a more inclusive academic environment and contribute to balanced representation in decision-making processes. Regional initiatives, such as the SADC

Regional Qualification Framework and the HAQAA program, further expand opportunities for academic mobility and research collaboration. These frameworks encourage knowledge exchange and build regional centres of excellence that tackle shared developmental challenges like climate change and public health. Digital transformation, particularly e-learning and virtual laboratories, strengthens these efforts by expanding access and fostering innovation-driven reform.

### **Technology and Innovation**

Technology and innovation have emerged as transformative forces in reshaping the higher education landscape across Southern Africa. The integration of digital learning platforms enhances educational access, particularly for students in remote and underserved areas, addressing long-standing geographical and infrastructural disparities. By adopting online and blended learning models, institutions can provide flexible and inclusive opportunities that meet diverse learner needs. Investments in high-speed internet and campus-wide digital tools not only improve teaching efficiency but also elevate institutional research capacity. Policymakers play a crucial role in sustaining this transformation by facilitating partnerships that fund technological advancement and teacher training. These strategic interventions collectively strengthen institutional resilience and the inclusivity of education delivery.

Innovation in curriculum and research design remains vital for equipping students with the competencies demanded by the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Establishing innovation hubs and incubation centres nurtures collaboration among students, researchers, and entrepreneurs to address pressing regional challenges. The adoption of advanced tools, such as artificial intelligence and data analytics, optimizes decision-making and research management, fostering evidence-based institutional practices. Moreover, integrating technology into higher education reforms enhances regional competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. It ensures that universities not only adapt to global shifts but also lead in knowledge creation and application. Thus, technology and innovation stand as cornerstones of sustainable educational reform, driving growth, inclusivity, and social transformation in Southern Africa.

### **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)**

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) present a transformative opportunity for addressing funding shortages and resource limitations that have long constrained higher education development in Southern Africa. By leveraging collaboration between governments, universities, and the private sector, PPPs can generate sustainable financing for infrastructure, research, and innovation. This collaborative model ensures that private enterprises benefit from a skilled workforce and cutting-edge research, while universities gain access to modern facilities and funding stability. However, the success of PPPs depends heavily on the establishment of transparent governance mechanisms that safeguard accountability and equity in implementation. Without clear oversight, there is a risk that private interests may dominate educational agendas, undermining public good objectives. Thus, strategic policy frameworks must guide PPPs to ensure that partnerships foster both economic growth and educational inclusivity.

Beyond funding, PPPs play a crucial role in narrowing the gap between academia and industry by fostering applied research and experiential learning opportunities. Through initiatives such as internships, co-designed curricula, and collaborative projects, universities can align graduate skills with labour market demands. This alignment enhances employability and ensures that education remains relevant in dynamic economic environments. Furthermore, PPPs contribute to social development by addressing regional issues like healthcare, energy, and agriculture through shared innovation. These partnerships also stimulate regional cooperation, promoting collective advancement across member states. Ultimately, PPPs serve not merely as financial tools but as strategic instruments for advancing innovation, sustainability, and inclusivity in higher education.

### **Policy Harmonisation within the Region**

Policy harmonisation across Southern African nations represents a critical step toward creating a cohesive and efficient regional higher education system. Aligning policies on quality assurance, accreditation, and qualification frameworks fosters mutual recognition of degrees and promotes academic and professional mobility. Such integration enhances regional collaboration, allowing institutions to pool resources and expertise in tackling shared challenges. However, disparities in institutional capacity, uneven resource distribution, and differing regulatory environments pose significant obstacles to harmonisation. These inconsistencies risk creating imbalances where well-resourced institutions benefit disproportionately from regional integration efforts. Therefore, policy alignment must be accompanied by capacity-building initiatives to ensure equitable participation across all member states.

Harmonisation efforts also serve as a foundation for improving research collaboration, innovation, and human capital development. By adopting unified guidelines and standards, Southern African institutions can collectively address transnational issues such as climate change, unemployment, and public health. Cross-border cooperation frameworks further enable equitable sharing of benefits and responsibilities among participating nations. Effective oversight and technical assistance are essential to ensure that harmonisation efforts translate into practical outcomes rather than remaining policy rhetoric. Moreover, coordinated policy implementation strengthens institutional accountability and transparency, fostering trust among regional stakeholders. In the long term, policy harmonisation can transform Southern Africa into an integrated and globally competitive higher education hub.

### **Obstacles Facing Reform in Southern African Higher Education**

Reforming higher education in Southern Africa remains a complex challenge due to persistent financial, structural, and socio-economic constraints. Limited funding continues to hinder infrastructure development, faculty recruitment, and access to quality learning resources, thereby impeding institutional growth. Many universities struggle to balance rising enrolments with maintaining academic quality, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and reduced teaching effectiveness. These financial difficulties are further compounded by widespread poverty and unemployment, which restrict students' ability to afford

tuition and associated educational costs. Consequently, higher education risks becoming a privilege for the few rather than a pathway to social mobility for all. Addressing these issues requires innovative financing mechanisms and greater collaboration between governments, private sectors, and international partners to ensure equitable and sustainable funding.

In addition to economic constraints, political and structural barriers significantly impede reform initiatives. Divergent regulatory systems and varying governance capacities among Southern African nations complicate policy harmonisation and regional cooperation. Political interference in university management undermines academic freedom, stifles innovation, and erodes institutional autonomy. Moreover, the persistence of the digital divide exacerbates inequalities, as many institutions—particularly in rural or under-resourced areas—lack the technological infrastructure needed for digital transformation. Without inclusive policy frameworks, the adoption of technology may inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchies rather than dismantle them. Therefore, bridging these obstacles demands a holistic and justice-oriented reform agenda that combines governance improvement, equitable resource distribution, and inclusive technological integration to ensure a resilient and future-ready higher education system.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

Southern African higher education policy obstacles are characterised by their complexity and offer scope as well as a challenge to be reshaped. Governance, finance, and curriculum reform all play a role in shaping effectiveness and access within institutions. Policy alignment, aimed at socio-economic necessities, can make higher education institutions drive innovation while remaining competitive internationally. Policy directions also play a crucial role in optimising opportunities with wider access, enhanced research, and integration of technology. These interventions allow for equitable involvement and enhance institutional collaboration to empower higher education to play a beneficial role in national and regional growth. But even with all these opportunities in existence, entrenched constraints such as limited funding levels reduced institutional autonomy, and dated curricula hinder transformation efforts. Removal of these obstacles through quality policy overhauls is key to establishing sustainability and resilience within the sector. Finally, the future of Southern African higher education hinges on shaping forward-looking policies that cut across threats and strategic possibilities. Through fostering innovation, inclusivity, and institutional framework unification, the region can establish a viable higher education sector that tackles both societal and economic demands.

## **SUGGESTION**

Based on the conclusion above, it is suggested that policymakers and educational leaders in Southern Africa adopt a comprehensive and collaborative approach to reforming the higher education sector. Strategic efforts should prioritise sustainable funding mechanisms, inclusive governance structures, and curriculum renewal aligned with labour market and technological demands. Regional cooperation must also be strengthened through harmonised quality assurance systems and shared research frameworks to enhance mobility, innovation, and cross-border collaboration. Furthermore, institutional autonomy should be

safeguarded while maintaining accountability to ensure academic freedom and responsiveness to societal needs. Integrating digital transformation and equity-driven initiatives will be essential for expanding access and improving quality across diverse contexts. Ultimately, the success of higher education reform in Southern Africa will depend on collective commitment to long-term, evidence-based policymaking that promotes resilience, inclusivity, and global competitiveness.

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