Higher education gender analysis:
access to employability and entrepreneurship opportunities

Sub-Saharan Africa: South Africa

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Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

AD:	Academic development
AGEE:	Accountability for Gender Equality in Education
ANIE:	African Network for Internationalization of Education
ANC:	African National Congress
CCDU:	Counselling and Careers Development Unit
CHE:	Council on Higher Education
DHET:	Department of Higher Education and Training
DTI:	Department of Trade and Industry
EEA:	Employment Equality Act
GBV:	Gender-based violence
GEO:	Gender Equality Office
HBUs:	Historically Black universities
HE:	Higher education
HEIs:	Higher education institutions
ICT:	Information and communication technology
NCHE:	National Commission on Higher Education
NPHE:	National Plan for Higher Education
NSFAS:	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
OSW:	Office on the Status of Women
RIUs:	Research-intensive universities
SETA:	Sector Education and Training Authority
SRC:	Student Representative Council
STEM:	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
TEFSA:	Tertiary Education Fund of South Africa
UCT:	University of Cape Town
UKZN:	University of KwaZulu-Natal
UMP:	University of Mpumalanga
UNISA:	University of South Africa
UNIVEN:	University of Venda
WIL:	Work-integrated learning
Wits:	University of the Witwatersrand

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Executive summary

This study examines gender inequality in South Africa's higher education (HE) sector.

Study objectives

The study objectives are listed below.

1. To produce a country report on gender inequality issues in South Africa, focusing on the barriers and challenges faced by female students and graduates in accessing and participating in employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

2. To identify actionable recommendations to enable the British Council to better integrate gender issues into its HE programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa.

3. To consider the broader role of higher education in contributing to improved gender equality for students and graduates, and to develop recommendations for HE-sector partners and stakeholders on gender-sensitive, transformative approaches and best practices for improving gender equality.

Method

The study uses a multimethod approach, comprising document reviews, surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. We selected seven public higher education institutions (HEIs) to represent the diversity of South Africa's higher education sector. Data collection involved survey questionnaires. We received a total of **406 responses** to the electronic questionnaire survey distributed across the participating institutions. Of these, **403 were valid** and included in the analysis. Among the valid responses, **265 (65.8%)** of participants identified as female, **131 (32.5%)** as male, and **7 (1.7%)** as other. The remaining three responses were excluded due to incomplete demographic information. We also conducted open-ended interviews with institutional leaders and a programme head, as well as focus group discussions with students. The study explores gender-related barriers and challenges faced by female students, and the role of institutional policies and frameworks in overcoming them.

Main findings

The study identifies significant gender-related concerns in South African HE post-1994.

1. More women than men are enrolled in HEIs in South Africa. This is attributed to positive affirmative action policies, commonly referred to as equity quotas, that offer redress for past and current injustices.

2. Black students of all genders still encounter institutional barriers, funding challenges, gender bias, under-resourcing, limited access to entrepreneurship opportunities and inadequate support structures, which affect access to HE and successful course completion.

3. South Africa has robust national and institutional policies that promote gender equality; however, their implementation (or lack of implementation) is identified as a possible cause of their ineffectiveness. This may be the result of several factors, including institutionalised sexism and racism, an insufficient number of suitably qualified people to implement the policies, limited resources and rigid institutional cultures.

4. Male students, especially those from previously marginalised populations, require assistance to succeed in HE.

5. Students in general and women in particular require support across areas such as accommodation, tuition, career guidance and life-skills training.

6. Despite institutional efforts to promote entrepreneurship through dedicated centres and initiatives, the majority of students (80%) are not engaged in entrepreneurship, often due to limited access and relevance of these supports, prompting many to independently start their own ventures.

Recommendations

1. Entrepreneurship education: universities should integrate entrepreneurship education into their academic programmes to prepare students, especially women, for self-employment and entrepreneurship.

2. Policy implementation and visibility: both national and institutional policies on gender equality should be implemented more effectively to ensure equal access to support services for all.

3. Support and mentorship for male students: this should be made available to improve equality for everyone.

4. University–industry partnerships: universities and the private sector should develop stronger partnerships to bridge the gap between academic learning and practical work experience.

5. Incubation centres: business parks and incubation centres across university faculties should be established to nurture student-led innovations and start-ups.

6. Strategic collaborations: universities should diversify their partnerships to include international and local stakeholders to expand support for female students in particular.

7. Access to finance: the government and universities should improve access to finance for students, especially women, to support entrepreneurial ventures.

8. Involvement of communities: communities should be involved as strategic partners in entrepreneurship ventures to tackle unemployment among young people.

9. Agency and resilience: students' agency and resilience should be developed to contribute to their general well-being and academic achievement.

10. Gender inequality: societal norms, sexism and patriarchy should be tackled to enable women and girls to have equitable access to education and entrepreneurship opportunities.

11. Sex education: families should be included in educating girls and female students about sexuality and sex to avoid unwanted teenage pregnancies that disrupt learning.

12. Maternal healthcare: HE practices that are contrary to the provision of good maternal healthcare should be remedied.

13. Provision of resources: the government and other principal stakeholders should make resources available to enable the implementation of gender-related policies and major programmes in HE.

Conclusion

South African HE has made tremendous progress in its efforts to overcome gender inequality post-1994. However, this study identifies persistent areas of marginalisation that require attention, such as gaps related to policy implementation and support systems. Female students, in particular, require institutional support to overcome barriers to entrepreneurship and employability. Collaboration with international and local partners can improve experiences for female students. Aside from funding opportunities, such collaboration has the potential to expose female students to work opportunities and develop lasting networks with local and international partners. Finally, this study emphasises the importance of promoting gender-responsive programmes and policies that include entrepreneurship education and strengthen university–industry links.

1   Introduction and context

1.1 Introduction

The post-1994 South African higher education (HE) landscape has undergone commendable progress and transformation. The Apartheid system excluded Black[1] people in general and Black women in particular, so their access to and participation in HE were limited. Although the Apartheid regime discriminated mainly on the basis of race and ethnicity, intersectional factors such as class, gender and geographical location contributed to endemic marginalisation (Badat, 2008). Today, positive transformation policies are in place that prohibit discrimination on grounds such as sex, race, ethnicity and social class. To a large extent, Black people and women are now well-represented in HE. However, the playing field for equal access and success is not completely level (Essop, 2020). Women still encounter barriers that hinder their full enjoyment of available opportunities. These barriers may be attributed to classism, institutional culture, sexism, racism, and societal gendered norms and stereotypes. In addition, there are notable differences between men and women in terms of field of study, entrepreneurship ventures, completion rates and employability. As a result, interventions are required to enable women to succeed in HE and employment. In this study, there, we recognize that gender inequality is prevalent across various regions globally, as highlighted in several British Council reports, including "Gender Equality in Higher Education – Maximising Impacts" (Mott, 2022) and "Accelerating Women's Employability Through Social Entrepreneurship: The Case of Mombasa" (British Council, 2020).

[1] In this context, Black refers to people of African and Indian heritage and other people of colour in South Africa.

1.2 Objectives and scope of the study

The study objectives are outlined below.

1. To produce a country report on gender inequality issues in South Africa, focusing on the barriers and challenges faced by female students and graduates in accessing and participating in employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

2. To identify actionable recommendations to enable the British Council to better integrate gender issues into its HE programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa.

3. To consider the broader role of higher education in contributing to improved gender equality for students and graduates, and to develop recommendations for HE-sector partners and stakeholders on gender-sensitive, transformative approaches and best practices for improving gender equality.

Our gender analysis explores the barriers to entrepreneurship, especially the experiences of female students. It further explores HE structures, such as ease of access and provision, and inherent gender bias and its intersection with other social categories. The study adopts an intersectional approach that considers how other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity, religion, race and economic status, fundamentally intersect with gender, and perpetuate inequalities in the HE sector. In this way, the study highlights the unique experiences of female students and the entrenched biases and barriers they encounter in HE. It also highlights best practices and innovations that institutions and students are developing in response to these challenges.

1.3 Method

The study uses a multimethod approach that comprises document reviews, surveys (questionnaires), interviews and focus group discussions. Table 1 presents the participating institutions in South Africa, each of which is a public university. Our sample selection was informed by the classification of higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, which we discuss in detail in section 2.1.

1.3.1 Literature review

We carried out a literature review for contextualisation purposes. Our aim was to collect and analyse relevant information about South Africa's HE sector. We selected literature that aligns with the objectives of the study, particularly gender-related barriers and challenges to entrepreneurship and employability. The selected literature mainly focuses on developments in policy, funding, enrolment patterns, fields of study and the general quality of access to education. We also scanned for information on institutional learning environments, university–industry and university–private-sector links, support frameworks for students and the role of development partners. This was important for understanding and contextualising the challenges facing female students and the support offered by institutions to overcome them.

In addition, we reviewed relevant government and institutional policy documents, legislation and guidelines that refer to gender concerns, entrepreneurship and access. We obtained some information from the websites and repositories of participating institutions and government departments, particularly the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE). We obtained additional information from research reports and publications. The British Council's study, titled "Universities, Employability, and Inclusive Development" (McCowan et al. 2016), provided valuable insights into the status of female students in South African higher education, including the significant barriers and challenges they face.

1.3.2 Questionnaire survey

The second phase of the study involved engaging with several HEIs to collect information. This included major stakeholders such as students, university leaders and heads of relevant support units, such as ethics committees and gatekeepers. Aside from acquiring ethics clearance from the host institution (the lead researcher's institution), we obtained authorisation letters from all participating universities before beginning information gathering. This process gives credence to the findings of the study. We initially invited ten public universities to join the study, but only seven participated due to delays in processing authorisation letters.

Our selection of institutions was guided by the South African government's classification of public universities, as presented in Table 1. This classification includes research-intensive universities (RIUs), historically Black universities (HBUs), distance education universities, and other public universities. The diverse institutional types were intentionally selected to ensure representation across the higher education sector. The selection represents the diversity of HEIs in South Africa. Although the selection of student participants was random, the selection aligns with student demographics in South African HE (Booi, et. al., 2020). We selected diverse universities with a mix of rural and urban students, as well as racial diversity. The University of South Africa (UNISA) is uniquely positioned as the only university offering distance learning, while the University of Mpumalanga (UMP), at ten years old, is one of the youngest universities in the country.

We sent the electronic questionnaire survey link to all participating students through the chief registrars' offices. Though the study targeted 50 participants per university, we only received 406 responses (403 of them completed successfully as expected). Out of the 403, 262 were females, 131 males, and 7 classified as others.

Due to a delay in processing institutional authorization letters, we analysed 305 of the total number of responses. Among these, 203 (66.8 per cent) of respondents identified as female, 97 (31.9 per cent) as male and 5 (1.3 per cent) as other. The sample reflects current national enrolment rates in South African HE (57 per cent women and 43 per cent men) (Essop, 2020).

Another important demographic statistic to note from our survey is the ethnicity of participants. A total of 341 participants (84 per cent) identified as Black, 35 (8.7 per cent) as White, 13 (3.3 per cent) as Coloured and 13 (3.3 per cent) as being of Indian heritage. This reflects national enrolment by ethnicity, whereby 81 per cent of students identify as Black (CHE, 2023; Essop, 2020). An institutional leader in our study confirmed that the 2024 enrolment figures in their university reflected a similar pattern, with 3,308 students identifying as being of African heritage, 206 as being of Indian heritage, 174 as White, 132 as people of colour, two as Chinese and 49 as international students.

Table 1: South African higher education institutions

Category	Institution	Number of faculties	Total enrolment (number of students)	Women	Men
Research-intensive universities (RIUs)	University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)	11 faculties or schools and 5 campuses	44,864	26,968	**17,896**
	University of the Witwatersrand (Wits)	5 faculties and 33 schools	42,498	24,597	**17,901**
Other universities	University of Mpumalanga (UMP)	3	7,099	4,368	**2,731**
Historically Black universities (HBUs)	University of Venda (UNIVEN)	4	15,248	9,301	**5,947**
	North-West University	8	45,306	27,204	**18,102**
	University of the Western Cape	7	23,937	14,602	**9,335**
Distance universities	University of South Africa (UNISA)	8	370,000	262,700	**107,300**

Source: Adapted from Essop (2020)

1.3.3 Focus group discussions and interviews

This part of the study was important because it provided additional insights to complement the information collected from survey responses. We identified areas that required further interrogation and carried out 5 focus group discussions with 30 students, 22 were females and 8 were males. The students had participated in the survey. These online interviews ran for one hour.

We also carried out extensive interviews with five institutional leaders, including a head of school, a deputy head of school, a programme manager and a member of support services finance manager- these are separate roles. The interviews provided valuable insights into student life, enrolment patterns, institutional policies, funding, academic programmes, entrepreneurship, collaboration, best practices, and pathways to improving gender equality, entrepreneurship and employability, especially for female students. The interviews were held online and lasted between two and three hours.

1.3.4 Ethical considerations

The study followed ethical guidelines set by South African universities. We obtained ethics clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), which is the lead researcher's host university. We also sought letters of permission from participating institutions. Eight such letters were received but we were unable to include the eighth institution in the study due to processing delays. The study observed all provisions stipulated in the letters of permission, such as obtaining consent from participants; informing them about the study; enabling voluntary participation; making participants aware of the option to withdraw from the study if they were uncomfortable at any time; seeking permission to record interviews; observing anonymity; and providing a safe space for focus group interviews that was supportive and respectful, allowing students to express themselves freely. We also followed ethics guidance provided by the British Council.

1.4 Analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyse secondary findings from HEIs, government agencies and other sources of literature that were relevant to the objectives of the study. We engaged critically and fairly with the salient literature to avoid bias. We analysed the information generated from survey questionnaire responses using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. With the exception of demographic information, we generated themes aligned to the study's aims and objectives. We transcribed interviews, which we then categorised into emerging themes to provide a deeper understanding of gender inequality, barriers, challenges and future pathways from the perspectives of both students and institutional leaders. The conclusions from the analysis gave us an opportunity to provide informed explanations to the research questions and propose nuanced solutions to the identified barriers and challenges to gender equality, entrepreneurship and employability in the context of South Africa.

1.5 Gender analysis framework

We considered several frameworks for gender analysis and adopted the Accountability for Gender Equality in Education (AGEE) Framework, which has been shown to be useful in similar studies (Unterhalter, et. al., 2022). The AGEE Framework is helpful for interrogating complex gender concerns and injustices in HE. It considers and provides for a holistic approach, as required by this study. It looks at gender inequalities and barriers in six areas, making it a robust, holistic model.

The six areas, shown in Figure 1, comprise resources (money, policies, administrators, school and institutional support systems, and information); values (ideas about rights, capabilities, peace); opportunities (factors that enable or constrain gender equality, and how these factors can be converted into opportunities); participation (how factors such as socio-economic status, location, race and ethnicity differentiate between girls and boys, and women and men in education); knowledge, understanding and skills; and outcomes (gender equality in all facets of society – education, employment, access to healthcare, and economic and political opportunities). These areas and their dimensions are a good fit with the questions and parameters explored in our study.

AGEE Framework

Figure 1: *AGEE Framework*
Source: *Unterhalter, et. al., 2022*

The AGEE Framework helps measure achievements enabled by education, as well levels of freedom and opportunity. At the same time, we can use it to measure the extent to which individuals convert specific resources to functioning and capability, that is, what individuals are able to do and become by means of educational achievement. The framework includes social contexts and arrangements that affect the distribution of resources and individual choices. The model introduces new ways of thinking about gender inequalities in HE by raising several questions and highlighting factors that may increase gender inequality in HE in Sub-Saharan Africa.

We deployed the AGEE Framework to frame questions concerning student experiences, institutional practices and social policy contexts in South Africa. We particularly focused on how the six central areas affect gender (in)equality discourse in the HE sector. The framework is suitable for this study due to its link with the intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 2017) to gender inequality, which recognises the complex, multifaceted nature of gender challenges and barriers. The framework rebuts the use of a single axis or dimension of (in) equality and argues for the need to interrogate a multiplicity of intersectional factors. It further interrogates policy-related concerns and gaps, as well as how social positioning and power relations inform our understanding of the gender-related barriers that female students face in South African HEIs.

We also reviewed the British Council's *Gender Equality in Higher Education: Maximising Impacts* document, as well as its theory of change. Specifically, we identified five critical components: fair access to resources and opportunities; a supportive legal and policy environment; changes in attitudes and social norms; increased awareness and agency among women and girls; and discussion and collaboration. In this study on the barriers against and opportunities for entrepreneurship and employability among female university students in South Africa, we use the framework as explained below.

First, the study explores the concept of fair access to resources and opportunities by investigating the educational and financial resources available to female students. Research indicates that female entrepreneurs often face significant barriers in accessing capital and financial support compared to their male counterparts (Dawa et al., 2021). By examining the availability of scholarships, grants and entrepreneurial training programmes specifically designed for women, our study seeks to identify gaps in resource allocation with the aim of proposing targeted interventions. For instance, programmes that strengthen financial literacy and provide mentorship could encourage female students to navigate the entrepreneurial landscape more effectively (Manzanera-Ruiz et al., 2022).

Second, the legal and policy environment is crucial for fostering gender equality in entrepreneurship. Our study analyses existing policies that affect female students' access to entrepreneurship and employment opportunities. For example, it assesses the effectiveness of policies aimed at promoting gender equity in education and entrepreneurship, such as affirmative action initiatives and gender-sensitive curricula (& Gough, 2012). By highlighting some best practices and identifying areas for improvement, our study advocates changes to create a more enabling environment for female students.

Third, our study discusses the need for changes in attitudes, beliefs and discriminatory social norms that hinder women's participation in entrepreneurship. Research has shown that societal expectations often dictate the roles women are expected to play, which can limit their aspirations and opportunities (Langevang & Gough, 2012). By investigating the cultural perceptions surrounding female entrepreneurship and employability, our study seeks to identify specific social norms that need to be challenged. This may involve engaging with institutional and community leaders and stakeholders to promote positive narratives about women's capabilities and contributions to the economy.

Fourth, increased awareness and agency among female students are critical aspects emphasised in our study. It is vital to explore how awareness of entrepreneurial opportunities and resources affects female students' intentions to start businesses or pursue careers in various fields. For instance, it is important to examine the role of entrepreneurship

education in shaping students' perceptions of their capabilities and the feasibility of starting their own ventures (Mshenga et al., 2020). By assessing the impact of entrepreneurship programmes and workshops, we may gain insights into the development of female students' confidence and agency in pursuing entrepreneurial paths.

Fifth, our study encourages a focus on the inclusion of social networks and their influence on female entrepreneurship. Research suggests that social capital plays a significant role in entrepreneurial success, as networks can provide access to resources, information and support. This links to the fifth theory of change component, which discusses how and why an intervention works in real-world settings (Dawa et al., 2021; Fixsen et al., 2017). By examining the role of peer networks, mentorship programmes and community support systems, our study highlights the importance of fostering collaborative environments that help female students. This may involve creating platforms for networking and knowledge-sharing among aspiring female entrepreneurs (Court & Arikekpar, 2022).

Finally, the study emphasises the importance of continuous monitoring and evaluation of initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in entrepreneurship and employability. By establishing clear metrics for success and regularly assessing the impact of interventions, stakeholders can ensure that efforts to encourage female students are effective and responsive to their needs (Manzanera-Ruiz et al., 2022). This commitment to accountability will not only strengthen the impact of gender equality initiatives but also foster a culture of inclusivity and encouragement within HE.

In conclusion, applying the British Council's theory of change in this study requires a comprehensive approach that considers, among other factors, access to resources, legal and policy frameworks, social norms and the encouragement of female students. By focusing on these areas, our study aims to contribute to significant progress in promoting gender equality in entrepreneurship and employability. We also reviewed the British Council's *Gender Equality in Higher Education: Maximising Impacts*, noting the report's principal recommendations and how the British Council's work in HE aligns with its theory of change for the encouragement of women and girls. In our report, we further investigate the application of a gender lens. We also referred to the national and institutional policies on gender in South Africa.

2   Policies for transformation

2.1 Higher education in South Africa: Context and recent developments

The transformation agenda adopted by the South African government has succeeded in reshaping and restructuring the HE sector. The public university sector – incorporating public universities and technikons[2] – has expanded in the past three decades from 495,348 students enrolled in 1994 to 1,068,046 students in 2021. The public university sector dominates HE enrolments, with 92 per cent of students enrolled in public universities compared to 8 per cent in private HEIs (CHE, 2021; Essop, 2020; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2021). Although the South Africa's public universities are categorised as HBUs, historically White institutions, RIUs, universities of technology, distance universities and other universities, not all categories were represented in the study (Essop, 2020). In total, there are 26 public universities (Essop, 2020). Enrolment in public and private HEIs combined increased by 38.6 per cent between 2010 and 2021, as shown in Figure 2. Student enrolment in private universities over this period rose by 156.6 per cent compared to 19.6 per cent in public universities (DHET, 2021).

The form and size of HE has also changed. Public sector universities still dominate the HE landscape, although there have been efforts to strengthen the college sub-sector. There has been substantial growth in this sub-sector, with enrolments doubling from 2010 onwards (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2022). Thus, there was doubling between 2010- 2017 (increase from 400,000 college enrolments in 2010 to more than double the number of enrolments (880,000) by 2017). Between 1993 and 1995, there was a decrease from 55 per cent to 35 per cent in the proportion of students who identified as White, compared to an increase from 32 per cent to 53 per cent in those identifying as Black. Examination of the total number of enrolments among students aged 20–24 for the periods 1996–2011 and 2014–2019 reveals increased participation rates among African and female students (Akala, 2023). Post-Apartheid, the graduation rate averaged 15 per cent between 1993 and 1998. During this period, the graduation rate (24 per cent) was slightly below the enrolment rate (29 per cent), while annual dropout rates were reported at 20 per cent for both undergraduates and postgraduates (Department of Higher Education, 2021). Literature indicates that the average was 15%, Where the graduation rate was 24%, it was still lower than the enrolment growth rate of 29%.

[2]
Technikons are universities of technology.

Notably, the rise in the number of graduates is attributed to HBUs. By 2021, 233,527 students had graduated across HEIs, 43 per cent of whom obtained undergraduate degrees, 27.3 per cent undergraduate certificates and diplomas, and 13.8 per cent postgraduate qualifications below master's level (postgraduate certificates, diplomas and honours) (VitalStats, CHE, 2021). There were no significant demographic changes among academic staff, whereby those identifying as White constituted 82 per cent and those identifying as African made up 11 per cent of all staff (VitalStats -CHE, 2021). However, the demographic profile of students has notably changed in these institutions, whereby those identifying as Black constituted 53 per cent of total enrolments in 1993, increasing to 84.8 per cent. The number of Black academic staff as a proportion of permanent academic staff has also risen – from 20 per cent to 54.5 per cent – over the same period-2005-2017 (Essop, 2020). The data covers the period between 1993 and 2017. The demographic profile of students in these institutions has notably changed. Previously, those identifying as Black constituted 53% of total headcount enrolments in 1993, which has increased to 84.8%. The number of Black academic staff as a proportion of permanent academic staff has also risen, from 20% to 54.5%, over the same time period.

Figure 2. Enrolment across public and private higher education institutions, 2010–2021

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total	983,703	1,041,237	1,050,851	1,103,639	1,111,712	1,132,422	1,143,245	1,222,030	1,283,466	1,283,890	1,313,839	1,300,961
Public HEIs	892,936	938,201	953,373	983,698	969,155	985,212	975,837	1,036,984	1,085,568	1,074,912	1,094,808	1,068,046
Private HEIs	90,767	103,036	97,478	119,941	142,557	147,210	167,408	185,046	197,898	208,978	219,031	232,915
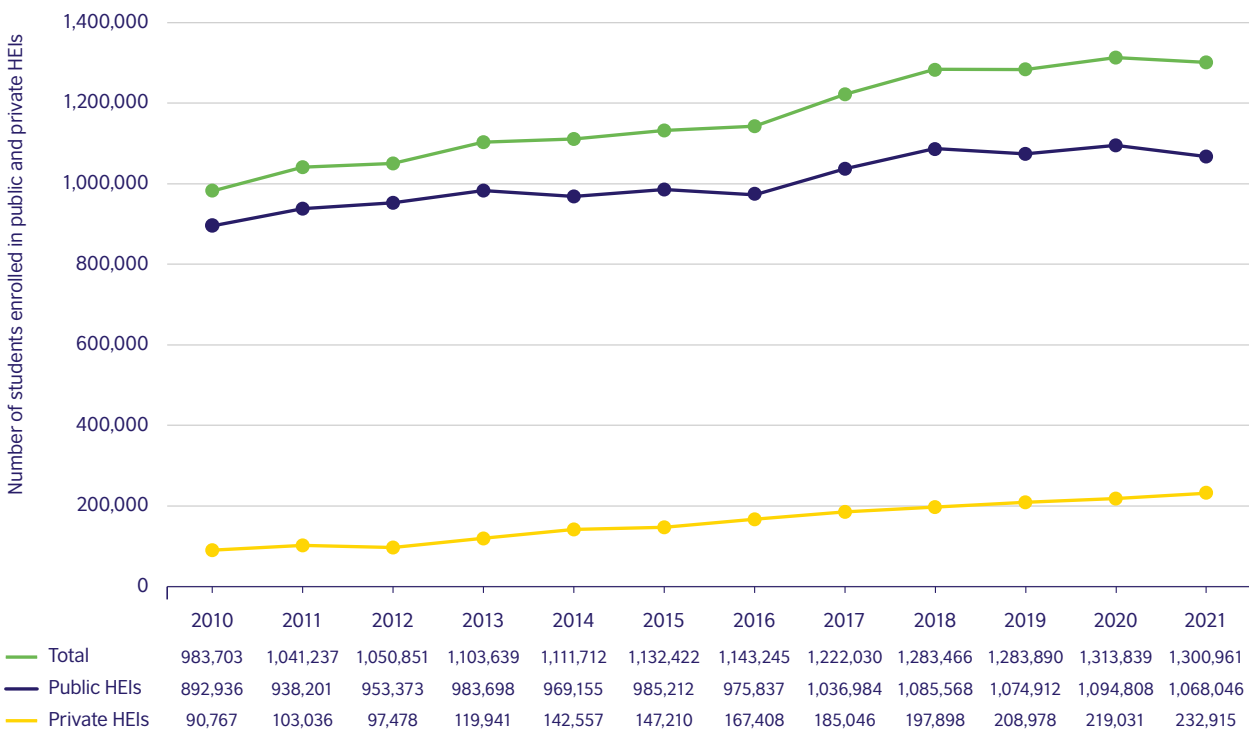
Source: *Department of Higher Education and Training (2021)*

2.2 Policies and legislative frameworks: Opportunities and persistent challenges

2.2.1 Main developments and transformation since 1994

Some of the notable policies that enabled the transformation of South African HE are discussed in this section. This transformation required that the race-based ethos that prevailed in South African HEIs during Apartheid to change adapt towards to a new democratic culture (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007). From a policy perspective, there was a heightened emphasis on demographic transformation within the student body, particularly with reference to race and ethnicity, although this focus was later widened to include gender, age, and disability (Naidoo, & Ranchod, 2018). A key major policy imperative associated with transformation was to the reform of higher education to become more socially equitable internally and to promote wider societal equity (Badaat, 2004).

At the onset of independence there was a flurry of policies concerning the transformation of HEIs. The African National Congress (ANC) announced a draft policy framework in January 1994. This laid out the ANC's overall vision for HE in South Africa and recommended a national commission to investigate the HE sector (Moja & Hayward, 2000). Meanwhile, the National Education Policy Act of 1996 was announced. This policy intervention aimed to deracialise, transform and mainstream the unequal HE system. It partly succeeded; however, most HEIs remained underfunded (Akala, 2016). These policies were associated with budgetary reprioritisation and fiscal discipline, which had implications for HE funding, especially in HBUs (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012).

2.2.2 Early policy changes

Some notable policies that enabled the transformation of South African HE are discussed in this section. This transformation required the race-based ethos that prevailed in South African HEIs during Apartheid to adapt to a new democratic culture (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007). From a policy perspective, there was a heightened emphasis on demographic transformation within the student body, particularly with reference to race and ethnicity, although this focus was later widened to include gender, age and disability (Naidoo, & Ranchod, 2018). A major policy imperative associated with transformation was the reform of HE to become more socially equitable internally and to promote wider societal equity (Badat, 2004).

2.2.3 National Commission on Higher Education

The mandate of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) is to advise the Minister of Higher Education on matters related to HE, so that HE can contribute to the political, social, economic and intellectual needs of society (CHE, 2001; DHET-White Paper, 1997). Increasing access to and participation in HE by encouraging more people from financially poor backgrounds and Black students to enter universities and technikons was referred to as 'massification' (Essop, 2020). Massification meaning increasing numbers in HE. Responsive is the way HEIs respond to societal needs. Responsiveness related to the need for HEIs to become involved in broader social issues. Meanwhile, governance advocated for a single HE system to overcome historical inequities and inefficiencies, and to manage increased access (Reddy, 2004, Essop, 2020; DHET- White Paper, 1997). Subsequently, NCHE developed a sound policy framework for transformation entitled *A Framework for Transformation* (Council on Higher Education,1996). This document shaped HE policy in South Africa in the form of White Paper 3. This resulted in a change in the demographic profile of South African HE and subsequently led to achievements in access, success, equity and representation across the student body and academic staff (Essop, 2020).

2.2.4 Education White Paper 3 of 1997

NCHE's policy framework resulted in the publication of the *Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation* (1996), followed by *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of the Higher Education System* (1997). This policy document aimed to increase access to HE for previously under-represented groups, including women and men who had been excluded on grounds of gender and race or ethnicity. It also

formed the basis for the transformation of HE. The White Paper clearly specified that the state, under the office of the Minister of Education, was at the head of the hierarchy of authority. The state could intervene to ensure that the transformation agenda was achieved or to prevent mismanagement and ensure public accountability (Hall & Symes, 2005). In this regard, transformation was characterised as an ethos to forge a new democratic culture and undo race-based separation in HEIs (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007).

2.2.5 Higher Education Act of 1997

The Higher Education Act of 1997 represents a greater commitment to HE transformation in South Africa. The Act has since been amended, with the most recent amendment being in 2010. The Act constituted NCHE as an independent statutory body to oversee quality assurance across HEIs and ensure the three Es of equity, effectiveness and efficiency. It nullified Apartheid-era legislation, which had divided HE based on race and ethnicity. It also shifted HE away from provincial competencies towards the current national competency (Akala, 2016). This Act also led to the formulation of the Higher Education Quality Committee, which was set up to monitor and regulate the quality of all HE programmes, primarily by accreditation (Le Grange, 2009). The Higher Education Act of 1997 provided a legal basis for HEIs. Additionally, the Act gave university bodies the authority to perform functions such as determining entrance requirements for programmes, the number of students to be admitted to a particular programme and the manner of selection (Jansen, 2004). HEIs have used the Act to determine various affirmative action clusters, such as gender, in admission policies. Subsequently, the Act led to closures, mergers, funding changes, the establishment of university councils, language policies and the formulation of public and private universities (Higher Education Act 1997; CHE, 2004).

2.2.6 National Student Financial Aid Scheme Act of 1999

An immediate concern was the need to improve access to HE for more people by means of student financial aid. The provision of financial aid was viewed as a tool to help students in need of financial support to gain access to equal opportunities to HE. It was also intended to irradicate the racial inequalities that characterised enrolment in HE systems. The Tertiary Education Fund of South Africa (TEFSA) had been put in place in 1991 to provide financial aid to historically disadvantaged students (De Villiers, 2017). After independence, TEFSA worked more closely with government, resulting in the formulation of a national financial scheme that TEFSA then

managed. In 1999, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) Act was passed, converting TEFSA into a statutory body called NSFAS. NSFAS was classified as a government agency to oversee the granting of bursaries and loans to students in need of financial support, with the intention of recouping these loans when the students secured employment. Furthermore, NSFAS engages in fundraising initiatives in all public universities, as well as vocational education and training colleges.

From our study interviews, we note that most students from communities that have been marginalised continue to benefit significantly from NFSAS. The fund is intended to cover their tuition, accommodation, subsistence and transport costs. Some students argue that the money is not enough. However, one institutional leader noted that students often use the money to support their families back home due to their socio-economic circumstances. Study findings show that most students (81.7 per cent) viewed their financial situation as being poor or very poor.

—

Yes, NFSAS covers everything. Accommodation, tuition and a good allowance as well.

(Student 11)

—

I get transport allowance from NSFAS and food allowance also.

(Student 13)

—

You see students going home and that is right outside the gate here. They buy those big, sealed packets of cool drinks, for instance. They can't even carry them. Things like that. And do you know what? These students don't have food to eat here, but they still believe they must also support the family at home.

(Leader B)

2.2.7 The National Plan for Higher Education of 2001

The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE), adopted in 2001, presents an agenda for HE restructuring in South Africa. NPHE provides an implementation framework to enable the attainment of policy goals in accordance with the transformation of HE agenda, which was discussed in Education White Paper 3 (Waghid, 2003). CHE proposed the reconfiguration of the HE system by altering the institutional mandates of HEIs. It further implemented the reconfiguration of institutional mandates by means of a regulatory policy and a set of criteria based on knowledge generation and the transmission of knowledge, generated by HE, to students and other consumers of knowledge for greater good of society role of HE (Essop, 2020). NPHE (2001) puts forward strategies aimed at 'access as participation' and 'access with success'. The latter concerns specific strategies, such as the funding of institutional academic development (AD) programmes, which improve the quality of education to provide better quality- highly qualified and Better prepared incoming students and financial aid schemes (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007).

The National Plan was intended to provide a framework for HE that would respond to the developmental needs of South Africa in the 21st century, that is, to develop a workforce that would meet these needs (Akala, 2016). NPHE led to the restructuring of the HE system, which had previously differentiated students by characteristics such as race and ethnicity.

2.2.8 Language policy The National Language Policy Framework in South Africa (2002)

Language policy legislation was preceded by investigations carried out by CHE. The main concern was to develop a multilingual learning environment, as access to HE favoured students able to carry out their studies in English (Van der Walt, 2004). Language is outlined as a barrier to access and success in HE, in the sense that African and other languages have not developed into scientific languages (Van der Walt, 2004). It has been argued that the languages have not developed to the level that they can be used as languages of instruction in all disciplines. Additionally, most students pursuing HE are not completely proficient in either English or Afrikaans.

This is dependent on where students are positioned in South Africa geographically (Foley, 2004). A citizen's right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions is enshrined In Section 3.1.2 of the policy. In 2012, the Ministerial Advisory Panel on the Development of African Languages in Higher Education was founded. Its aim was to produce a report on the use of African languages as the medium of instruction (The National Language Policy Framework in South Africa, 2002). The objective of this report was to foster the use of official languages in HEIs. Unfortunately, this objective has not been met in all HEIs and English is still the dominant language (Akala, 2023).

In summary, although the policies discussed above have contributed immensely to transforming the South African education landscape, the language of instruction and academic writing remains an area of contention in HE. Thus, calls to decolonialise HE include rethinking the language of instruction. Most students whose home language is not English struggle to engage productively with reading course materials and academic writing. The fluidity of intersecting rurality, language and transitioning to HE is a reality faced by most HE students in South Africa. One institutional leader described their students' frustration.

Suddenly, as a new student, you start Education 1 and they're giving you all kinds of papers to read. You ask yourself, what is this journal article and the kind of English it's using? Even the lecturer is speaking a type of English you do not recognise. It's not the kind of English you used in school. You say to yourself, I would like some hope. Students are saying, I do not even know what pedagogy means. They cry quietly to themselves.

(Leader A)

3 Gender inequality, barriers and challenges in South African higher education

3.1 Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 for 2030 of achieving gender equality and enabling all women and girls is crucial to this study. Gender inequality in education was nurtured by formal and informal curricula, which promoted dominant views of stereotypical masculinity and femininity. The colonial and missionary education systems focused on domesticity, subservience and maintaining societal order 'to produce good Christian wives and mothers' (Akala, 2016, 2018). Black women were trained to be good wives and home-keepers, learning sewing, housekeeping and religious studies. During the Apartheid era, education for Black women became more segregated and gendered. The Bantu education framework did not prepare Black women to achieve prestigious positions in society but rather led to an acceptance of the status quo in subordinate positions for Whites and White men in particular(Akala, 2018). Bantu education system did not prepare Black women for participation in all areas of society. Rather, it entrenched segregation, gendered roles and sexism. Women were mostly concentrated in fields characterised as 'feminine', which were associated with the traditional maternal roles of nurturing and caring. Furthermore, in the 1960s, Black women comprised only 13.3 per cent of the total enrolment figures for Black students in HE. These participation rates marginally increased to 18.9 per cent by 1970 and 21.6 per cent in 1975, at which time most Black female students were enrolled on nursing and paramedic courses (Akala & Divala, 2016).

Post-1994, increasing numbers of women have entered HE in South Africa. Notably, by 2002, female students accounted for 54 per cent of total university enrolment. Nevertheless, it can be argued that, after 2001, a new, complex system of inequality emerged based on race and class, which continues to negatively affect students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, predominantly women and Black people (Ndebele, 2010). Arguably, post-1994 legislation has not yet achieved much in terms of overcoming gender discrimination and improving gender relations. For example, power structures have not yet been sufficiently transformed to enable women to hold senior roles in organisations. There is still an under-representation of women in executive and senior management positions in South African universities despite the implementation of progressive policies. (Romahai, 2019)

Zulu (2003) argues that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators act as barriers for women's career advancement in academia. Extrinsic factors concern the organisational setting, namely the distribution of women within positions and the power associated with them. Intrinsic factors relate to socialisation and cultural patterns related to femininity. Other factors include male domination, self-objectification, discrimination and the effect of women taking on family responsibilities, such as child rearing (Akala, 2016).

Notably, women comprise 19 per cent of vice-chancellor positions in South Africa (Moodly & Toni, 2019). Furthermore, women comprise 43 per cent of permanent academic staff across HEIs in South Africa. The equality gap is further widened in terms of senior academic positions, whereby 18.5 per cent of women are professors. However, figure 3 below shows that female employees comprise 54.4 per cent of total permanent staff, although most work in the administration and services categories Conversely, there are 542 more men than women employed as teaching and research staff, with a significant gender disparity among employees identifying as African (1,347 more men than women) (DHET, 2021). The number of women recognised by the National Research Foundation- Women who publish in DHET accredited journals that attract subsidy rose from 18 per cent to 29 per cent in 2011; men still publish more journal articles than women and the disparity between genders is determined by discipline (Shober, 2014).

Figure 3. Number of permanent staff in public higher education institutions, by ethnicity, staff category and gender, 2021
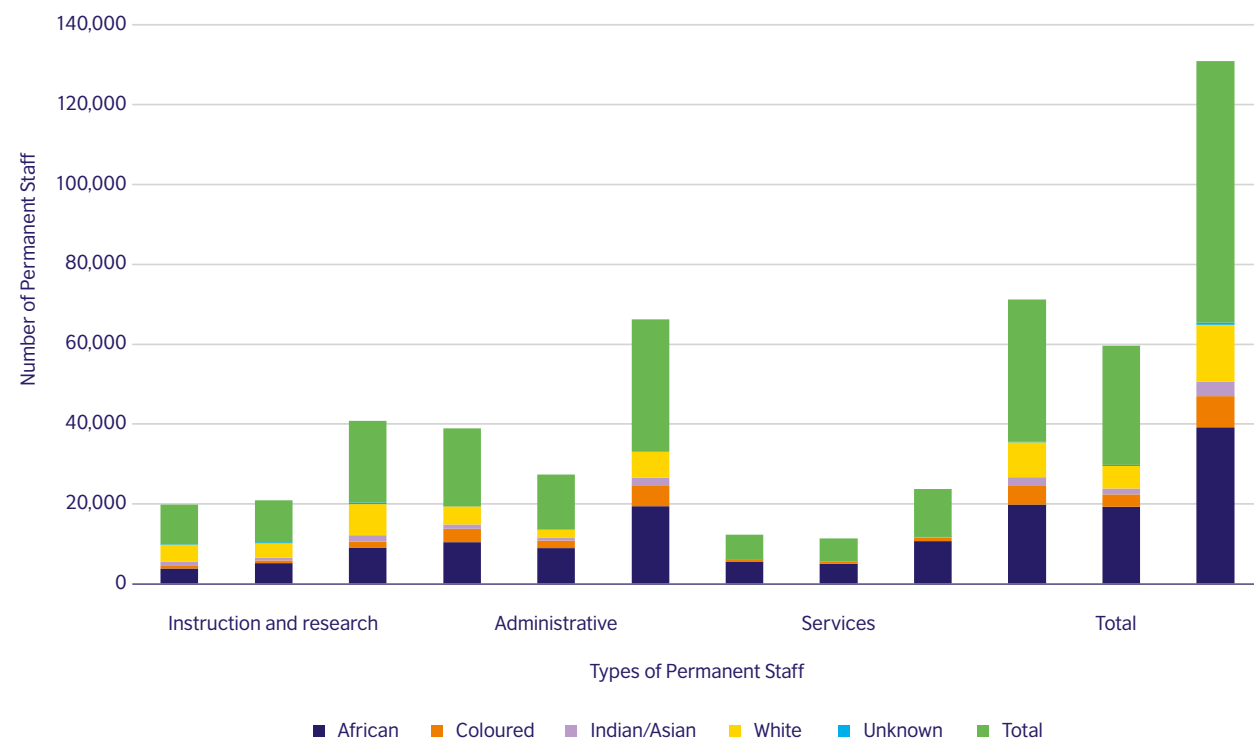
Source: Department of Higher Education and Training (2021)

Our study data aligns with the literature in terms of descriptions of skewed power relations and the undermining of female leaders (Akala, 2018). One female institutional leader described the experience of being overlooked for a head of department position despite being appropriately qualified, and commented on the disparity in remuneration between men and women.

The highest-level qualification among the staff was a master's degree held by one of the men. There were no female heads of department, only men. It's not about qualifications, nor about who does the work. It's about who the men are. You know, if you play rugby, then you're a big guy.

A male colleague's salary slip landed in my office. He came in and he sat with me. We were chatting and having coffee. He opened the salary slip. I said, 'I suppose that's a big one'. I found out he was earning R100,000 a year more than me.

Some men want to force women out. I hear these guys, these union guys; you know how they go around.

(Leader 3)

3.2 Gender, access and financing in HE

Enrolment information reveals that the female participation rate in HE has increased from 18 per cent to 24 per cent since 1999 when gender parity was achieved- an increase from 1999- 18% to 24%- 2005- 2017. This is higher than the overall participation rate during the period between 2005 and 2017 (Essop, 2020). From 1993 to 2017, the number of female HE students rose from 34 per cent of the total number of students to 58.5 per cent, which demonstrates an improvement in gender equity. Figure 4 shows the growth in enrolment rates for female and male students between 2015 and 2020. This demonstrates a small increase in male participation and a higher increase in female participation. This increase may be partially attributed to transformation policies, such as affirmative action (Akala, 2023). Women's access to HE has been helped by funding interventions from NSFAS. Most NSFAS recipients between 2000 and 2012 were women, with their share of funding rising from 56 per cent to 60 per cent over this period (Pillay et.al. 2021. Furthermore, the concentration of these beneficiaries was within the highest and the lowest quartile of award sizes (Bhorat et al., 2018, 2021).

Figure 4. Enrolment rates by gender, 2015–2020
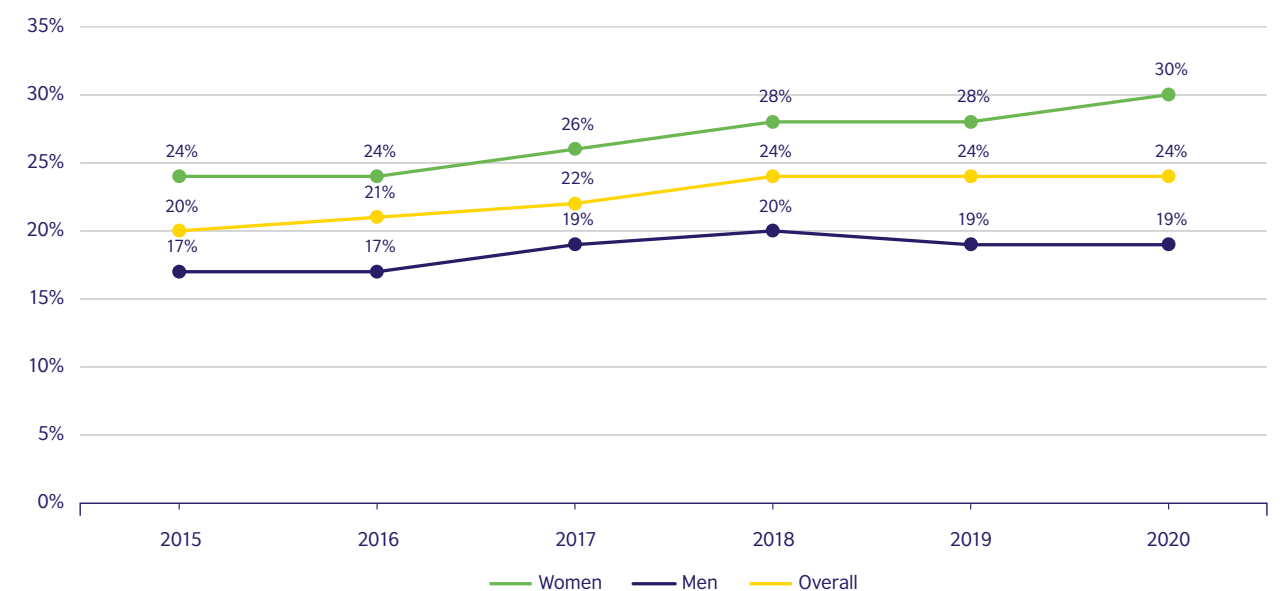
Source: Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2020)

A Gender Parity Index of 1.6 is testimony to South Africa's efforts to achieve an inclusive HE system (Akala, 2023). Additional data shows that first-time female students performed better than first-time male students in terms of obtaining qualifications in the shortest possible time. However, data on postgraduate studies is not so encouraging. There is an historical gender imbalance in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. This can be traced back to the Apartheid era, when Black people were denied opportunities to study science-related subjects and courses (Akala & Divala, 2016). The imbalance is caused by different forms of discrimination- race being the predominant factor. Female students still tend to gravitate towards courses that are considered re 'feminine' than 'masculine' (Akala, 2018). Thus, there are inequalities in relation to attendance and participation rates. Female students are still under-represented in SET fields-Science Engineering and Technology- SET which provide access to more highly paid employment.

On a positive note, almost two thirds (63.8 per cent) of graduates were women while just over one third (36.2 per cent) were men. The number of female graduates exceeded the number of male graduates for all types of qualification with the exception of doctoral degrees and STEM subjects (DHET, 2023a). Furthermore, the data indicates that most female students graduated in humanities and education-related subjects. However, for students with disabilities, the right to HE has not been fully realised. This may be attributed to a variety of factors including the bureaucratisation of the application process, cuts in disability funding, means-testing requirements and a lack of accessible buildings (Vincent & Chiwandire, 2017).

In line with the literature (Stats SA (2024), our findings indicate that women can find male-dominated fields toxic or hostile.

> **In science and maths, the narrative has not changed, right? If you go to a faculty like engineering, it's male-dominated. The women there will talk about ostracization, such as being talked down or looked down upon. Some of these perennial gender stereotypes and behaviours have not shifted much, you know? So, survival for women in those spheres is still a battle. And, I speak from the viewpoint of being a female leader. Sadly, there are battles you have to navigate between men and women.**
>
> **(Leader A)**

3.3 Enabling gender-related policies

Notable gender-related policies include the Women's Charter (1954), which aimed to improve gender equality in society. The charter observed that South African women had endured marginalisation, regardless of race, ethnicity or religion. It stressed the importance of women's unity in winning the battle against oppressive systems (Akala, 2016). Post-Apartheid policies aimed to achieve greater gender equality. The first of these was the 1996 Bill of Rights, in which gender-equality legislation was introduced to all sectors of society, including HE. This led to the formulation of many bodies, commissions and Acts to spearhead equity, equality and transformation initiatives (Zulu, 2003).

The National Gender Machinery was established in 1997, comprising the Office on the Status of Women (OSW), the Commission on Gender Equality and the Parliamentary Joint Monitoring Committee on the Improvement of the Quality of Life and Status of Women, among other gender-centred initiatives. Further government initiatives, which aimed to ensure that HEIs were more inclusive and equitable were also adopted (Mabokela & Mawila, 2004). The OSW defined gender equity as the fair and just distribution of resources and opportunities across gender lines. It developed the National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality (2000). which guides gender policy in South Africa. This policy document prescribes the values and principles of public- and private-sector gender equality and quotas for integration into policies, practices and programmes. The legislation strives for 50 per cent female representation on the executive boards of all organisations.

In 1996, the Gender Equity Task Team was appointed to investigate gender inequality in HE. It found that women's participation in education was at its lowest point during the Apartheid era (Akala and Divala,

2016). Gender equity was considered in all areas of education, including enrolments, competition, course choices and stereotypes in curricula (Akala, 2016). Other pieces of legislation associated with overcoming gender inequality, such as a gender curriculum group to review proposed curricula and ombudsmen to function as gender watchdogs, were also implemented (Higgs et al., 2004).

The 2013 White Paper on Post-School Education and Training recognised the impact of patriarchal norms in keeping women in subordinate positions both within and beyond the education system (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). The Ministerial Report on Transformation (Department of Education, 2008, Walker, 2018) also noted that sexual harassment and gender discrimination were endemic in HE (Walker, 2018). Due to the positive policies enacted post-1994, the South African HE landscape has transformed significantly. More Black students in general and Black women in particular are currently- 2019/2020 enrolled in HE (Department of Higher Education, 2021). Figure 5 confirms this to be the case. proposed curricula and ombudsmen to function as gender watchdogs, were also implemented (Higgs et al., 2004).

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Figure 5. Distribution of survey respondents by gender
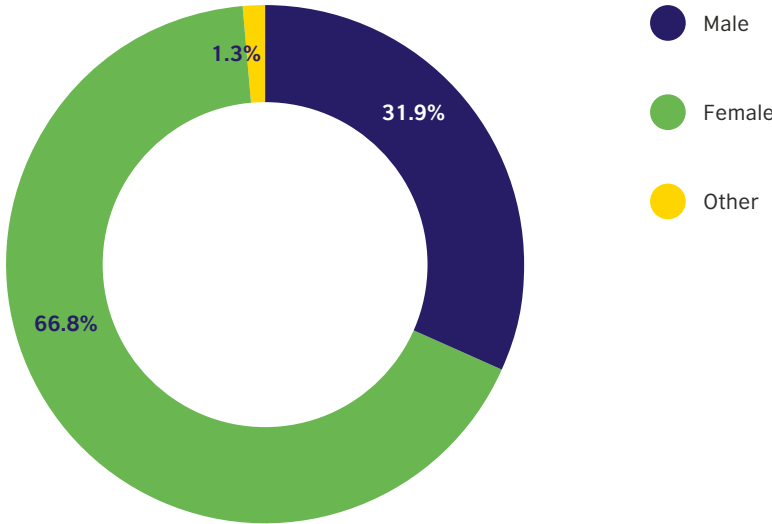
Source: Authors' own diagram

We observe a similar pattern in our survey data, which confirms that there are more women in HE than men. This finding is further supported by the following extracts.

> **The government has succeeded by having more women than men in HE.**
>
> **(Student 1)**

> **Management only takes women. They should balance genders and cultures on campus. They should also balance achievement.**
>
> **(Student 2)**

> **Management accepts more women than men. But if there are more women than men applying, what are they supposed to do? And what if women have better APS scores- Admission Point Score than the men who have applied? What are they supposed to do because they accept applicants based on the level of qualification?**
>
> **(Student 3)**

Although there are more women than men in HE, it is concerning that some courses taken by female students, such as teaching, are still viewed as 'feminine'. This entrenches the traditional gendered stereotype of women being responsible for caring and nurturing. Institutional leaders commented on this conceptualisation.

—

I've mentioned that education is a very feminised profession. So, we're always biased in terms of numbers, with the stronger skew towards female students

(Leader A)

—

In the class I teach, the majority of the students are women and most of them are Black women and women of colour. I think this is because our vice-chancellor is very aware of equity, very much so.

(Leader C)

One female student discussed a negative experience of 'progressive' gender policies in relation to pregnancy.

—

They say that they do not cater for pregnancy, so, if you're pregnant, you cannot use the university clinic. You have to go outside to the hospital or a private doctor. And when you're seven months pregnant, you have to go home.

(Student 11)

We argue that this practice is discriminatory and has implications for female students' health and studies.

On a positive note, the teaching profession is undergoing change, especially in the training of foundation-phase teachers (focusing on Grades 1-3, 7-9 years of age on average) who are traditionally women. One participating institution is challenging this narrative. More young men are applying for foundation-phase training, but society has not yet accepted this change. According to a male participant, being moved to intermediate-phase-10-13 years on average training is unfair and inconsiderate.

—

We have a government that's pushing a feminist agenda at the expense of us men. We obtain posts that are designed for us but are not what we want. You've been hearing about the foundation phase. They will tell you straight that this post is designed for female teachers because a women is more caring and better placed to handle the foundation phase than us men.

(A male participant) Student 12

3.4 Visibility and awareness of gender policies

Our study findings suggest that although South African HE has progressive policies that aim to overcome past and current injustices, most students are unaware of these policies. In addition, the responses to perception-related questions show that most student participants have experienced neither gender bias nor gender-related violence. Meanwhile, a majority of student participants neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that gender inequality concerns were being adequately tackled.

Interestingly, 73 per cent of student participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that their institutions have support units to which they could report mistreatment or gender discrimination. This particular finding contrasts with the views of institutional leaders who noted that HEIs have several support structures in place to handle such cases. These support structures include the Transformation Office, the Gender Equality Office (GEO), the Dean of Students' Office, the Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU), the Office of the Psychologist, the Student Representative Council (SRC), the Legal Office and the Office of the Ombudsman. These bodies deal with a variety of concerns that affect student life. Institutional leaders suggested that this information is readily available on university websites, and that the orientation week provides such information to students. This perception gap between students and institutional leaders shows that although these offices exist, only a few students are aware of them. Thus, universities need to introduce measures to enable greater visibility and engagement. Workshops and seminars would be ways of developing awareness.

One student participant confirmed that indeed universities have various policies and structures: that address gender related discrimination

—

Just like any other university, we have what is called the Student Representative Council. So, the university then has the Minister of Gender and People Living with Disabilities. So, I think if students have concerns, there is a person that can be contacted with anything related to gender.

(Student 5)

Gender policies are silent or implicit on the topics of socio-cultural and religious rights.

—

There are apparently some provinces where a specific time in the year is set aside a provision for them when they receive an ancestral calling that requires them to take time to go for training) so that it does not clash with exams or interrupt the school year. There are other places where they say I've just had a calling- An ancestral call for spiritual assignments (being a traditional doctor- Sangoma) and I have to go now and I cannot continue my studies. And so, the university still needs to tighten up on this kind of issue- calling of students.

(Leader A)

Table 2. Comparing perception statements by gender

Gender analysis statements	Gender	Number	Mean rank	Sum of ranks
Satisfaction with institution/learning environment	Male	96	163.16	15,663.00
	Female	203	143.78	29,187.00
Training in the institution helped students develop skills and abilities	Male	94	151.66	14,256.00
	Female	197	143.30	28,230.00
Analysis of gender inequality issues	Male	93	147.89	13,754.00
	Female	194	142.13	27,574.00
Satisfaction with support services	Male	91	142.48	12,966.00
	Female	190	140.29	26,655.00
Gender-based inequalities in accessing entrepreneurship opportunities	Male	91	138.17	12,573.50
	Female	190	142.36	27,047.50
Gender impact in accessing opportunities that can strengthen students' employability	Male	91	143.31	13,041.50
	Female	190	139.89	26,579.50
Issues and challenges faced by students / young women and men in the context of the institution	Male	89	131.17	11,674.00
	Female	190	144.14	27,386.00
Importance of building gender equality in the institution	Male	89	128.49	11,436.00

Source: Authors' own table

Table 2 shows a comparison of perception statements by gender. More women than men responded to statements about gender equality and institutional support policies and practices. Most statements yielded neutral or satisfied responses, except for those about the support services offered by institutions. Most student participants agreed with the statement indicating they were satisfied with support services, including library support services, counselling services, support for female students and people with disabilities, and the registrar's office. This is the tension in data, at times students gave contrary statements. This positive result may be attributed to the caring environments provided by HEIs to boost access with success (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007).

Most student participants demonstrated perceptions of neutrality or satisfaction and limited awareness of policies and support systems. Meanwhile, institutional leaders noted that most students may not be aware of available resources and policies that aim to support them, for example, sexual misconduct policies, strategic policies to support women and funding policies. They attributed this to limited understanding and engagement, arguing that as some students do not read their course materials thoroughly, they are highly unlikely to read policy documents.

> **Visibility is being able to engage with the policy from a level of understanding to a level of implementation and being able to say, OK, based on the understanding and implementation where are we in terms of implementation?**
>
> **(Leader 2)- B**

> **These policies are there; they are visible; they are provided during first-year orientation, which is a very good programme.**

Students learn about the support and policies available when they encounter a particular challenge.

> **I think no matter how visible the policies are, they only become relevant when you have that particular experience and then suddenly you say, 'Oh, there is a plagiarism and academic integrity policy. They told me about it, but I did not really know the deeper meaning of this thing until I made a mess and somebody had to point it out to me.'**
>
> **(Leader A)**

Table 3 shows that although most student participants perceived that institutions offer conducive teaching and learning environments, they were dissatisfied with some aspects of the learning environment, such as a lack of financial support for small entrepreneurial activities (57.5 per cent of respondents). This suggests that institutions could do more to support students interested in entrepreneurship because both male and female students face financial constraints, they require support from their institutions

Another area of discontent concerns timetabling that does not favour female students who tend to worry about their safety and security more than male students according to Leader A. South Africa is known for high levels of crime and gender-based violence. When classes are scheduled late in the evening, many female students are exposed to potential danger and crime.

> **What we see increasingly now is the impact of our timetabling. Most of our postgraduate students are part-time. And they're afraid to leave classes at 20.00 or 21.00. They are worried about becoming targets of violence and crime. We'll have to rethink the ways of offering education in a climate that is crime-ridden. Everyone worries about the safety of our students.**
>
> **(Leader A)**

Participants also cited overcrowding in lecture theatres as a challenge for some courses with large classes. Students have to arrive at the venue early or attend the lesson outside the venue.- standing outside of the venue- and listening to the lecturer (they do not the comfort of seating/writing This is particularly disturbing because the comfort of the learning venue contributes to productive learning. Thus, overcrowding affects male and female students equally. It is the idea of finding alternative means of listening to the lecturer that might be problematic to the female students; sitting on the floor.

—
Having lots of students means they cannot all fit in the venue, and we find that some students are outside. As a result, this often leads to poor lecture management. So, to be accommodated in the venue, you must be very early.

(Student 13)

Table 3. Institutional learning environment

Aspects of institutional learning environment	Dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied	Mean
Overall learning environment	4.4%	11.4%	60.7%	23.5%	3.03
Guidance and support from your department	6.4%	18.2%	51.7%	23.6%	2.93
Relevance of the courses offered	2.4%	12.9%	50.5%	34.2%	3.17
Overall satisfaction with the relevance of the programme to the labour market	9.0%	15.4%	51.3%	24.4%	2.91
Availability of learning facilities such as lecture rooms, computers and library	7.9%	13.1%	42.3%	36.8%	3.08
Professional relationship with your lecturers	4.1%	11.7%	49.1%	35.1%	3.15
Professional relationships with students and support staff	1.7%	9.0%	57.4%	31.8%	3.19
Adequacy of opportunities for entrepreneurship	13.1%	30.3%	44.9%	11.6%	2.55
Adequacy of financial support for your studies	17.7%	23.2%	42.3%	16.7%	2.58
Support (including financial) for establishing small entrepreneurship activities	26.5%	30.8%	35.2%	7.5%	2.24
Opportunities to share relevant experiences with students from other universities	25.7%	32.0%	31.6%	10.7%	2.27
Support to participate in relevant seminars and workshops	12.7%	19.6%	48.4%	19.3%	2.74
Networking opportunities with industry / the private sector	21.6%	27.8%	35.5%	15.1%	2.44
Opportunities to participate in work-study and internships	20.5%	28.0%	36.0%	15.5%	2.47
Gender inclusivity in the campus environment	6.5%	9.7%	51.6%	32.1%	3.09
Access to a stable internet connection	13.0%	17.3%	38.7%	31.0%	2.88
Intellectual environment of your department	5.6%	10.9%	54.6%	28.9%	3.07
Access to funding opportunities and sources	16.8%	26.3%	38.6%	18.2%	2.58
Access to information on possible employment opportunities	27.8%	11.9%	39.2%	21.1%	2.54
Training on how to navigate the world of work	16.5%	30.6%	37.8%	15.1%	2.51
Quality of accommodation facilities on campus	14.8%	21.3%	43.0%	20.9%	2.70

3.5 Employability policies, opportunities, enablers and challenges

3.5.1 Employment Equity Act of 1997 and affirmative action

Education White Paper 3 made provisions for the introduction of affirmative action quotas in HE based on race, gender and disability to drive transformation (Akala, 2023). The Employment Equity Act (EEA) of 1998 has been a conduit of affirmative action not only in the economy but also in other parts of society in which people had experienced marginalisation due to the impact of earlier policies. The EEA sought to ensure equitable representation in all occupational categories and at all workforce levels (Moodly & Toni, 2019). It aimed to achieve equity in the workplace by promoting equal opportunities, the fair treatment of workers and affirmative action measures for designated groups (Hay & Wilkinson, 2002). Affirmative action has provided opportunities to students from marginalised groups to enter courses such as medicine or engineering with lower points-entry points into the course than other students (Akala, 2023). For instance, Wits and the University of Cape Town (UCT) have introduced quota systems to provide opportunities for Black and female students who were historically disadvantaged (Akala, 2019). UCT, which is characterised as an historically White university, applies demographic quotas to enable more students who identify as African or Coloured people to study at its medical school (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). However, the policies have not levelled the playground, more women are employed in industries that require soft skills as compared to men, thus perpetuating the nurturing and caring roles of women (Akala and Divala, 2016)

3.5.2 General graduate employability

Employers have raised concerns about the employability of recent graduates, claiming that there are insufficient links between institutional and workplace learning (Pitan & Muller, 2020). A major concern in the South African employment market is the lack of soft skills - personal attributes and interpersonal abilities that enable individuals to interact effectively and harmoniously with others. communication among recent graduates. Vezi-Magigaba & Utete (2023) argue that South African graduates are plagued by unemployability rather than unemployment. Historically, only hard skills- often mastered through education or specific training. i.e. finance were considered during the recruitment process. However, following recent technological advancements, there has been a shift towards a demand for soft skills to manage unplanned and rapid transitions in the workplace. While traditional universities focus on academic curricula, universities of technology provide curricula centred on vocational learning to prepare skilled and work-ready graduates for various positions in industry and commerce.

The curricula of universities of technology are distinguished by their compulsory work-integrated learning (WIL) components. The implementation of WIL is costly, but it is associated with elevating the employability of graduates (Jacobs & Dzansi, 2015). There has been collaboration among civil society, employers and communities to promote WIL and ensure graduate employability. This collaboration has been linked to curricula by means of teaching, learning and research activities. Such initiatives include service, learning, -an educational approach that combines academic learning with community service. Examples- health initiatives, tutoring projects, civic engagements; cooperative education programmes and community-based research, in addition to engagement with the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) to develop the skills

needed within each sector (DHET, 2023b). SETAs were established under the Skills Development Act of 1998 to enable the implementation of Sector Skills Plans and contribute to the National Skills Development Strategy (DHET, 2023a). Under the NPHE framework, SETAs have been identified as important bodies that focus on supporting skills development and industry engagement. They are evaluated by the National Skills Authority. Additionally, post-school education and training funding frameworks such as the Skills Development Levy will be repurposed for each sector to enable the development of work-based learning, learnerships (a structured training program that combines theoretical learning with practical work experience. It is aimed at providing individuals with skills and knowledge for employability) and WIL platforms (DHET, 2023c).

Our interview data is aligned with findings in the literature. Institutional leaders and students on education degrees (Bachelor of Education) confirmed that they obtain employment in their chosen field by means of government recruitment. As a result, some students from other courses, such as those on Bachelor of Commerce programmes, have opted to join the teaching profession by enrolling in Postgraduate Certificate in Education programmes.

In a general sense, we know that graduate unemployment in the world, not just in this country, is escalating, right? I think in the School of Education, and in education more generally, we have a very strong market for our graduates. So, you will see that students are obtaining employment by means of the government. The Department of Education has a recruitment office, so our students can apply to the department and be placed in different schools.

(Leader B)

I chose this [education] course due to social-economic difficulties. I could see the demand in the market. I started doing a Bachelor of Commerce and Accounting course and then looked at market demand. That's when I changed direction.

(Student 10)

It is clear that those studying education degrees have a better chance of employability in the South African context. One institutional leader said that they prepare their students very well, and that the teaching profession values their skills. Links with recruitment consultants also help with job placements. Finally, institutions are in touch with industry and understand what skills are required. This understanding helps institutional leaders decide which courses to discontinue if markets are saturated.

3.5.3 Women and entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship has been posited (Okeke-Uzodike et al., 2018). as a way to improve women's economic outcomes. However, South African women tend to be more involved in business activities at the micro level in areas such as crafts, selling goods informally, personal services and the retail sector. Furthermore, female entrepreneurs face marginalisation in thriving sectors such as mining, energy, transport, coordination- organized arrangement and management of activities to ensure they work together effectively. and construction (Okeke-Uzodike et al., 2018). The economic and social standing of women remains a barrier to their participation in entrepreneurship. Moreover, men are more likely to be entrepreneurs than women, although women are more attracted to the flexibility and autonomy of a career in entrepreneurship given their traditional gendered roles of home-keeping and child-rearing (Farrington et al., 2012).

Policies introduced by the South African government since the onset of democracy have sought to enable women's economic empowerment. These policies include the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and South Africa's National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality. They have been implemented to encourage the participation and financial inclusion of women. These policy documents form part of the Women's Financial Inclusion Framework, which seeks to accelerate women's socio-economic inclusion in both public and private sectors (Commission for Gender Equality, 2020). In 2007, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) launched the Strategic Framework on Gender and Women's Economic Development. This strategy aimed to encourage entrepreneurship among women by means of initiatives such as the Establishment of a national women's fund, the mobilisation and strengthening of South African women in business, and entrepreneurial education, training and development (Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, 2015). DTI also provides financial assistance and incentive programmes to women by means of the Small Enterprise Development Agency Technology Programme, the Support Programme for Industrial Innovation, the Technology and Human Resources for Industry Programme, and the Isivande Women's Fund.

Entrepreneurship has been identified as one of the main pillars of HE. Professor Mayekiso of UMP argues that entrepreneurship is a beacon of hope and a catalyst for economic growth and development (University of Mpumalanga, 2023). It offers invaluable resources and guidance to aspiring entrepreneurs regionally. UMP positions itself as an engaged university, and it places great value on partnerships, collaborations, links and networks. UMP aims to reduce unemployment levels by means of entrepreneurship skills development and small-business commercialisation. UMP's entrepreneurship programme stands out because of the excellent networking opportunities and exposure it offers to students. For instance, UMP students won the Best Pitch Award at the Entrepreneurship Summit held at the Asia Pacific University of Technology & Innovation in Malaysia.

(https://www.ump.ac.za/News-and-Events/ News/2023/UMP-OFFICIALLY-OPENS-THE-CENTRE-FOR-ENTREPRENEURSH).

Wits hosts an entrepreneurship clinic that aims to develop and mentor young, aspiring entrepreneurs who will be the future job creators in South Africa. The University of KwaZulu-Natal's InQubate runs ENSPIRE, an entrepreneurship skills programme that aims to equip the university's students with practical entrepreneurial skills. This innovative programme intends to convert students' vibrant entrepreneurial determination into sustainable viable businesses (About Enspire – UKZN InQube. ENSPIRE supports and mentors new and experienced student entrepreneurs. The University of Venda (UNIVEN) and UNISA have entrepreneurship centres that help incubate student businesses.

Although universities have established entrepreneurship centres, Figure 6 shows that most students in our study (82 per cent) are not involved in any entrepreneurship activities. The students we interviewed commented that they were aware of the entrepreneurship hubs or centres at their universities but had not visited them. This did not deter them from engaging in small businesses on campus or thinking of starting larger businesses on completion of their courses.

Figure 6. Respondents involved in entrepreneurship activities
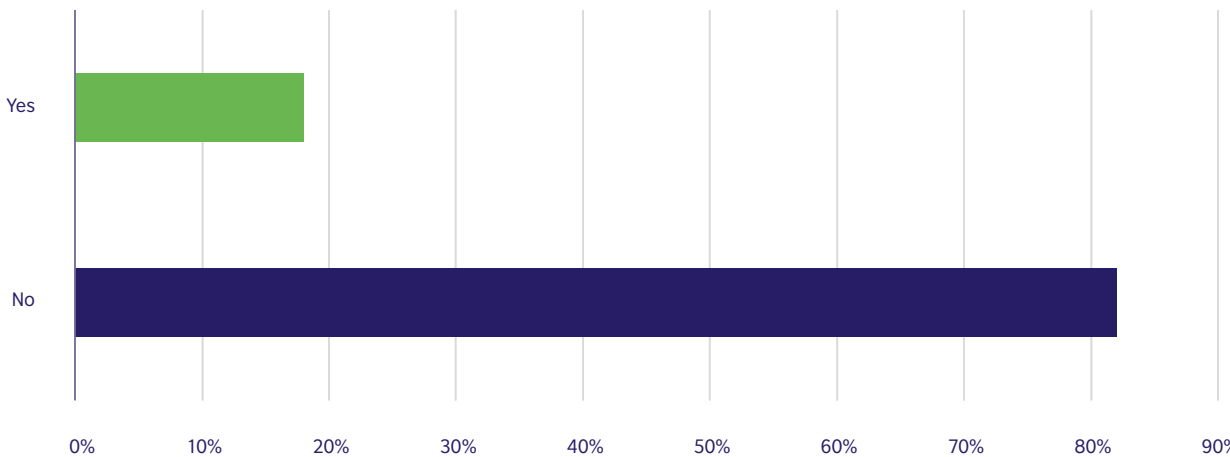
Source: Author's own chart based on survey data

According to our survey data (Table 4), economic stability plays a role in determining the extent to which students engage in entrepreneurship activities. Respondents who were involved in entrepreneurship indicated that they were financially secure (18.7 per cent), while those who were not involved classified their financial status as poor or very poor (81.3 per cent). This result strongly links involvement in entrepreneurship to financial security.

The figure shows that majority of students 246 (81.7%) reported that they had not involved themselves in entrepreneurship with 55 (18.3%) of them reporting that they had involved themselves in entrepreneurship. It was further observed that students who said that they had never involved themselves in entrepreneurship rated their overall financial situation as poor or very poor however, a few students who rated their overall financial situation as good or excellent were found to have been involved with entrepreneurship. This implies that students who had involved themselves in entrepreneurship were financially safe/secure.

The students we interviewed confirmed that small-scale entrepreneurship activities were taking place on campus. Both female and male students reported running businesses such as tutoring, hairdressing, selling food and laundry services. Those offering tutorial services use online channels to reach their clients, who include learners from neighbouring communities. One institutional leader stated that opportunities are available in the medical field and in engineering and information and communication technology (ICT), where students are developing and patenting apps. The leader classified such ventures as innovations rather than entrepreneurship.

Some students had plans to venture into agriculture on completion of their courses. Both male and female students mentioned finance, data costs, stable internet connectivity, load shedding, water shedding-rationing of water and electricity due to scarcity in SA and climate change as possible impediments to the success of such businesses.

Our analysis reveals gender nuances. For example, female students were mainly interested in agriculture, food security and hairdressing businesses, while male students preferred tutoring and online businesses. Interestingly, one participant employs other students in a laundry business on campus during busy periods. The same students make and sell graduation gowns. These examples demonstrate the resourcefulness of students. With appropriate financial support and mentorship, these businesses can thrive and create employment opportunities for many people. The excerpts below provide examples of current and future businesses, reasons for starting a business and barriers to entrepreneurship ventures. Finance is cited as a major hindrance.

Table 4. Students' rating of their overall financial stability

			Involvement in entrepreneurship activities		Total
			Yes	No	
Students' rating of their overall financial situation	Very poor	n	5	31	36
		%	13.9%	86.1%	100.0%
	Poor	n	10	77	87
		%	11.5%	88.5%	100.0%
	Fair	n	28	91	119
		%	23.5%	76.5%	100.0%
	Good	n	11	36	47
		%	23.4%	76.6%	100.0%
	Excellent	n	1	11	12
		%	8.3%	91.7%	100.0%
Total		n	55	246	301
		%	18.3%	81.7%	100.0%

Source: adopted from Survey data

The businesses that I have in my mind include fishing, poultry, taxis, as well as building resorts. Those are the main businesses that I'm interested in. I've done my research into businesses that will make money when I need it. So, I'm interested in these businesses. However, I still love the qualification that I'm doing. I hope that if I happen to be working in that sector, I won't be working from 8.00 to 17.00, so that I can find time to pursue other opportunities.

(Student 7)

One business that I had in mind was offering tutorial services. We once ran a tutorial series but it did not work out. It did not last for a long time; we decided to close it down.

(Student 5)

In 2019, I dropped out because I become pregnant and then I had the baby. I have to do hairdressing so that my baby gets milk and food.

(Student 6)

One participant offered useful advice to those engaging in business opportunities.

One piece of advice I would give to any business, any start-up: you must always conduct a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis. If you cover all four areas, your business has a higher chance of succeeding.

(Student 8)

Table 5. Students' perceptions of whether training in their institution helped them to develop entrepreneurship skills and abilities

	Not at all	To a very small extent	To some extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	Mean
Understanding the current and emerging issues and challenges in your field	2.4%	4.1%	26.6%	36.9%	30.0%	2.88
Developing and applying theories, techniques, methods and tools to solve problems in your field	2.1%	2.4%	24.4%	41.2%	29.9%	2.95
Integrating existing knowledge across disciplinary boundaries and evaluating the limits of your knowledge and skills	1.4%	3.8%	24.1%	43.4%	27.2%	2.91
Selecting and using appropriate technology to assist and manage knowledge communication	2.1%	6.2%	22.3%	37.5%	32.0%	2.91
Thinking critically, analytically and creatively in your field	1.4%	4.5%	14.9%	36.0%	43.3%	3.15
Understanding the professional ethics and standards of your field	2.1%	5.2%	16.3%	35.6%	40.8%	3.08
Understanding the requirements of the labour market	7.6%	9.3%	25.8%	34.7%	22.7%	2.56
Developing business plans and grant proposals	15.1%	20.3%	24.7%	27.1%	12.7%	2.02
Identifying entrepreneurship opportunities	13.5%	22.2%	26.7%	24.7%	12.8%	2.01
Understanding how to fit in the competitive labour market	11.4%	21.4%	25.9%	28.6%	12.8%	2.10
Analysing, interpreting and synthesising data, and making informed conclusions and judgements	5.2%	11.7%	22.0%	36.1%	25.1%	2.64
Academic writing for presentations or professional publications	3.8%	5.2%	16.2%	33.3%	41.6%	3.04
Communicating clearly and making professional presentations	3.8%	4.8%	20.8%	36.3%	34.3%	2.92
Working collaboratively with interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary teams	5.9%	6.6%	24.1%	36.6%	26.9%	2.72
Evaluating and maximising entrepreneurship and employment opportunities	10.7%	13.8%	30.8%	31.5%	13.1%	2.22
Successfully engaging with prospective employers	12.5%	17.0%	27.7%	24.9%	18.0%	2.19
Developing leadership skills and the ability to overcome challenging situations	5.5%	11.0%	23.7%	34.0%	25.8%	2.64

Our analysis of whether students receive support to develop entrepreneurship skills and abilities (Table 5) shows that 48.9 per cent felt that the training they received from their institution helped them identify entrepreneurship opportunities to a very small extent or to some extent. This implies that although students receive training from their institutions, it does not help them to develop entrepreneurial skills and abilities. We can link finding this to the nature of HEIs in South Africa, which are traditional and formal in nature. They focus on producing graduates in the shortest possible time to attract government subsidies, as alluded to by some institutional leaders in our study. We acknowledge this dilemma and argue for the development of more opportunities for students to put innovation and entrepreneurship theory into practice.

It is noteworthy that although this has been the case, there is a move towards universities being more innovative, and hence the link between research and innovation is being made.

(Leader A)

There has been a late awakening that, as a university, we need to be innovative. But with innovation comes invention and the scope for entrepreneurship.

(Leader A)

You're more likely to see an engineering medical school, in the computer sciences, they are in a patent on maybe apps that are created or like designs and different kind of stuff- that there is innovation in faculties such as medicine and science and technology but they are not classified as entrepreneurship.

(Leader A)

This suggests that may be a lot of activity in the university that is being reported as science, technology or innovation rather than entrepreneurship.

3.6 Information and communication technologies

In the wake of changes in global trends and national development goals, there has been a notable shift towards digitalisation in South African HE. The first phase of this process took place between 1996 and 2000, during which time technology was used for computer-aided instruction. The second phase (2000–2006) was related to developing relevant ICT infrastructure, democratising information, policy development and research (Ng'ambi et al., 2016). In the third phase (2006–2010), HEIs introduced ICT to strategic planning, including discourse on access. Some view ICT as offering flexible and cost-effective access to education, which serves as an equaliser in economic development and transformation. The flexibility is good for women who have multiple responsibilities to balance. The application of educational technologies to teaching mathematical and academic literacy, and to managing large classes can help combat South Africa's educational challenges and thus improve the graduation rates of Black South Africans (Jaffer et al., 2007).

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 forced many institutions in South Africa to close as part of government measures aimed at containing the outbreak. Emergency remote teaching was introduced (Jili et al., 2021). This entailed the use of digital technologies such as computers, smartphones and social media sites. The pandemic highlighted the inequalities that existed within South African HEIs, notably the lack of infrastructure in HBUs at the time. Thus, it may be argued that the pandemic fast-tracked developments in e-learning. However, the digital divide still loomed large for both male and female Black South African students because of historical inequalities. Studies have highlighted that rural women lag behind in the digital arena because of barriers such as lack of computer skills, education and language skills, as well as digital usage patterns and unemployment (Mhlanga et al., 2022). Greater integration of ICT in universities requires equitable access to resources. This has not been possible in the past due to resource inequalities among students, particularly those from historically disadvantaged populations.

The literature demonstrates that most HEIs have made efforts to provide students with ICT support services (Jili et al., 2021).This was crucial for transitioning to online learning with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, some students still struggle with the availability and serviceability of computers in their student residences. The inadequacy heightens tensions and frustrations among students and leads to delays in the submission of assessments.

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We have one computer that works in our residence, and we have two floors: the ground floor and the first floor. We only have one computer per floor that's working. Other students don't have any.

(Student 11)

The pandemic also entrenched gendered norms. Most female students took on the responsibility of caring for families and sick relatives, which posed a major challenge to their studies and progression.

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You never quite escape those responsibilities. During the Covid-19 pandemic, when people were in lockdown and women were at home, women were still burdened with more of the caregiving. Female students would disappear for months on end, only for us to find out that they were busy trying to look after different family members, going from one room to another in hospital, trying to ensure that their family members were fed when they were sick.

(Leader A)

4   Pathways towards gender equality

4.1 Policy implementation

Table 6 shows participants' perceptions of how gender equality can be built into HEIs. Most participants believed it was important or very important to strengthen gender equality in identified areas. They confirmed the need to develop gender policies, establish support units that deal with gender discrimination, help students thrive in entrepreneurship activities, gain employability skills, create networking opportunities by means of collaborations and links, and combat gender inequalities. Mvunabandi et.al (2023) and Smart (2020) argue for the use of multiple pathways to achieve gender equality in South Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. The authors note the importance of targeted training in employability skills, career counselling for women, the development of sporting programmes, labour market assessments and using ICT to combat unemployment among young people. Despite the existence of progressive policies in South Africa, implementation remains challenging. Female students and students from impoverished communities struggle to access and succeed in HE. These groups of students also struggle to participate in entrepreneurship activities, for example, 81 per cent of participants indicated that they had not participated in any entrepreneurship activity (Chiramba and Ndofirepi, 2023).

Table 6. Participants' perceptions of building gender equality in their institution

Building gender equality in institutions	Don't know	Not important at all	Somewhat important	Important	Very important	Mean
My institution needs to put in place strong gender policies and frameworks	6.1%	7.1%	21.8%	35.7%	29.3%	3.75
My institution needs to establish support units for students in regard to gender-based discrimination	5.7%	7.1%	14.6%	34.9%	37.7%	3.92
Students need adequate preparation for the world of work	2.5%	1.4%	12.2%	30.5%	53.4%	4.31
Awareness of challenges facing female students needs to be improved	3.9%	5.3%	16.4%	34.2%	40.2%	4.01
My institution needs to put in place supportive gender-inclusive policies and more support for female students	4.6%	6.4%	20.6%	33.1%	35.2%	3.88
My institution needs to bring on board various stakeholders to support student access entrepreneurship and employability opportunities	3.9%	3.6%	11.1%	32.1%	49.3%	4.19
My institution needs to develop strong collaborations with industry, the private sector and the world of work	5.0%	2.9%	13.6%	28.6%	50.0%	4.16
My institution needs to create awareness focused on various stakeholders on the challenges facing female students in entrepreneurship and in accessing employability opportunities	4.3%	6.4%	17.4%	33.8%	38.1%	3.95
Funding mechanisms need to be put in place to support students in entrepreneurship	2.9%	3.6%	11.8%	32.1%	49.6%	4.22
Students need to form clubs to support their entrepreneurship activities	4.6%	3.2%	15.8%	32.6%	43.9%	4.08

According to the institutional leaders in our study, the implementation of gender-related policies is complex and unstable. Obstacles to implementation include limited resources, a lack of skilled people to appraise and implement the policies, and poor communication of changes to existing policies.

As Chair for Transformation, Internationalisation and Partnerships in the Faculty of Humanities, I can confirm that about 8 years ago the university made a conscious decision that we were going to support our female students, especially Black female students and those identifying as African, Indian or people of colour, to help them enrol into programmes.

(Leader B)

I personally think the policies are there and I think it's not something we should shy away from. But the problem is the implementation of the policies

(Leader B)

They are coming for the first time, so there's a combination of many issues that are not covered by policies

(Leader B)

I think we are biting off more than we can chew. We want to attract the rest of the world. We want to be seen as a Father Christmas figure. We want to be seen as nice. We want to make sure that students do not protest. We want to be everything to them, but the truth of the matter is we cannot. We have to pick a niche. If we are supporting first-time, first-generation students, then we must have the resources for them.

Implementation and take-up is a reflection of the microcosm. The university is a microcosm of the country. We have been lauded and celebrated in South Africa for having extremely liberal, progressive policies, but they fall flat at the point of implementation.

It is clear that universities need appropriate communication channels to relay major policies. They need to focus on priority deliverables and develop clear objectives that can be met without straining their limited resources.

4.2 Encouraging agency and resilience among students

The institutional leaders in our study noted the value of students' agency and autonomy. They believe that students should learn to do things for themselves, but in a way that does not cause harm. The following excerpts demonstrate various ways in which students can use their agency.

It's about how students find their own agency without ending up dead, beaten or bruised.

(Leader B)

Agency is an intrinsic passion. And when a passion is intrinsic, it's a losing battle to try to steer somebody to the water's edge and make them drink.

Oh, if the school does not give us food. So, who said that life is meant to be easy, especially as a student, and that the university has to give you everything?

(Leader B)

People who create innovation and are able to create successful pathways into the future are able to push outside the normal boundaries. So, I argue that the self-agency of each of our students is the starting point and the pathway for the future.

(Leader B)

But unless we get up and do stuff by ourselves, things will not get done.

(Leader A)

Master's students who come from a very staunch Muslim background and even the topic that she needed to research.

(Leader A)

The female student was so afraid that they could not do it and that if they were to ask those questions, there would be a backlash. They could not interview women because the women would have got into trouble. They had to find all kinds of ways to complete the master's degree. The student studied a case of Muslim girls who were removed from school at the age of 11 or 12. They taught themselves at home, so for this woman to graduate at master's level is a phenomenal story.

(Leader A)

So instead of us giving them fish to eat every time, we might as well teach them how to fish

(Leader A)

In light of these comments, our study considers the importance of harnessing students' abilities for the betterment of society and their own well-being. Female students from marginalised communities encounter many challenges associated with social class, poverty, racism, pregnancy, familial roles and responsibilities, burnout and mental health. Despite these challenges, the literature shows that such female students succeed against the odds. Female students in our study reported sleeping in tutorial rooms and libraries (.Wilson-Strydom, 2017; Woldegiorgis and Chiramba, 2024). These students were motivated by their circumstances and the need to change their lives. Instead of accepting the status quo, they called on their resilience, agency and academic self-efficacy to excel in their studies. However, this does not mean that they do not require additional support to succeed (Wilson-Strydom, 2017; Woldegiorgis and Chiramba, 2024).

4.3 Tackling patriarchy and sexism across different contexts

Patriarchy, which posits that men are superior to women, is a demeaning concept that permeates matters of race, social class and political affiliation. The institutional leaders in our study discussed how women struggle as a result of intersecting identities that are informed by culture, religion and marriage. Gendered norms construct and sustain gender inequalities in various ways, as demonstrated in the following excerpts.

I grew up in a home where my father was terribly abusive. I was abused all my life, verbally, physically and mentally. My mother was abused In the same way. She had no way of getting out of it because she did not have work and, at the time, she had five kids. I think for some African men, in the Afrikaans community at the time, their children were sort of considered to be their wealth.

(Leader C)

If you are not betraying your family, you're speaking badly about them. You are disrespecting your father and your mother. So, a lot of the time we can think about the mainstream where, for the most part, I think most of us did not have that kind of extreme. The Taliban rules prevent girls from receiving education. I do not know how you answer that question.

(Leader A)

First of all, we have to acknowledge that we are in a society that is unequal and it is male dominated because that is the natural look like that there are more women. So, first of all, we cannot shy away from it and we cannot carry on the conversation under the table. We need to be able to create that awareness to say, let's open up, let's unpark, even within our universities, and have an open conversation because we have to understand a lot of things

(Leader B)

This conversation should be nested within the global sustainable development goals because these strategic goals are not just sitting a document; they are real goals.

(Leader B)

I want to do that- act/do the right thing. People talk. We have to act (Mean People discourage you)

You know the way society has been, in terms of socialisation and gender hierarchies. We have to confront that, and we have to agitate and work towards social justice and equity. But I think that we're also increasingly seeing women make it through the battlefield.

(Leader B)

There is also a major guilt syndrome and people think they would be considered selfish if they invest too much time in their own intellectual pursuits. They think that they must invest the limited money that they have in their children. So, they constantly battle against that tension and, more often than not, they lose the battle and they succumb to just settling for a master's degree- not meeting their potential

(Leader B)

This particular example that I will give could be culture-specific, but I think it's widespread. I know a female postdoc who was afraid to use the title of doctor. The student was a really brilliant scholar but was afraid that their husband did not like the idea of them being called doctor. The husband wanted the postdoc's identity as a married woman to be foregrounded: Mrs, not doctor

(Leader B)

From these excerpts, we can see that patriarchy destabilises women's careers and achievement levels. Whole-community approaches are necessary to overcome these difficulties.

4.4 Community-led actions for women

The institutional leaders in our study were adamant that action should be community-driven and not left to politicians and government, who, they argued have limited capacity to resolve all societal problems. However, we believe that partnerships between governments and civil society can yield great success. The following excerpts demonstrate the power of working together to achieve greater societal goals.

Afrikaans people were down and out and they really did not have much. They did not have good schooling. They were behind. And the only thing that could help them was starting things like women's clubs, where woman empowered other women. In these clubs, one month they would learn how do flower-flower arranging. And they had someone come in to train them and they had competitions. They learnt how to cook and bake and make decorations. The following month, they can learn how to embroider. So, it comes from the community for the community.

(Leader C)

We have those gogos (grandmothers) with all these skills and I do not care if they can read or not. Reading is not the only skill you need to learn. Many of these soft skills, these emotional intelligence skills, must come from the community.

We are gregarious beings. We are social beings and part of our survival is about working with each other, and the more we can work on collaborations and partnerships, the better.

(Leader C)

We are designed to collaborate and some of us on the frontline are familiar with the biblical scripture that says the hand cannot say 'I do not need you' to the leg and the eyes cannot say 'I do not need you' to the ears. It's about having a unified, functional body. What is that saying about travelling alone and travelling together? If you want to travel fast, go by yourself. But if you want to go far, travel together.

(Leader C)

This latter saying expresses the essence of working collaboratively for greater success. Similarly, one leader noted the importance of women supporting each other, especially those in leadership positions. They argued that women embrace theoretical concepts such as breaking glass ceilings and shuttering glass doors, but, in reality, they do not support each other.

Racial tensions among women, among ethnicities, among classes and among language groups is difficult to fathom. I wonder whether it's just human nature that we do not know how to celebrate each other. So, I think that perhaps we just need to be able to learn what it is to be supportive of each other. Where is all this envy, jealous and intolerance of each other coming from? Perhaps that is one of the more important barriers we have to navigate.

(Leader A)

In summary, our study calls for closer collaboration between HEIs and communities. Arguably, such collaboration has the potential to transform communities and tackle gender-related concerns.

5   Conclusions, best practice and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

Gender inequality is a reality that needs to be confronted and overcome in South African HE and society. Using AGEE and Gender Equality Unit-GEU frameworks, our study identifies various intersectional factors that perpetuate inequalities in HE, employability and access to entrepreneurship opportunities. We conclude that cultural norms, institutional practices, sexism, language, ethnicity, racism, classism, geographical positioning, institutional type, resources, marital status and patriarchy fundamentally intersect with gender and inform women's experiences in HE. Additionally, women's achievements that are not currently directly linked to the Capabilities Approach (CA)- one of the theoretical frameworks with works hand in hand with AGEE require further interrogation. This will establish the extent to which developed capabilities and functioning boost individual and societal well-being, as well as human resource- meaning development of capabilities for employability. It will also further inform gender-equality policy activity and related interventions.

We also conclude that although South Africa has progressive gender-equality policies, their successful implementation has been hindered by institutionalised sexism and a lack of resources. HEIs have encountered similar obstacles in implementing equity policies. We note that while resources are pivotal to implementation processes, a skilled workforce is also required. The institutional leaders in our study argued that academic leaders do not have the requisite time and skills to deal with the challenges that female students encounter in their institutions. Nevertheless, we note the need to make policies more visible to all stakeholders in HE.

Our study also recognises the centrality of entrepreneurship and innovation to HE goals and South Africa's National Development Plan 2030. Most HEIs have incorporated varied activities into their academic programmes to achieve these goals, including establishing entrepreneurship hubs, clinics and centres on university campuses. Although limited, some faculties include entrepreneurship in their courses, for example, in the Bachelor of Commerce and Management degree. UMP, in particular, has demonstrated an outstanding appreciation of enterprises that help students, the community and the region. Its students participate in international competitions and collaborate with students from other universities in South Africa. Innovative ideas are also nested and incubated in health, engineering and ICT departments and faculties across several universities. As a result, it has been difficult to differentiate between entrepreneurship and innovation offerings. Barriers that impede the successful implementation of entrepreneurship ventures for women include lack of relevant skills and financial resources, unstable electricity and water supplies, climate change, the high cost of data, and inadequate internet connectivity and mentorship.

Institutions play an important role in the academic project- teaching/learning/researching. Our study found that most learning environments in South Africa are good and favourable for teaching and learning. However, overcrowding in lecture halls, the unfavourable timetabling of lectures and assessments, inadequate computers and poor communication between students and lecturers adversely affects students. These areas require the attention of university leaders.

Graduate employability is a crucial part of the HE knowledge project. They aligned with the view that HE equips students with crucial knowledge(s). South Africa currently has high unemployment levels. Therefore, most participants worry about whether they are being well-prepared for the world of work. Our study found that most students agree that the education they receive is preparing them adequately. Nevertheless, participants noted the need to develop more industry-related links, collaborations and mentorship programmes to better prepare them for employment. Our study also found that those in the teaching profession benefit from opportunities offered by government recruitment programmes. We also observed persistent gendered norms and roles that perpetuate gender inequalities in employment. We found cases of discrimination, skewed salary scales and the undermining of women in the workplace.

In summary, we suggest the following measures to overcome gender inequality in South African HE: encourage agency and resilience among students to avoid overdependence on government and HEIs;

- Equip HE with resources and finances to enable the sustainability of all programmes and facilities;

- Form more collaborations and links with industry and related businesses for mentorship and work-related experience; tackle gendered norms and sexism in society and HEIs;

- Encourage community involvement

- Collaboration in solving societal problems; work towards achieving greater gender equality for all students;

- Provide targeted intervention and support for young mothers in HEIs and those who require psycho-social assistance; and educate female students about the consequences of engaging in unprotected sex and early pregnancies.

Finally, we cannot underestimate the importance of women supporting each other, especially in the workplace. Women share unique experiences of marginalisation and injustice, and should not perpetuate injustices against each other. We also concede that women need male champions to support them in fighting toxic masculinity and gender inequality. Support from men against gender-based violence (GBV) and campaigns such as 'Not in my name' demonstrate the importance of involving male champions in fighting societal ills such as GBV and femicide.

5.2 Examples of best practice

We have identified the following best practice examples from the South African case study.

1. The availability of progressive national and institutional gender-equality policies across all HEIs in South Africa is laudable.

2. Most HEIs have principal offices or agencies that deal with gender-discrimination-related concerns on university campuses. For instance, Wits supports female students with the GEO, the Office of the Ombudsman, the Transformation Office, the Legal Office and the CCDU.

3. DHET's New Generation of Academics Programme, introduced in 2015, aims to recruit highly capable scholars as academics. It is a university staff development component under the University Capacity Development Programme. The programme is designed to encourage capacity development at all levels and in all areas: research, teaching, and curriculum and programme development. The programme is implemented in partnership with all 26 HEIs in South Africa. Women benefit from the programme equity is a consideration. This is built into the programme

4. Wits has several menstrual poverty programmes. For example, the Wits 100 Centenary Period Poverty Pilot Project, founded in 2022, provided 10,000 sanitary towels to Wits students. Student on the Go is a Dean of Students Office initiative and Clicks. The aim of the project is to end menstrual poverty on university campuses. The #EndMenstrualPoverty Programme is an initiative run by Wits SRC; it provided 5,000 sanitary pads to students in 2023.

5. The Future Professors Programme, a collaborative initiative between DHET and South African public universities aims to develop academic excellence and leadership in university scholarship. It also prepares early- to mid-career academics for professorship. The programme prioritises Black and female South African lecturers, senior lecturers and associate professors who show signs of research and teaching leadership.

6. Most institutions that participated in our study have good learning environments with readily available facilities that enable teaching and learning. In particular, participants noted the interventions that were put in place during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown to support students. For example, Wits provided technology and data that enabled the transition from in-person to online learning.

7. Resources such as academic writing centres assist students from marginalised backgrounds to handle academic rigour and academic writing. For example, Wits has a vibrant writing centre with consultants who are readily available to assist students in improving their reading and writing skills.

8. NFSAS funding has enabled students to access and succeed in HE. The fund also provides money for transportation for students who study from home (They need to travel from home to university campuses). Students from rural universities such as UMP and UNIVEN continue to benefit from this fund.

9. UMP excels in its collaboration with national and international bodies, giving students opportunities to network and benefit from work-related experiences. It has also provided students with opportunities to compete nationally and internationally with their peers on various entrepreneurship platforms.

10. Innovation and entrepreneurship hubs and clinics have helped students incubate and innovate their ideas at Wits, UMP, UKZN and UNIVEN. For example, Wit's entrepreneurship clinic helps students shape and accelerate their business ideas.

11. Female lecturers organise informal mentorship and life-skills sessions with female students. This takes place on campuses, outside of teaching and learning time

12. Most Schools of Education in South Africa work with recruitment agencies to ensure that appropriate employability skills are developed.

13. Industry partnerships play an important role in championing innovation. For example, Wits Innovation Centre enables access to innovation grants and funding and aids in harnessing resources for the commercialisation of research.

14. Interventions such as WIL and the Isivande Women's Fund, provided by the DTI, assists female entrepreneurs by means of various programmes that boost small enterprises, industry innovation and human resource development.

15. Gender-related mentorship programmes initiated by vice-chancellor's offices encourage women in HE to work hard and complete their studies. For example, the Vice-Chancellor of UMP is very supportive of female students and staff members.

16. Organised talks during South Africa's Women's Month (August) encourage female students and staff to draw inspiration from the stories of other women, such as the 20,000 women who marched against the Apartheid pass laws in 1956.

17. Universities collaborate with community leaders on challenges such as hunger on campus and menstrual health. For example, Wits has several programmes that provide food for students who need support: the Wits Food Programme, the Masidleni Daily Meal Project and the Wits Food Bank.

5.3 Recommendations

The uniqueness of the South Africa case, the findings of the study have implications for practice, HEIs, policymakers and government agencies. We make the following recommendations.

1. **Entrepreneurship education:** universities should integrate entrepreneurship education into their academic programmes to prepare students, especially women, for self-employment and entrepreneurship. (BC)

2. **Policy Implementation and visibility:** both national and institutional policies on gender equality should be implemented more effectively to ensure equal access to support services for female students. Gaps between policy, implementation of policy and the daily realities experienced by women should be identified and discussed to make the policies relevant to potential beneficiaries. Government and other principal stakeholders should deploy resources to enable the implementation of policies and major programmes in HE. (BC)

3. **Support and mentorship for male students:** this should be made available to improve equality for everyone. such as shaving equipment. (HE)

4. University–industry partnerships: universities and the private sector should develop stronger partnerships to bridge the gap between academic learning and practical work experience.(HE)

5. **Incubation centres:** business parks and incubation centres across university faculties should be established to nurture student-led innovations and start-ups.

6. **Strategic collaborations:** universities should diversify partnerships to include international and local stakeholders to expand support for female students in particular.(HE)

7. **Access to finance:** the government and universities should improve access to finance for students, especially women, to support entrepreneurial ventures (HE)

8. **Involvement of communities:** communities should be involved as strategic partners in entrepreneurship ventures to tackle youth unemployment.

9. **Agency and resilience:** students' agency and resilience should be developed to contribute to their general well-being and academic achievement. One institutional leader gave

10. **Gender inequality:** societal norms, sexism and patriarchy should be tackled to enable women and girls to have equitable access to education and entrepreneurship opportunities. This can be achieved by means of civic education in communities provided by various advocacy groups and faith-based organisations led by both men and women. University-wide campaigns should be developed to sensitise students and staff about GBV, toxic masculinity and harmful societal norms and values. The campaigns should be aimed at finding solutions to gender inequality in society rather than simply sloganeering.

11. **Sex education:** families should be included in educating girls and female students about sexuality and sex to avoid unwanted teenage pregnancies that disrupt learning.

12. **Maternal healthcare:** HE practices that are contrary to the provision of maternal healthcare should be remedied, for example, pregnant students should be allowed to access university health services.

13. **Provision of resources:** the government and other principal stakeholders should make resources available to enable the implementation of gender-related policies and major programmes in HE.

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