

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

George Rugare Chingarande, Phd.

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.



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Key Concepts

- Ethical fault lines:**

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

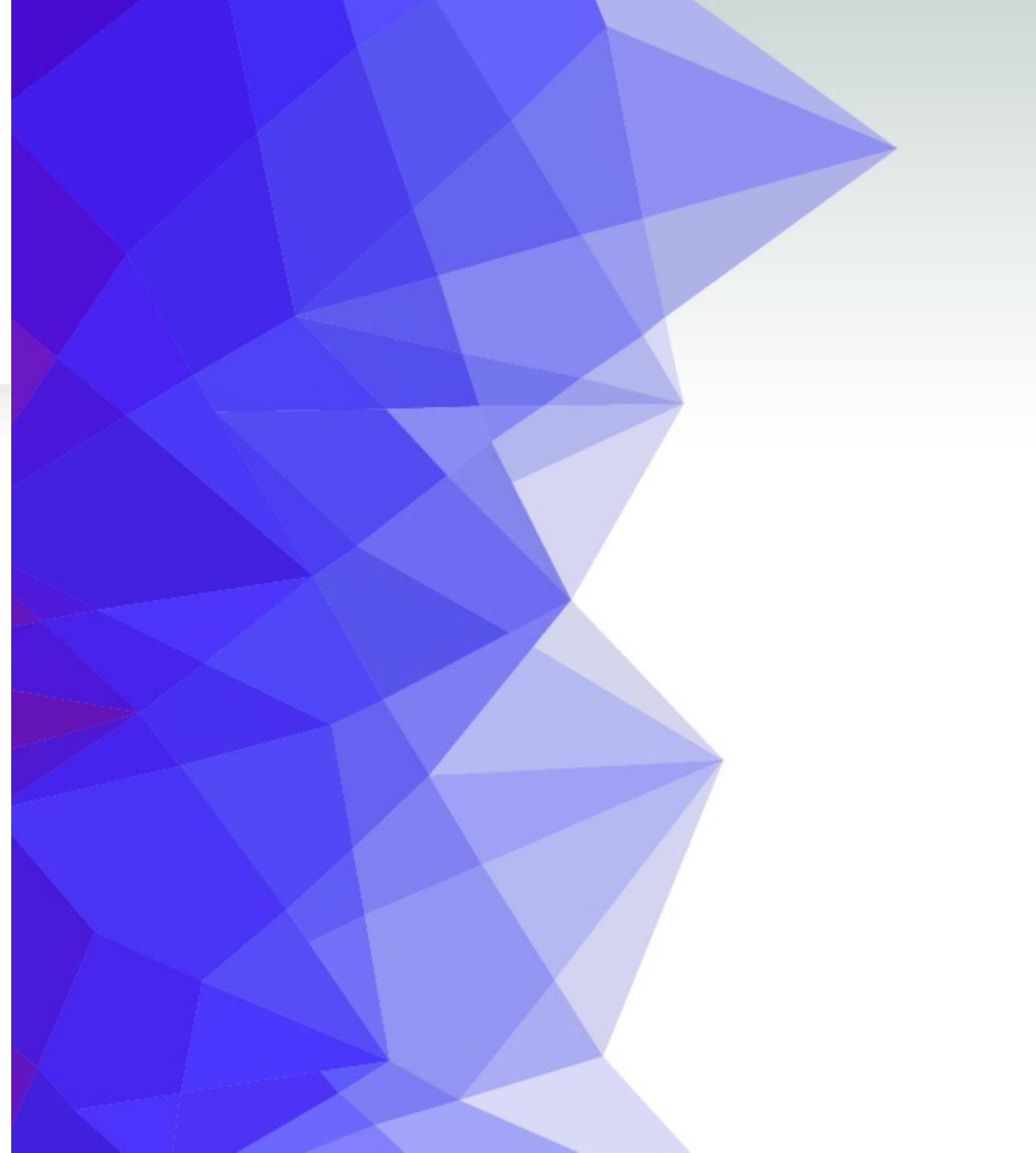
- Keywords:**



- Antitheses:** Between stated values and practices

- Disjunctures:** Between access and support

- Fractures:** Within institutional culture and leadership

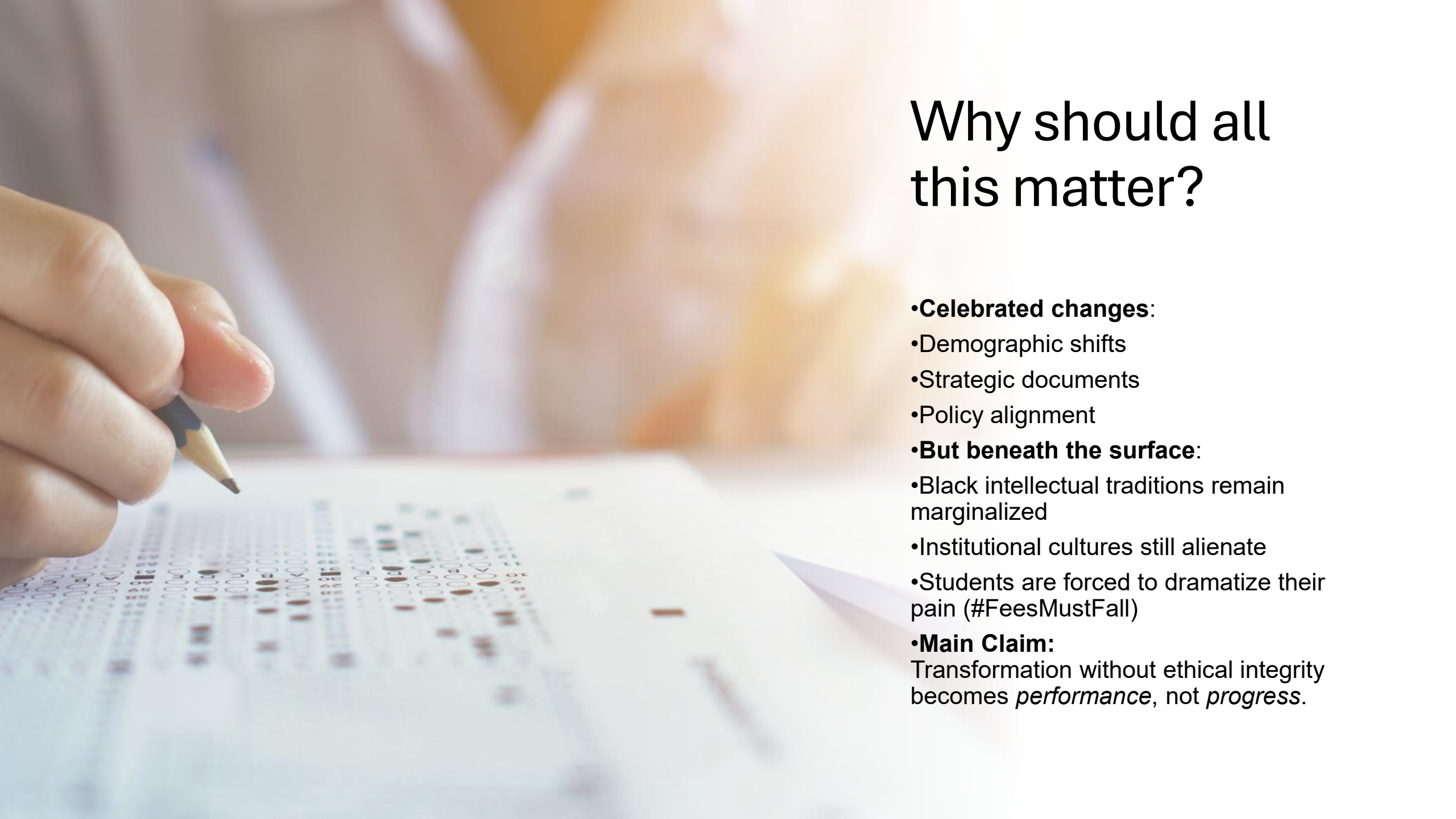
- Ethics:** As the foundational lens for critique and transformation





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

A hand holding a pencil is positioned over a document that features a grid of small circles, some of which are filled with color. The background is blurred, showing a person in a white lab coat. The overall scene suggests a scientific or academic context.

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.***

The background of the slide is a photograph of an outdoor cafe or terrace. It features several white, square tables and matching white chairs with curved backs. The furniture is arranged on a light-colored, square-tiled floor. Strong shadows are cast by the tables and chairs, indicating bright sunlight from the upper right. The overall scene is clean and minimalist.

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.**

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

“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.”

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

But still chose the menu

Admission of diverse students/staff

Culture remains white/Afrikaans-centric

Diversity policies exist

Lived experiences reflect marginalization

Inclusion in structures

Exclusion from influence and power

Visible presence

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?



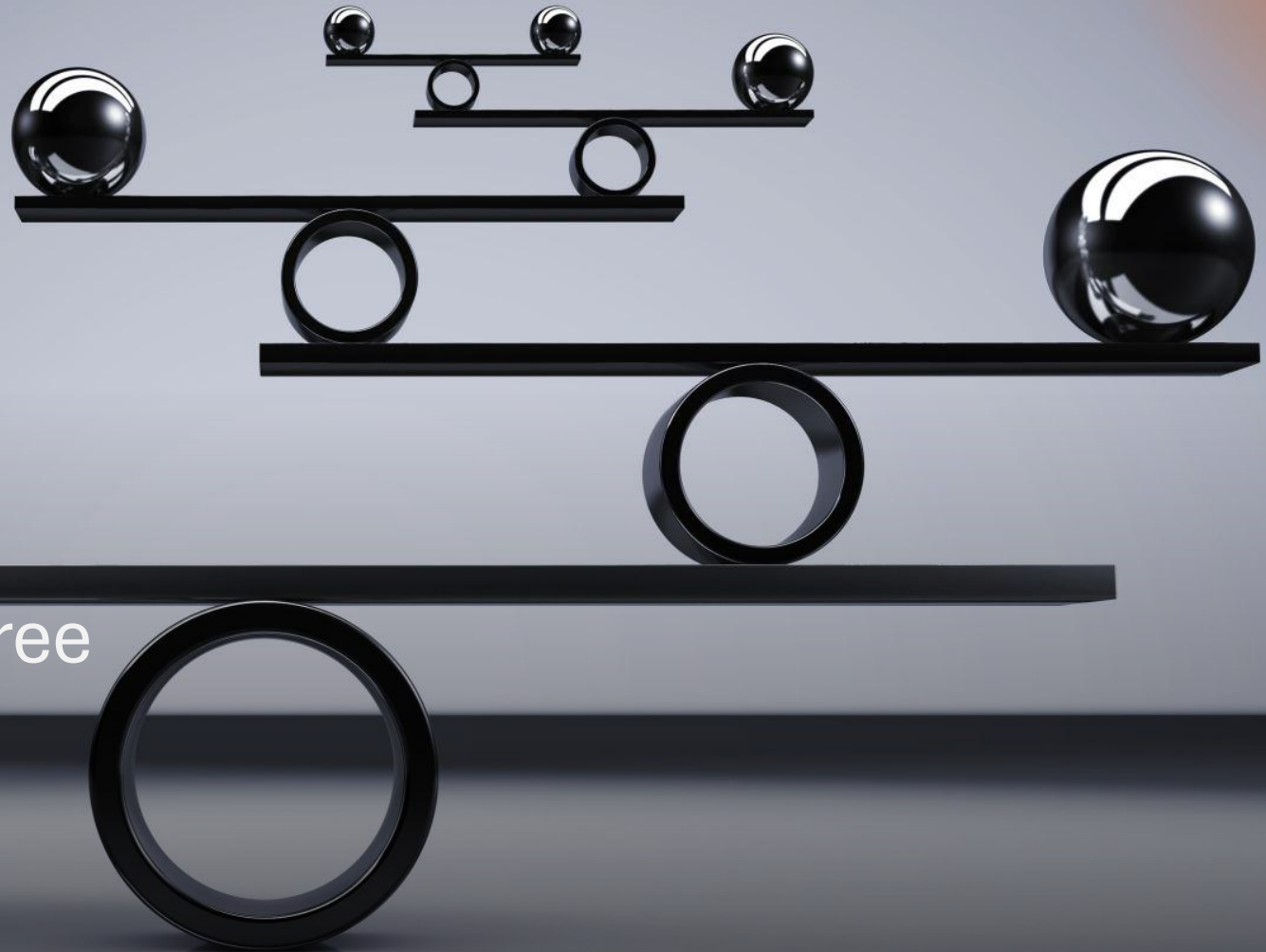
Expectations-Outcomes Disconfirmation

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 reimagining 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:

- Eurocentric content persists
- Decolonisation remains rhetorical

Access vs. Support:

- Improved access
- BUT: High dropout rates, inadequate housing, limited psychosocial support

Governance and Leadership:

- Exclusion of Black women in senior roles
- Hierarchical, undemocratic decision-making

Marketisation & Repression:

- Neoliberal policies contradict social justice ideals
- Repressive responses to activism

Key Findings-Antitheses



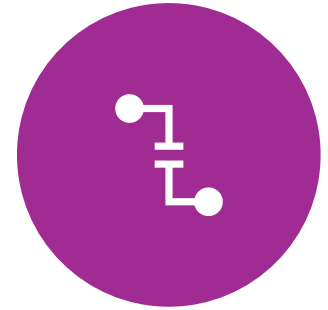
INSTITUTIONS CLAIM **JUSTICE** BUT
PRACTICE **EXCLUSION**



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.**

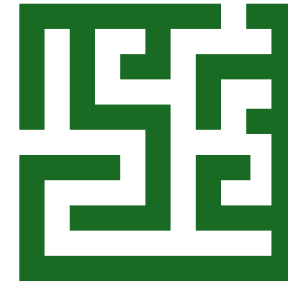
Conclusion

- 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*.