

# Higher Education Transformation Ethics and its discontents, antitheses and contradictions-the case of South Africa.

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2025 SU Transformation Indaba  
**Embarking on the Next Phase of  
Holistic Transformation**



# Introduction: Utopian dream vs Dystopian nightmare

- **Post-apartheid promise:**

Higher education in South Africa was reimagined around *equity, redress, inclusion*.

- **Present reality:**

- Slow, surface-level transformation

- Enduring *colonial logics* and *exclusionary institutional cultures*

- **Core Argument:**

There is a widening **gap between rhetoric and lived realities**, revealing *ethical fault lines*—moral and ideological contradictions.



# Key Concepts

- **Ethical fault lines:**

Unacknowledged contradictions between what institutions **claim** to value and what they **actually** practice.

- **Keywords:**

- **Antitheses:** Between stated values and practices

- **Disjunctures:** Between access and support

- **Fractures:** Within institutional culture and leadership

- **Ethics:** As the foundational lens for critique and transformation



# Transformation Anti-theses: The tale of contesting realities.



- “It is the best of times, it is the worst of times, it is the age of wisdom, it is the age of foolishness, it is the epoch of belief, it is the epoch of incredulity, it is the season of Light, it is the season of Darkness, it is the spring of hope, it is the winter of despair...”
- Charles Dickens-A tale of two cities



# Why should all this matter?

- **Celebrated changes:**
  - Demographic shifts
  - Strategic documents
  - Policy alignment
- **But beneath the surface:**
  - Black intellectual traditions remain marginalized
  - Institutional cultures still alienate
  - Students are forced to dramatize their pain (#FeesMustFall)
- **Main Claim:**

Transformation without ethical integrity becomes *performance*, not *progress*.

Do you have a seat at the table?  
Or do you have a place at the table?  
Or neither?  
The demographic composition of the people at the table is not nearly as important as the culture of the table.





“Having a seat at the table entails surviving, while having a place at the table connotes thriving.

- **Seat at the Table = Surviving**
- **Access without influence**
- Increased enrolment of Black students (post-1994)
- Structural barriers remain:
  - Alienating institutional culture
  - Eurocentric curricula
  - Language exclusion
- Students/staff present, but marginalized





# Access without influence ≠ Transformation

- **Place at the Table = Thriving**
- **Belonging + Power + Epistemic Recognition**
- #RhodesMustFall & #FeesMustFall: shift to **decolonial demands**
- Decolonized curricula, African knowledge systems
- Greater representation in leadership
- Afrocentric institutional identity
- Access without influence is decorative and performative but not transformational.
- **True transformation** = inclusion + recognition + institutional change
- ***Beyond thriving the lily in the valley, provides succor to other species.***



Two types of tables  
The institutional space and the  
personal space.

At the table organizational culture  
eats transformation strategy  
everyday for breakfast

Organizations do not change.  
People do. Organizations are  
aggregations of people. When  
people change organizations  
follow suit.

# A seat at the table gives you presence; A place at the table gives you belonging.

- In the absence of rejection, belonging is not something one man can give to another. It is something one must appropriate for oneself
- It is comforting to have a seat at the table, but it is uncomfortable not to belong.
- The commission captures a cry for belonging.

“In other words, although the university appears to have in its arsenal a formidable transformation apparatus, black students and staff members still feel unwelcome and excluded at the university.”

## Black students feel unwelcome at Stellenbosch University: Khampepe report

08 November 2022 - 19:56



**Ernest Mabuza**  
JOURNALIST

## Khampepe Commission report finds Stellenbosch University stuck in anti-transformation cycle



Se-Anne Rall | Published 2 years ago

They gave us seats; but they chose the menu.  
“You’re welcome to join — but don’t move the cutlery.”  
Do the previously marginalized groups have true power  
or an illusion of power?



### In Summary:

They gave us seats

Admission of diverse students/staff

Diversity policies exist

Inclusion in structures

Visible presence

But still chose the menu

Culture remains white/Afrikaans-centric

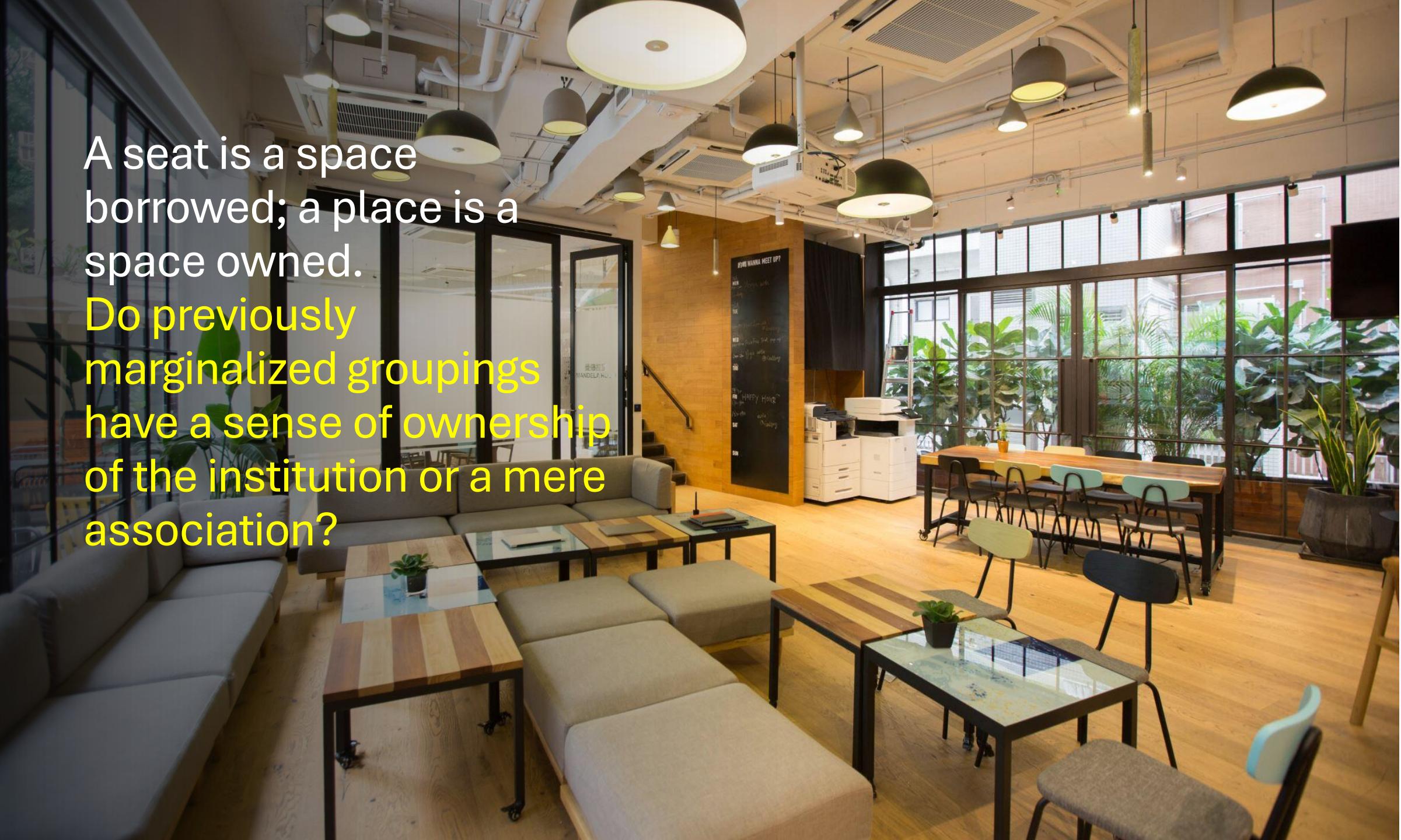
Lived experiences reflect marginalization

Exclusion from influence and power

Lack of cultural safety or belonging

A seat is a space  
borrowed; a place is a  
space owned.

Do previously  
marginalized groupings  
have a sense of ownership  
of the institution or a mere  
association?



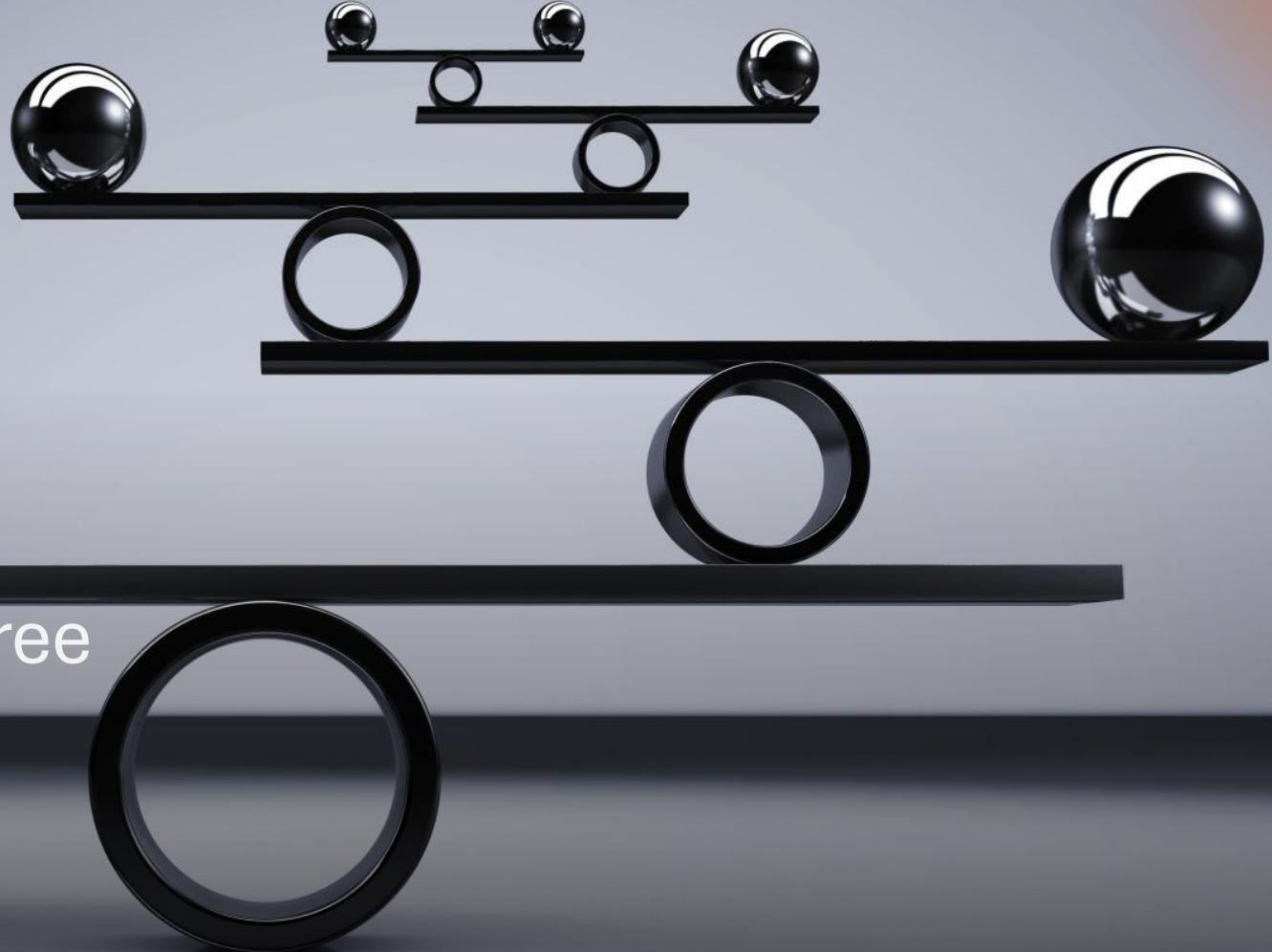
# Expectations-Outcomes Disconfirmation

The current frustration is a result of a disjuncture between what people expected from transformation and what they got-The TEMU Effect



Transformation **vs**  
**Transmogrification**  
**vs Transfiguration**

There can be no moral  
clarity without a proper  
understanding of the three  
phenomena.





## Summary Comparison Table

Concept	Meaning	Implication in Higher Education (SA)	Tone
Transformation	Structural, institutional change	Genuine but often slow process toward equity & inclusion	Neutral/Positive
Transmogrification	Distorted or absurd change	Superficial, dysfunctional, or tokenistic transformation	Critical/Negative
Transfiguration	Uplifting, deep moral/epistemic change	Spiritual, holistic reimaging of universities	Visionary/Positive

# "Equity adds — it doesn't subtract.

Transformation efforts that don't address the fears of the previously privileged will hit stormy waters.



"A seat at the table for others doesn't mean less for you — unless your position was built on their exclusion."



"Your rise doesn't mean their fall."

"A space at the table" does not require those already seated to make room — but they must make meaning with others.  
Making room is decorative but making meaning is transformative.



# It's not about stepping aside — it's about standing together.

- "To make space for others, I must reflect on how I've used the space I have."
- The shift: From **gatekeepers** to **co-participants**
- "Inclusion means the norms must evolve — not just the guest list."
- "You don't lose your voice by letting others speak — you strengthen the conversation."
- You do not strengthen your voice by shouting. You merely weaken your vocal cord and harm the other's eardrum.



We are not merely  
making space-we  
are remaking the  
space.

Now that we have addressed  
the diversity of our medical  
students, where is the module  
on alternative medicine?

If it were offered as an  
elective, how many of our  
students would freely enroll?

# Expanding the table isn't synonymous with reshaping the table.

- "Expanding the table asks who else can come in. Reshaping the table asks what needs to change now that we're all here."

# ?Questions to ponder?

01

What privileges  
do I hold at my  
table?

02

How do I  
respond when  
others ask for  
space?

03

Am I willing to  
help **reshape**  
**the table**, not  
just expand it?

# Key Findings– Disjunctures and Contradictions

Curriculum:	Access vs. Support:	Governance and Leadership:	Marketisation & Repression:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Eurocentric content persists</li><li>• Decolonisation remains rhetorical</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improved access</li><li>• BUT: High dropout rates, inadequate housing, limited psychosocial support</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exclusion of Black women in senior roles</li><li>• Hierarchical, undemocratic decision-making</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Neoliberal policies contradict social justice ideals</li><li>• Repressive responses to activism</li></ul>

# Key Findings-Antitheses



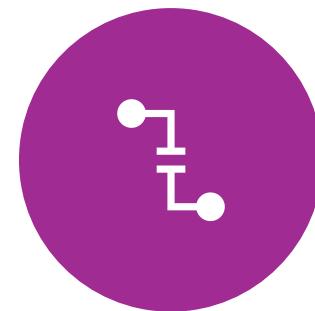
INSTITUTIONS CLAIM JUSTICE BUT  
PRACTICE EXCLUSION



THEY TOUT TRANSFORMATION  
BUT MAINTAIN COLONIAL NORMS



THEY SEEK INCLUSION BUT  
SUPPRESS ACTIVIST VOICES



THESE CONTRADICTIONS ARE NOT  
INCIDENTAL—THEY ARE  
STRUCTURAL AND ETHICAL  
FAILURES.

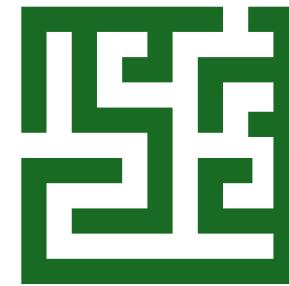
# Conclusion

- Transformation requires more than incremental reform—it demands ethical rupture. We all must abandon the illusion of change, confront our complicity in systemic injustice, and commit to decolonial, democratic, and morally grounded transformation. Without radical ethical reckoning, the pursuit of justice in higher education will remain compromised and incomplete.

# Final Provocation



“Without ethical integrity, the pursuit of transformation is a carefully managed illusion.”



Let us not confuse *change management* with *moral courage*.