

# **Rethinking higher education transformation and disability inclusion in South Africa: A synthesis of literature**

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## **Abstract**

The concept of ‘transformation’ underpins most of South Africa’s higher education (HE) inclusive education policies aimed at redressing the legacies of the apartheid segregated education system which deprived students with disabilities (SWDs) equal access to education on the grounds of race and disability. However, this legislative achievement has not translated to the meaningful inclusion for SWDs in terms of full participation and academic success because of exclusionary teaching and learning practices which favour their non-disabled peers. Despite this, there is a dearth of literature focusing on how higher education institutions (HEIs) are supporting the learning needs of SWDs in practice as most previous studies on transformation have focused on issues of gender, race and class at the cost of the inclusion of SWDs. We employed Dean’s (1961) approach to ‘alienation theory’ as an analytical framework to critically analyse South African literature on transformation and disability inclusion between 1994 and 2022. Our aim was to examine whether HE transformation-oriented discourse, policy framework and practices are inclusive and sensitive to the academic needs of SWDs. The study finds that achieving meaningful transformation for SWDs at most HEIs continues to be derailed by a top-down approach dominated by disability unit staff members, lecturers and the university management personnel stakeholders who are using their power, privilege and status to marginalise SWDs. The study also found that most of these stakeholders lack knowledge and awareness about current relevant HE disability inclusion and transformation policies as well as their responsibilities under the current inclusive education policy framework. In so doing, these stakeholders are upholding normative and prejudicial assumptions about what SWDs are and not capable of. Thus, negatively contributing to an ableist institutional culture which perpetuates the exclusion of SWDs on the grounds of disability. We conclude by calling for the need to question the current dominant oppressive and ableist HEIs’ institutional cultures which foster hierarchical and unequal power relations which disproportionately affect the full inclusion and academic success of SWDs. We recommend key stakeholders to rather promote the inculcation of an inclusive and non-alienating institutional culture which prioritise consultative dialogues with SWDs on how best

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to practically achieve the goals of transformation. It is hoped that the perspectives of SWDs may contribute to designing effective strategies of addressing the current alienating ableist cultural practices impeding meaningful inclusion, transformation and a sense of belonging of this group within HEIs.

**Keywords:** disability inclusion, transformation in higher education, students with disabilities, alienation, ableism