

## Reimagining Policy Frameworks: The Role of Higher Education Governance in Advancing Equity in South Africa

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### Abstract

*This study critically examines the role of governance frameworks in shaping equity outcomes within the South African higher education system. Drawing on a qualitative, interpretive research design, the study integrates policy document analysis, comparative multi-case analysis of nine universities, and secondary qualitative data derived from stakeholder submissions. Key national policy frameworks, including the Higher Education Act (1997) and the Ministerial Statement on University Funding (2020), are analysed to assess the alignment between policy intent and institutional realities. The findings reveal persistent structural inequalities, including misalignment between policy and institutional capacity, inequitable funding distribution, tensions between autonomy and accountability, limited stakeholder participation, and restricted policy adaptability. Evidence suggests that performance-based funding and standardised governance approaches disproportionately advantage historically well-resourced institutions while constraining historically disadvantaged institutions and universities of technology. In response, the study proposes a Governance Adaptability Model that integrates contextual differentiation, stakeholder inclusion, and strategic adaptability. The model advocates for differentiated governance contracts, equity-based funding mechanisms, participatory governance audits, and continuous feedback systems. By embedding flexibility and inclusivity into governance frameworks, the model offers a context-sensitive approach to advancing equity and institutional responsiveness in South Africa's higher education sector.*

**Keywords:** Equity, Educational Governance, Higher Education Policy, Institutional Autonomy, Reform Strategy.

### I. Introduction

Good governance in higher education is widely recognised as a key determinant of national development, social justice, and democratic stability (Marginson, 2016). In South Africa, governance remains shaped by the enduring legacy of apartheid, which produced deep institutional inequalities that continue to influence the sector despite more than three decades of democratic reform. Although post-apartheid legislation, particularly the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, aimed to establish a more equitable and accountable system (DHET, 1997), a clear gap persists between policy intent and institutional reality. Inequalities remain structurally embedded in funding and governance arrangements, favouring Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs) while constraining Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) and Universities of Technology (UoTs). Institutions such as the University of Cape Town, the University of the Witwatersrand, and Stellenbosch University benefit from strong research capacity, infrastructure, and global networks. In contrast, universities such as the University of Fort

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Hare, Walter Sisulu University, the University of Limpopo, and several UoTs continue to face resource shortages and capacity constraints (Mtshweni, 2022; Mbaleki & Mbodila, 2022).

This imbalance is reinforced by funding and governance models that do not adequately account for institutional context or student socio-economic conditions (Matsiliza et al., 2022; Masutha & Motala, 2023). Performance-based funding, while intended to reward efficiency, often advantages well-resourced institutions and reproduces inequality (Matveeva, 2025). The paper argues that current governance approaches are insufficiently responsive to institutional diversity. It draws on a comparative analysis of nine universities to examine how national policies interact with institutional realities. Attention is given to tensions between autonomy and accountability, uneven funding patterns, and limited stakeholder participation. Student movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall further exposed governance shortcomings, highlighting exclusionary institutional cultures and the limited responsiveness of formal governance structures (Habib, 2019; Jansen, 2019). These developments underline the need for more inclusive and adaptive governance arrangements. This study contributes to this debate by proposing a Governance Adaptability Model tailored to the South African context. The model emphasises differentiation, stakeholder inclusion, and flexibility in policy implementation.

## II. Literature Review

Over the past three decades, higher education governance has increasingly shifted toward managerial and performance-oriented models. These approaches emphasise measurable outputs, competitive funding, and efficiency (De Boer et al., 2015). While widely adopted, they have been criticised for reinforcing inequalities, particularly in postcolonial contexts where institutions differ significantly in capacity and historical advantage (Varghese, 2013). In South Africa, these global trends intersect with the legacy of apartheid, which created a deeply unequal institutional landscape. Despite restructuring efforts, HAIs continue to benefit from stronger funding bases and research capacity, while HDIs and UoTs face ongoing constraints (Cloete et al., 2015; Mtshweni, 2022).

Funding policy remains a central concern. The current model, administered by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), combines block grants and earmarked funding (DHET, 2020). Critics argue that this approach reinforces historical inequalities, as institutions with established research capacity are better positioned to benefit from performance-based allocations (Bawa, 2020; Masutha & Motala, 2023). Recent literature highlights the need for more context-sensitive funding approaches. Oketch (2023) identifies different financing models, while Matveeva (2025) shows that performance-based funding produces uneven outcomes depending on institutional capacity. Similarly, Shahmoradi and Ehteshamnejad (2025) argue that sustainable funding models must balance equity, innovation, and institutional resilience.

Debates on governance also emphasise tensions between autonomy and state control. While autonomy supports academic freedom, it is unevenly distributed, with HAIs benefiting more than HDIs (Marginson, 2016; Paul & Rena, 2024<sup>a</sup>). At the same time, stakeholder participation remains limited, with formal structures often failing to enable meaningful involvement (Lange, 2017; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Comparative evidence suggests that more flexible and negotiated governance approaches, such as those in Finland and the Netherlands, can better balance autonomy and accountability (Valimaa, 2019; De Boer et al., 2007). These insights point to the need for governance reform that recognises institutional diversity and promotes equity.

*Theoretical Framework*

The applicability of the “triangle of coordination” is particularly evident in funding discussions. While market pressures drive institutions toward competitiveness and the academic core prioritises research autonomy, performance-based funding and regulatory compliance remain closely aligned with state policy (Marginson, 2016). This asymmetry tends to benefit historically advantaged institutions (HAIs) such as UCT, Wits, and Stellenbosch, while disadvantaging historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) (UFH, WSU, UL) and universities of technology (UoTs) (TUT, CPUT, DUT), which operate under more constrained conditions (Cloete et al., 2015; Odhav & Rena, 2024).

At the institutional level, governance can also be understood through stakeholder theory (Olsen, 2005), which conceptualises universities as networks of actors, including students, staff, government, and civil society (Freeman, 1984). Effective governance therefore requires meaningful stakeholder participation in shaping institutional priorities. However, participation remains limited, particularly for students and junior staff in HDIs. The #FeesMustFall movement exposed this democratic deficit, demonstrating that governance structures often fail to reflect the realities of marginalised groups (Habib, 2019; Paul & Rena, 2024<sup>b</sup>). Although representation exists formally, it is frequently symbolic rather than substantive (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

Adaptive governance further informs this analysis by emphasising flexible, learning-oriented institutional arrangements that respond to changing conditions (Chaffin et al., 2014). In the South African context, this suggests a shift away from rigid, compliance-driven approaches toward more context-sensitive and participatory governance systems. This study therefore adopts a multi-level analytical framework that integrates Clark’s (1983) triangle of coordination, stakeholder theory (Olsen, 2005), and adaptive governance to examine how governance structures either support or undermine equity in higher education.

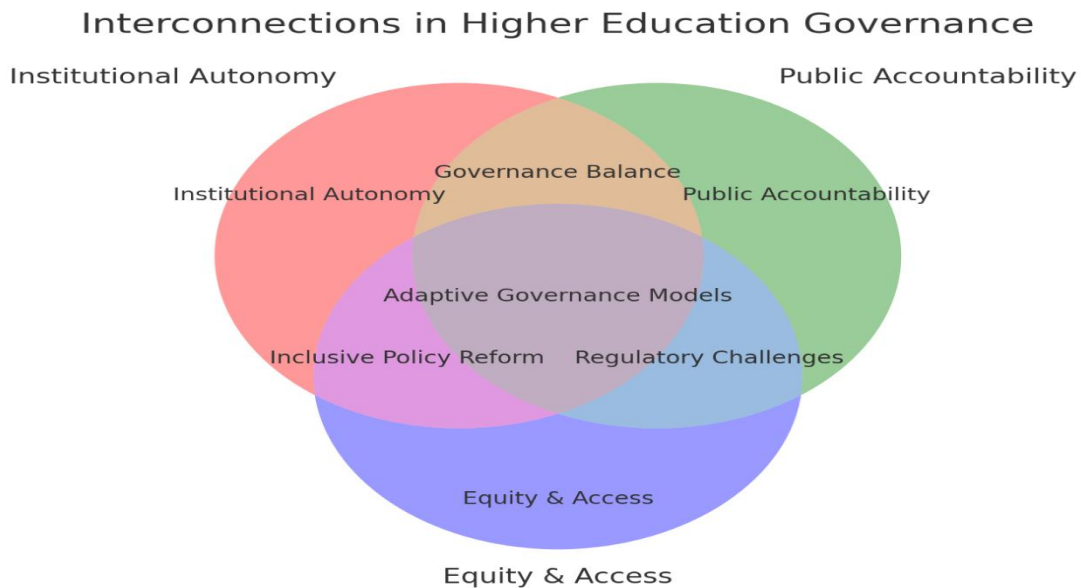


Figure 1 Source: Authors’ construct

The visualisation is a heuristic for conceptualising tensions and synergies between governance imperatives. The public areas, particularly the areas that have adaptive governance models, inclusion in policy reform, and problematic regulation, highlight the subtle world in which institutions operate. This

framework underpins the dual theoretical analysis that ensues, which provides a perspective through which to interpret institutional reactions to policy on the part of the state and demands of stakeholders. The applicability of the “*triangle of coordination*” is especially prominent during the funding discussions. Although the market pressure drives institutions in the direction of competitiveness (e.g., international rankings or globalisation), and the academic core celebrates research autonomy, performance-based funding, and regulatory compliance, it embraces policies of the South African state (Marginson, 2016). The asymmetry often benefits HAIs, including the University of Cape Town (UCT), University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), and Stellenbosch University; mostly to the detriment of HDIs, including the University of Fort Hare (UFH), Walter Sisulu University (WSU) and University of Limpopo(UL); Technical & Vocational (Universities of Technology) (UoTs) Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), Durban University of Technology (DUT) which currently face challenges in achieving their policy agenda in circumstances that limit it (Cloete et al., 2015; Odhav and Rena, 2024).

Governance at the institutional level can also be found by incorporating the stakeholder theory developed by Olsen (2005) to supplement this macro-structural analysis. It assumes that universities are within networks of actors such as students, staff, government, alumni, and civil society whose interests are legitimate (Freeman, 1984). Good governance, thus, requires comprehensive involvement where all stakeholders can play a meaningful role in shaping the priorities among institutions.

However, the participation of students and junior staff in governance in South Africa is low, especially among HDIs. The #FeesMustFall campaign revealed this democratic deficit, particularly that the governance systems used to govern the lives of marginalised people do not always reflect marginalised people's realities (Habib, 2019; Paul & Rena, 2024<sup>b</sup>). Although some council positions are required by law in the university setting, they are often little more than decorative (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Odhav and Rena, 2024). The theory advanced by Olsen reveals that participatory governance requires empowering those stakeholders so that they have a profound influence on institutional direction. Another aspect of this study is the incorporation of the notion of adaptive governance, a concept of environmental policy that has made its way into higher education (Chaffin et al., 2014). Adaptive governance is defined as responsive and flexible institutional designs that can learn through feedback (Paul and Rena, 2024<sup>c</sup>). This means the shift in the higher education of South Africa, where strict compliance is replaced by context-sensitive, participatory, and iterative policy implementation. This model is critical to such a historically stratified and diverse system such that institutions require varied approaches based on their specific context and purpose.

This study adopts a multi-level analytical framework that integrates stakeholder theory with adaptive governance and structural coordination models. Clark (1983) conceptualises higher education governance as a balance between the state, the market, and academic oligarchies, Olsen (2005) sheds light on the agency of the institutional actors, and adaptive governance gives us a normative vision of change, all of which help us comprehend how the system of governance disparages or supports equity.

### **III. Methodology**

#### *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive multi-case study approach. It relies primarily on secondary data sources, including policy documents, institutional reports, and stakeholder submissions (PMG, SAUS, USAf), which are analysed thematically. In addition, the study incorporates preliminary exploratory insights drawn from limited stakeholder engagement to support and triangulate the findings. These insights are not intended to constitute a full empirical dataset but serve to enhance the interpretive depth of the analysis. The design is appropriate for examining complex governance systems in which

institutional dynamics, historical context, and policy frameworks interact to shape outcomes related to equity. Rather than relying on a single method, the study adopts a triangulated approach that integrates policy document analysis, institutional case comparisons, and secondary qualitative data reflecting stakeholder perspectives. This approach enhances analytical depth and strengthens the validity of the findings.

#### *Document Analysis*

A systematic review of national policy documents was conducted to establish the formal governance and funding framework of South African higher education. Key documents analysed include:

- Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997)
- National Plan for Higher Education (2001)
- Ministerial Statement on University Funding (2020)
- DHET reports, white papers, and statistical publications

In addition to foundational policy texts, the study analyses the DHET Ministerial Statements on University Funding for 2024/25–2026/27 and 2025/26–2027/28. These documents are important because they specify the structure of the funding framework, including budget sub-categories, funding benchmarks, sector totals for teaching and research output units, and university-level allocations. Their inclusion strengthens the evidentiary basis of the paper’s analysis of how the funding model operates in practice (Ministerial Statement on University funding -2024-25 to 2026-27, 2023). These documents were analysed thematically to identify policy intentions regarding equity and transformation; funding allocation mechanisms; governance structures and regulatory expectations. This analysis provided the normative baseline against which institutional realities were assessed.

#### *Comparative Case Study Selection*

The study employs a purposive sampling strategy to select nine universities representing the diversity of South Africa’s higher education system:

- Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs): UCT, Wits, Stellenbosch
- Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs): UFH, WSU, UL
- Universities of Technology (UoTs): TUT, CPUT, DUT

This selection ensures representation of historical inequality; variation in institutional missions and capacity and comparative insight across three governance contexts. The multi-case design reduces bias associated with single-case studies and enables pattern identification across institutional types.

#### *Secondary Qualitative Data (Stakeholder Perspectives)*

To incorporate stakeholder perspectives without primary data collection, this study uses qualitative secondary data analysis and incorporate the primary interview data. Sources include Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) reports; Submissions from Universities South Africa (USAf); South African Union of Students (SAUS); Budgetary review and oversight reports. These sources contain direct stakeholder inputs from: University administrators; Student representatives; Sector organisations. This method allows the study to capture authentic stakeholder voices within an ethical and publicly accessible framework.

### Analytical Strategy

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, guided by both inductive and deductive coding. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes across: Policy frameworks; Institutional practices; Stakeholder narratives. Five dominant themes emerged: Structural misalignment; Unequal funding distribution; Autonomy-accountability tensions; Stakeholder exclusion; Limited policy adaptability. These themes form the basis for both the empirical findings and the proposed governance model. In addition, preliminary stakeholder insights were incorporated to provide exploratory empirical support for the study's findings. These insights are used for triangulation purposes and are not intended to constitute a full-scale empirical dataset.

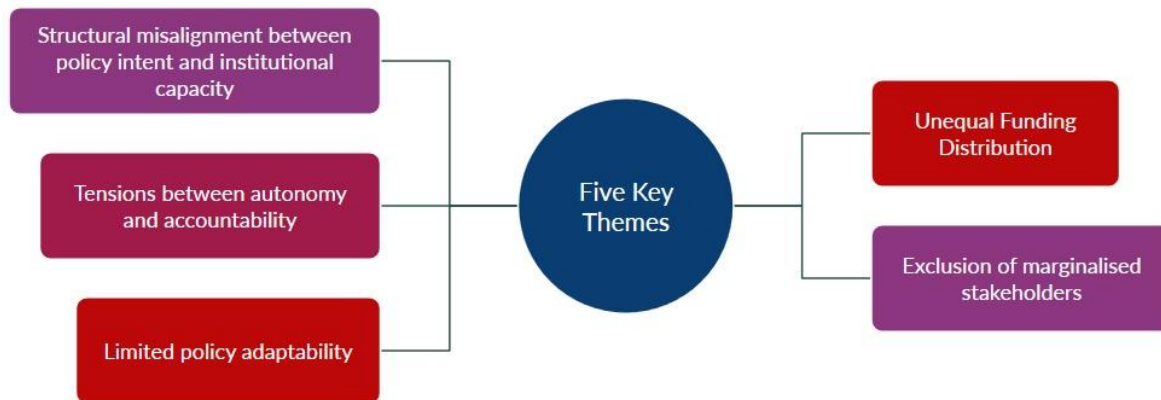
### Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Durban University of Technology. The exploratory stakeholder engagement adhered to ethical guidelines, with participation being voluntary and anonymised. As the study primarily relies on secondary data, no extensive primary data collection was undertaken.

## IV. Findings

Thematic analysis of national policy documents, interviews, institutional charters, and third-party reviews of the sample of universities identified 5 major themes: structural misfit between policy intent and institutional capability, unequal distribution of funding, tension between autonomy and accountability, marginalised stakeholders, and inability to adapt policies.

Figure 2: Thematic Analysis Mind Map



Source: NVivo 15 Mind Map Output, 2025

#### a) *Structural Misalignment and Institutional Differentiation:*

A significant theme emerging from the analysis was the persistent misalignment between national policy goals and institutional realities. While the Higher Education Act (DHET, 1997) and subsequent reforms promote a vision of equitable and transformative education, actual implementation is shaped by historical resource disparities. The case studies show a clear pattern: *Research-intensive HAIs* (UCT, Wits, Stellenbosch) have maintained and expanded their infrastructure and international linkages, benefiting from historical capital and strong donor confidence. In contrast, *HDI*s (UFH, Walter Sisulu, Limpopo) and *UoTs* (TUT, CPUT, DUT) continue to experience chronic underfunding and capacity

constraints. These limitations impede their ability to fulfil their transformation mandates, despite serving disadvantaged student populations. This misalignment is exacerbated by a *"one-size-fits-all"* policy approach that fails to acknowledge institutional diversity. For instance, universities like UFH and Limpopo, which serve rural and poor students, receive less per capita investment than HAIs, which are better equipped to produce high-value research outputs.

#### *b) Unequal Funding Distribution*

Another key theme was the interplay between institutional autonomy and public accountability. The analysis is expanded and demonstrates a definite difference: HAIs (UCT, Wits, Stellenbosch) are rather free in their fiscal management, curriculum and research prioritisation. This is enabled by their legacy, good alumni networks and external funding. In comparison, HDIs (UFH, WSU, UL) and UoTs (TUT, CPUT, DUT) boast of higher reliance on DHET and have more restrictive state control, especially regarding state interventions in governance and compliance with audits. Although autonomy is a constitutional right, imbalanced application leads to institutional freedoms that are skewed. The existing governance paradigm fails to embrace the issue of autonomy being responsibly practiced within various institutions that are differently endowed.

#### *c) Autonomy and Accountability Tensions*

Another recurring theme was the complex interplay between institutional autonomy and public accountability. The expanded analysis highlights a clear disparity: HAIs (UCT, Wits, Stellenbosch) exercise considerable autonomy in fiscal management, curriculum design, and research prioritisation. This is facilitated by their legacy, strong alumni networks, and ability to attract external funding. By contrast, HDIs (UFH, WSU, UL) and UoTs (TUT, CPUT, DUT) report greater dependency on DHET funding and face tighter state oversight, particularly concerning governance interventions and audit compliance. While autonomy is constitutionally protected, its uneven practice results in skewed institutional freedoms. The current governance model inadequately addresses how autonomy should be responsibly exercised across differently resourced institutions.

#### *d) Stakeholder Exclusion and Democratic Deficit*

Documents across all nine universities indicate a lack of participation of stakeholders, particularly the students and junior personnel, in the administrative procedures. Whereas every institution has official guidelines concerning who should represent the students in councils, our interviews showed that this representation is usually pushed to the periphery. In UoTs such as CPUT and DUT, student roles have been incorporated in governance charters on a nominal basis, although the stakeholders indicated that students have little influence on making strategic decisions. The effects of this marginalization were most eminently captured during the #FeesMustFall demonstrations where the need to have an inclusive governance system was eminent. According to institutional documents that have been reviewed after 2015, there are certain reforms, however, they are quite reactive and superficial rather than transformative.

#### *e) Limited Policy Adaptability and Institutional Rigidity*

Lastly, the study revealed scanty evidence of adaptive governance structures. The institutional plans and policies of the DHET are largely premised on stiff compliance-based frameworks that can poise very little contextual and innovative flexibilities. This rigidity is evidenced in the expanded case studies: The transformation charters of HDIs such as UFH and Limpopo are based on national targets and tend to be insufficient compared to locally developed strategies to reach the rural locations or staff development. Likewise, the bureaucratic issues of UoTs such as TUT and DUT to react to performance-

based measures can also be limited in most cases, which impedes agility. This rigidity is very much contrary to the international experience in Finland and the Netherlands, where negotiated performance contracts have been adopted and the balance between institutional autonomy and adaptive feedback responses.

#### *Empirical Insights from Secondary Stakeholder Evidence*

To strengthen the empirical grounding of this study, stakeholder perspectives drawn from Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) reports and sector submissions were analysed.

#### *Funding Pressures and Institutional Inequality*

Stakeholder submissions consistently highlight the disproportionate impact of funding constraints on HDIs and UoTs. Universities South Africa (USAf) reports indicate that Institutions serving low-income students face higher operational burdens, performance-based funding models disadvantage institutions with limited research capacity. While Student organisations (SAUS) emphasised the persistence of the “*missing middle*” problem and insufficient financial aid relative to student need. These findings support the argument that current funding frameworks reinforce structural inequality.

#### *Governance and Stakeholder Participation*

Evidence from institutional submissions reveals limited influence of students in decision-making structures, governance bodies often function in a formal rather than participatory manner. Reports indicate that student representation exists in councils, but participation is often symbolic rather than substantive. This confirms the existence of a democratic deficit in governance systems.

#### *Institutional Capacity Constraints*

HDIs and UoTs reported infrastructure deficits, Staff shortages and limited administrative capacity. These constraints affect policy implementation and responsiveness to national mandates. This reinforces the need for differentiated governance approaches rather than uniform policy frameworks.

#### *Evidence of Policy-Implementation Gap*

Across multiple reports, a recurring theme is the gap between policy intent and institutional reality. While national policy emphasises Equity, Transformation and Inclusion. Institutional evidence shows *persistent inequality*, *Limited adaptability* and *uneven autonomy*. This empirical pattern directly supports the core argument of this paper.

#### *Preliminary Empirical Insights (Pilot Evidence)*

To complement the document analysis and secondary stakeholder evidence, this study incorporates preliminary empirical insights based on a limited exploratory engagement with stakeholders in the higher education sector. This pilot-level evidence is not intended to be statistically representative but serves to triangulate key themes emerging from the broader qualitative analysis. Across stakeholder engagements, three consistent patterns emerged.

*First*, respondents highlighted persistent funding inequality across institutional types. Participants from historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) and universities of technology (UoTs) emphasized that current funding mechanisms do not sufficiently account for socio-economic disadvantage, infrastructure deficits, and teaching-intensive mandates. In contrast, respondents associated with

historically advantaged institutions (HAIs) noted greater access to diversified revenue streams, including research funding and private partnerships.

*Second*, there was a strong perception of limited meaningful stakeholder participation in governance structures. While formal representation of students and staff exists within councils and senates, participants indicated that such involvement is often procedural rather than influential. This finding aligns with broader concerns about symbolic participation raised in national reports and prior studies.

*Third*, stakeholders consistently identified rigidity in governance and policy frameworks. Participants reported that compliance-driven governance systems constrain institutional flexibility, particularly in responding to local challenges such as student support needs, digital transformation, and resource limitations. There was broad support for more adaptive, context-sensitive governance approaches.

Overall, these preliminary insights reinforce the central argument of this study: that current governance and funding frameworks, while formally aligned with transformation goals, remain insufficiently responsive to institutional diversity and equity imperatives. These findings further support the need for a differentiated and adaptive governance model for South African higher education.

## V. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce longstanding concerns regarding the uneven impact of governance arrangements in South African higher education. While post-apartheid policy frameworks emphasise equity, transformation, and inclusion, their implementation continues to produce differentiated outcomes across institutions. These outcomes remain closely tied to historical advantage, institutional capacity, and funding structures. A central issue emerging from the analysis is the persistence of unequal funding distribution. The current funding model, administered by the Department of Higher Education and Training, is intended to balance teaching, research, and institutional development. However, in practice, performance-based funding mechanisms tend to favour institutions with established research capacity and infrastructure. This is consistent with earlier findings that such models can reinforce structural inequalities rather than address them (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012; Masutha & Motala, 2023). As shown in this study, HAIs such as UCT, Wits, and Stellenbosch are better positioned to benefit from these arrangements, while HDIs and UoTs continue to operate under more constrained conditions (Cloete et al., 2015; Mbaleki & Mbodila, 2022). Recent scholarship further supports this view, indicating that the outcomes of performance-based funding depend heavily on institutional context and capacity (Matveeva, 2025; Oketch, 2023).

The analysis also highlights persistent tensions between institutional autonomy and state accountability. While autonomy is widely regarded as essential for academic freedom and innovation, its distribution remains uneven across the system (Marginson, 2016). Institutions with stronger financial and research bases are able to exercise greater strategic independence, while those that depend heavily on state funding are subject to stricter regulatory oversight. This imbalance reflects broader governance challenges in aligning transformation goals with institutional autonomy (Jansen, 2019; Paul & Rena, 2024<sup>a</sup>). In practice, autonomy is therefore experienced differently across institutional types, contributing to uneven institutional development.

Stakeholder participation remains another key concern. Although governance frameworks provide for representation of students and staff within councils and senates, the findings suggest that such participation is often limited in influence. In many cases, engagement remains procedural rather than substantive, with decision-making power concentrated within senior management structures (Luescher-

Mamashela, 2013; Lange, 2017). The #FeesMustFall movement brought these issues into sharp focus, exposing the gap between formal representation and meaningful participation (Habib, 2019). This supports Olsen's (2005) argument that effective governance requires not only inclusion but also genuine influence over institutional decision-making processes.

In addition, the study finds limited evidence of adaptive governance within the South African system. Institutional responses are largely shaped by compliance-driven policy frameworks, which prioritise accountability and regulation over flexibility. This rigidity constrains the ability of institutions particularly HDIs and UoTs to respond to local challenges such as resource limitations, student support needs, and technological change. Adaptive governance theory suggests that effective systems should incorporate feedback mechanisms, learning processes, and flexibility in policy implementation (Chaffin et al., 2014). However, such features remain underdeveloped in the current context.

### *Comparative International Insights*

Comparative perspectives provide useful insight into how different governance and funding arrangements shape institutional outcomes. The Kenyan experience illustrates the challenges associated with more centralised and standardised governance systems. Although the Commission for University Education (CUE) is responsible for quality assurance and accreditation, it has been criticised for adopting a micromanagement approach that slows the approval of academic programmes and contributes to overregulation (Munene, 2013). In addition, recurrent political interference in university governance has been shown to undermine institutional stability and academic freedom (Wangenge-Ouma, 2010; Kumela, 2019). These conditions limit institutional autonomy and constrain the ability of universities to respond effectively to local needs.

In contrast, governance arrangements in Finland demonstrate a more balanced and flexible approach. Finnish universities operate within a framework of negotiated performance agreements between the state and institutions. These agreements define expected outputs, funding allocations, and strategic priorities, while allowing institutions considerable discretion in determining how these objectives are achieved (Valimaa, 2019). Importantly, the Finnish model avoids punitive benchmarking, as all universities receive base funding, which reduces the risk of marginalising weaker institutions. Funding is not solely tied to research outputs, but also places emphasis on teaching quality, student support, and regional engagement (Kivistö & Pekkola, 2017). This enables institutions to pursue differentiated missions while remaining aligned with national objectives.

Similarly, the Dutch higher education system illustrates the value of coordinated but differentiated governance. In the Netherlands, performance agreements are used to align institutional strategies with national priorities while maintaining institutional autonomy (De Boer et al., 2007; De Boer et al., 2015). Universities are encouraged to specialise according to their strengths, and funding mechanisms are designed to support this differentiation rather than impose uniform expectations. This has contributed to a system that balances accountability with flexibility and supports institutional diversity. Taken together, these comparative examples highlight the importance of governance frameworks that are both context-sensitive and adaptable. While the Kenyan case demonstrates the limitations of centralised and rigid governance systems, the Finnish and Dutch models show how negotiated and differentiated approaches can better accommodate institutional diversity. In the South African context, where historical inequalities remain deeply embedded, a shift toward more flexible and differentiated governance and funding arrangements is necessary to ensure that policy interventions address structural disparities rather than reproduce them (Cloete et al., 2015; Jansen, 2019; Marginson, 2016).

### *Governance Adaptability Model for South African Higher Education*

Table 1: Institutional Case Comparisons

Dimension	Historically Advantaged	Historically Disadvantaged	Vocational Disadvantaged /
Universities Included	UCT; Wits; SU	UFH, WSU, UL	TUT, CPUT, DUT
Institutional Status	Historically Advantaged	Historically Disadvantaged	Vocational Disadvantaged /
Autonomy Level	High	Moderate	Low
Funding Availability	High (endowments, grants, research)	Low (state-dependent)	Moderate (state-dependent)
Stakeholder Engagement	Formal structures, some input	Limited participation	Administrative dominance
Policy Adaptability	High	Constrained	Bureaucratic rigidity

Source: Authors' Construct

This comparison highlights varying institutional needs and capacities, which support the argument for a differentiated policy approach. Stakeholder Engagement and Governance: The protest movements associated with #FeesMustFall demonstrated that students play a vital role in debates on governance. According to Habib (2019), student activism reshaped national policy discourse and compelled institutions to confront exclusionary practices within their systems. However, policy documents continue to marginalise the voices of students and academics in formal governance structures. Jansen (2019) argues that university councils and senates remain elitist and bureaucratic, limiting meaningful participation. This lack of voice undermines policy legitimacy and weakens the implementation of reforms. To strengthen stakeholder engagement, it is essential to institutionalise inclusive processes such as student participation in councils, transparent consultation practices, and regular stakeholder audits. These measures would enhance accountability and build trust among institutional constituencies.

*Critical Analysis:* Research indicates a significant gap between policy intentions and their practical implementation. Existing governance models often fail to produce inclusive systems due to persistent funding inequalities and institutional barriers to change (Badat, 2010). Lange (2017) similarly argues that equity-oriented governance reforms are frequently undermined by policy inconsistency and a lack of contextual adaptation. Habib's (2019) work on student activism further demonstrates that governance mechanisms are central to responding to demands for transformation and decolonisation. In addition, the broader economic and developmental challenges outlined by Rena (2006) and Rena and Kidane (2009) provide further insight into the structural constraints facing higher education systems in developing contexts.

#### *Comparative Implications for South Africa*

Comparative perspectives provide useful insight into how different governance and funding arrangements shape institutional outcomes. The Kenyan experience illustrates the challenges associated with more centralised and standardised governance systems. Although the Commission for University Education (CUE) is responsible for quality assurance and accreditation, it has been criticised for adopting a micromanagement approach that slows the approval of academic programmes and contributes to overregulation (Munene, 2013). In addition, recurrent political interference in university governance undermines institutional stability and academic freedom (Wangenge-Ouma, 2010; Kumela, 2019). These conditions limit institutional autonomy and constrain universities' ability to respond effectively to local needs.

In contrast, governance arrangements in Finland demonstrate a more balanced and flexible approach. Finnish universities operate within a framework of negotiated performance agreements

between the state and institutions. These agreements define expected outputs, funding allocations, and strategic priorities, while allowing institutions considerable discretion in determining how these objectives are achieved (Valimaa, 2019). Importantly, the Finnish model avoids punitive benchmarking, as all universities receive base funding, reducing the risk of marginalising weaker institutions. Funding is not solely tied to research outputs but also emphasises teaching quality, student support, and regional engagement (Kivistö & Pekkola, 2017).

Similarly, the Dutch higher education system demonstrates the value of coordinated but differentiated governance. In the Netherlands, performance agreements align institutional strategies with national priorities while maintaining institutional autonomy (De Boer et al., 2007; De Boer et al., 2015). Universities are encouraged to specialise according to their strengths, and funding mechanisms are designed to support this differentiation rather than impose uniform expectations. This contributes to a system that balances accountability with flexibility and supports institutional diversity. Taken together, these comparative examples highlight the importance of governance frameworks that are both context-sensitive and adaptable. While the Kenyan case illustrates the limitations of centralised governance, the Finnish and Dutch models show how negotiated and differentiated approaches can better accommodate institutional diversity. In South Africa, where historical inequalities remain deeply embedded, a shift toward more flexible and differentiated governance and funding arrangements is necessary to ensure that policy interventions address structural disparities rather than reproduce them (Cloete et al., 2015; Jansen, 2019; Marginson, 2016).

#### *Governance Adaptability Model for South African Higher Education*

Based on the challenges and comparative experiences discussed, this section proposes a governance adaptability model suited to the South African higher education system. The model integrates the principles of equity, autonomy, and participation within a differentiated and responsive governance framework.

#### *Foundational Principles*

The model is grounded in three interdependent principles:

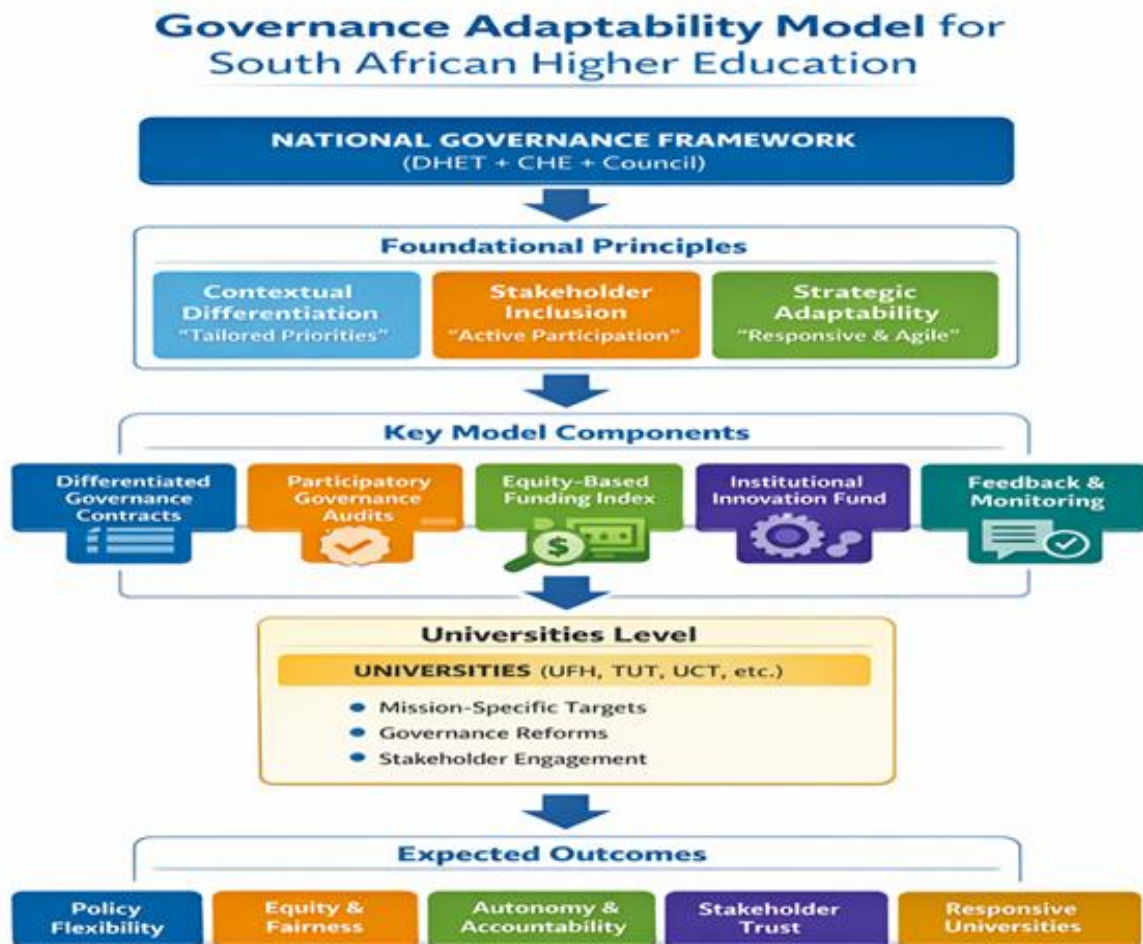
1. *Contextual Differentiation*: Governance should not be based on uniform policy prescriptions, as institutions differ in history, mission, capacity, and location. Instead, it should enable institutions to define strategic priorities aligned with national objectives (Cloete et al., 2015).
2. *Stakeholder Inclusion*: Governance systems should facilitate meaningful participation of all stakeholders, particularly students, marginalised staff, and regional actors. This includes not only representation in councils and senates but also active involvement in strategic planning and policy review (Olsen, 2005; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).
3. *Strategic Adaptability*: Institutions should be sufficiently agile to respond to evolving social, technological, and economic demands. Governance frameworks should incorporate policy learning, institutional feedback, and continuous improvement (Chaffin et al., 2014).

*Key Components of the Model*

The proposed model includes the following components:

1. *Differentiated Governance Contracts*: Drawing on the Dutch model, the DHET should negotiate performance agreements tailored to institutional missions and contexts. For example, UFH may focus on rural outreach, TUT on technological innovation, and UCT on research excellence. Funding allocations should reflect these differences and account for historical disadvantage to avoid penalising HDIs.

Figure 2: Governance Adaptability Model for South African Higher Education



Source: Authors' construct

2. *Participatory Governance Audits*: Institutions should undergo regular governance audits to assess stakeholder participation, transparency, and inclusiveness. Conducted by bodies such as the CHE, these audits would help move institutions beyond symbolic participation toward more substantive engagement (Jansen, 2019).
3. *Equity-Based Funding Index*: The current performance-based funding model should be revised to include an equity index that considers student socio-economic status, historical disadvantage, and geographic location. This would enable more equitable resource allocation and support capacity development in HDIs (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012).

4. *Institutional Innovation Fund*: The DHET should allocate funding to support institutional innovation. This aligns with recent arguments that funding models should promote not only performance but also innovation, adaptability, and equitable development (Shahmoradi & Ehteshamnejad, 2025). Universities could submit proposals to improve teaching, governance, and community engagement without being constrained by uniform policy prescriptions.
5. *Feedback and Monitoring Mechanisms*: Governance systems should include structured feedback mechanisms. Universities should publish annual governance reports detailing progress on transformation, stakeholder engagement, and responsiveness. These reports should be reviewed by a national advisory council representing civil society, business, and academia.

### *Expected Outcomes*

This model provides a framework for a more equitable and responsive higher education system. It recognises institutional diversity and seeks to balance autonomy with accountability through negotiated, participatory, and flexible governance arrangements. By embedding stakeholder participation and equity considerations within governance frameworks, the model has the potential to strengthen institutional legitimacy, trust, and resilience.

## **V. Conclusion and recommendations**

This study has examined governance arrangements shaping equity and transformation in South African higher education. It identifies key gaps in efforts to democratise governance through a qualitative analysis of policy frameworks, institutional practices, and comparative international experiences. While post-apartheid reforms introduced progressive legislation, their implementation has often reproduced historical inequalities through misaligned funding, limited stakeholder representation, and rigid governance systems. Structural advantages continue to favour institutions such as UCT, while institutions such as UFH and TUT remain constrained.

Comparative insights from Finland, the Netherlands, and Kenya reinforce the importance of balancing institutional autonomy with coordinated state oversight. These examples highlight the value of differentiated funding models, negotiated performance agreements, and adaptive governance approaches.

The Governance Adaptability Model proposed in this study responds to these challenges by promoting contextual differentiation, stakeholder inclusion, and strategic adaptability. It emphasises the importance of diverse funding mechanisms, participatory audits, and continuous feedback processes in strengthening governance systems. There is an urgent need to move beyond rhetorical commitments toward substantive reform. Addressing historical inequalities requires governance frameworks that are responsive, inclusive, and adaptable. Governance should be understood not only as a managerial function but as a democratic practice through which universities fulfil their role as public institutions. If implemented effectively, the proposed reforms can contribute to a more equitable, responsive, and sustainable higher education system in South Africa.

### *Recommendations*

Given the analysis advanced in this research, several strategic and policy-driven recommendations are proposed to improve the responsiveness and equity of higher education governance in South Africa. These recommendations are informed by empirical insights and international best practices and are

intended to guide the development of a system that is both inclusive and context-sensitive, as well as capable of continuous transformation.

1. *Introduce Differentiated and Negotiated Performance Contracts:* Institution-specific performance contracts should be developed by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), considering each university's mission, historical legacy, and student demographics. Negotiated agreements, as demonstrated in the Dutch model (De Boer et al., 2007), provide a more effective mechanism for aligning national priorities with institutional capacities, particularly for historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) that require additional support to meet transformation goals. These contracts should incorporate both equity-based indicators and academic outputs to ensure a more comprehensive performance assessment.
2. *Reform the Higher Education Funding Framework:* The current funding model, which is largely based on research output and student throughput, places institutions serving marginalised populations at a disadvantage (Wangenge-Ouma & Cloete, 2008). A reformed framework should incorporate an Equity Index that accounts for student socio-economic background, geographic disadvantage, and historical underfunding. Such an approach would promote a more equitable distribution of resources and support HDIs in improving quality without compromising access or social responsiveness.
3. *Institutionalise Stakeholder Inclusion Mechanisms:* Universities should move beyond token representation by institutionalising meaningful stakeholder participation in governance processes. This includes expanding the involvement of students, early-career academics, and non-academic staff in councils, senates, and strategic planning structures (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Participatory training programmes and capacity-building initiatives should be introduced to ensure informed and effective engagement.
4. *Establish National Governance Capacity-Building Initiatives:* A national centre for governance development should be established under the Council on Higher Education (CHE) to provide training, benchmarking, and leadership development across institutions. Such a centre would support universities in aligning governance practices with constitutional values while remaining responsive to institutional and societal needs (Jansen, 2019).
5. *Promote Adaptive Governance and Innovation:* Universities should be supported in developing agile and responsive governance systems capable of learning from experience. This includes establishing internal monitoring and evaluation units, conducting regular institutional reviews, and allocating dedicated funding for governance innovation. Adaptive governance, as theorised by Chaffin et al. (2014), is particularly relevant in addressing the dynamic and unequal conditions of the South African higher education sector.
6. *Enhance Policy Coherence and Regulatory Simplicity:* Finally, the DHET and CHE should streamline regulatory frameworks to reduce unnecessary bureaucratic burdens, particularly in under-resourced institutions. Greater policy coherence and simplified regulatory processes would improve institutional efficiency and enable more effective governance implementation. Taken together, these recommendations provide a framework for recalibrating higher education governance in South Africa. Their successful implementation will depend on sustained political will, institutional commitment, and the active involvement of stakeholders across the sector.

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