

Research Article

Cite this article: Kanyopa, T. J., & Mokhele-Makgalwa, M. (2026). Enhancing Academic Diversity among Staff in South African Universities: Strategic Approaches for Addressing. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 24, e2026083.
<https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2026.24.83>

Received August 13, 2025

Accepted November 14, 2025

Keywords: Academic diversity, equity, higher education, inclusion, inequality, strategic approaches, transformation

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Enhancing Academic Diversity among Staff in South African Universities: Strategic Approaches for Addressing Inequality

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Abstract

Background/purpose. The study aimed to explore a strategic approach to address inequalities that exist among academic staff in South African universities. To achieve this aim, the study was guided by two main objectives, namely, to examine the current state of academic staff diversity in South African universities and to propose strategic, evidence-based approaches that South African universities can adopt to address inequality and build inclusive academic environments.

Materials/methods. A mixed-methods approach was employed to investigate diversity among staff in South African universities. An interpretive research paradigm was adopted as a lens to provide a comprehensive overview of the diverse institutional structures employed for academic staff employment in South African universities. Furthermore, the study utilized questionnaires and reflective writing to collect data; an explanatory data analysis (EDA) was also employed to analyze the collected data.

Results. The study revealed that academic staff demographics in South African universities continue to be skewed, with a notable underrepresentation of certain racial and gender groups. This means that the composition of academic staff at some South African universities does not accurately reflect the country's broader population demographics. In addition, although South African universities operate under employment equity policies and a broader transformation agenda, the implementation of these policies remains inconsistent. A lack of effective accountability mechanisms often hinders it.

Conclusion. The study highlights proactive and adaptive critical steps toward building an equitable and representative higher education sector in South Africa. Despite existing policies and frameworks, this study argues that enhancing diversity among academic staff in South African universities will succeed only through deliberate, sustained, and systemic strategies that address institutional biases, promote equitable recruitment and retention practices, and foster inclusive workplace cultures.



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1. Introduction

Literature reflects a substantial increase in studies addressing equality and transformation in South Africa's higher education sector since 1994. However, much of this research has concentrated on the inclusion and integration of diverse student populations, while issues of staff diversity and equity within academic spaces remain largely underexplored. In essence, after the attainment of democracy in 1994, South African higher education remained overwhelmingly dominated by white male academics. A 20-year review of the sector by Maringe and Prew (2015) revealed that 92 percent of employees in higher education were white, while the combined representation of black, colored, and Indian South Africans accounted for only 8 percent of the academic workforce. Makhanya and Botha (2015) further confirmed that such inequalities were not confined to academic positions but were also evident in non-academic roles such as management, administration, technical services, and other professional categories within universities.

In 2001, the National Commission on Higher Education reported that, with the introduction of new higher education policies and legislation aimed at transforming institutions, there had been slight shifts toward greater staff diversity and inclusion (Alexander, 2005; Botha, 2015; Cloete, 2014). However, more than three decades after the end of apartheid, research shows that the staffing profile of South African universities remains polarized along racial and gender lines (Jackson, 2023; Keebine-Sibanda, 2021; Lumadi, 2021). As Magida et al. (2024) observed, "the composition of the workforce still does not reflect the country's demographics" (p. 7), indicating that one racial and gender group continues to dominate the sector.

The pace of transformation has been described as frustratingly slow (Dlamini & Dlamini, 2024). In addition, scholars such as Raciti and Motala (2025) and Wheeler and Wiese (2025) attributed delays in transforming the sector to the absence of critical measures needed to demolish the remaining apartheid legacy, which continues to shape historical inequalities. Consequently, the literature consistently points to the urgent need for radical transformation to address persistent inequalities and challenge the dominance of mainstream structures that hinder inclusivity in higher education institutions (Gumede, 2020; Keebine-Sibanda, 2021; Mzangwa, 2019).

As such, this study maintains that diversity among academic staff in South African universities must be reimagined to reflect a non-racial, non-sexist agenda, in line with transformation efforts across other sectors of society. This study also argues that enhancing diversity among university academic staff is vital because higher education plays a fundamental role in shaping the country's social, political, and economic values. Moreover, as a key driver of knowledge production and societal change, higher education has the responsibility to model inclusivity and inspire broader societal transformation (Kanyopa, 2025).

Given the limited literature on how the higher education sector can effectively promote academic staff diversity, this study is significant for its potential to identify strategies to advance diversity and address systemic inequalities within South African universities. To achieve this, the study seeks to answer the following research questions.

1. What is the current situation of academic staff diversity in South African universities?
2. How can academic staff diversity be enhanced in South African universities?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Theoretical framework: Institutional transformation

This study is grounded in the institutional transformation framework, which emphasizes the need for institutions to undergo meaningful transitions to respond to the evolving needs, aspirations, and demands of diverse populations (Alexander, 2005; Tunji-Olayeni et al., 2025). In this context, the

concept of transformation refers to comprehensive changes in the political, economic, socio-cultural, and educational structures of institutions. Manning (2017) argued that institutional transformation theory seeks to introduce entirely new configurations of power relations within institutional environments, thereby disrupting entrenched systems of privilege and exclusion.

Institutional transformation theory recognizes that change is not limited to surface-level adjustments but often entails profound transitions in both core and sub-processes, affecting all members of the institution (Berthod, 2023; Mpofu et al., 2024). Such transformation requires revisiting and reconfiguring policies, governance structures, resource allocation, and decision-making processes to align with the imperatives of equity and inclusivity.

Within the context of this study, the framework was employed to interrogate and challenge the structural configurations of staff recruitment, retention, and promotion in South African higher education. The sector continues to be marked by the systematic underrepresentation and marginalization of historically excluded groups, including women, persons of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, and black African, Indian, and colored people. By applying the institutional transformation lens, this study positions diversity enhancement not as an optional reform but as a structural necessity for eradicating historical inequalities and ensuring that higher education institutions embody the democratic values they are mandated to uphold.

2.2. Related literature review

Although some scholars, such as Munyanyi and Mothibi (2024) and Mashwama and Madubela (2024), have reported a gradual increase in the appointment of previously marginalized groups to academic positions in South African universities since 2010, the body of literature consistently shows that white men remain the dominant demographic, particularly at the professorial rank (Kanyopa et al., 2024; Walker, 2018). According to the 2022 census report, academic staff demographics in South Africa show that approximately 77 percent of professor-level posts ($n = 2186$) in higher education are occupied by whites, while other racial groups collectively hold only 23 percent of such positions ($n = 602$) (Magida et al., 2024).

Staff diversity in South African universities is widely acknowledged as essential for fostering more inclusive, relevant, and socially responsive educational experiences for students (Lumadi, 2021; Wheeler & Wiese, 2025). Increasing diversity among academic staff not only addresses historical inequalities but also improves the quality of teaching and learning and advances the principles of social justice within higher education institutions (Keebine-Sibanda, 2021; Tunji-Olayeni et al., 2025). A diverse academic workforce is better positioned to understand and respond to the specific needs and challenges of a varied student body and the broader South African society (Berthod, 2023; Mpofu et al., 2024). Moreover, Jackson (2023) and Manning (2017) argued that diversity in academia enriches research by introducing varied perspectives, approaches, and insights into problem-solving, ultimately leading to more innovative and impactful scholarship.

This study, therefore, asserts that enhancing academic staff diversity is a critical pillar of transformation in the South African higher education sector. It is not merely a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity to dismantle entrenched inequalities and create equitable, inclusive teaching and learning environments that reflect the country's democratic ideals.

3. Methodology

Research methodology refers to the process the researcher follows to conduct and report the study, ensuring the validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

3.1. Research approach

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach. Mixed-methods research is an approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data within a single study (Taheri & Okumus, 2024). This approach was adopted to provide a nuanced understanding of a research issue from both statistical and qualitative data. In this study, qualitative data were used to complement the quantitative data, providing richer and more valid findings. Furthermore, an interpretive research paradigm was adopted as the guiding lens, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the diverse institutional structures influencing academic staff recruitment and employment practices in the sector.

3.2. Research design

This study employed an explanatory research design, with the quantitative approach implemented first, followed by the qualitative approach (Mambang et al., 2022). An explanatory design is a research design that seeks to answer the “why” and “how” questions by deeply exploring the underlying research problem (Wipulanusat et al., 2020). This design helped this study to explain the why and how of the current state of academic staff diversity in South African universities. The design provided the study with accurate details on academic staff diversity and informed future dynamic strategies to ensure effectiveness in South African universities.

3.3. Research participants

The study's research settings and participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling methods. These are non-probability sampling methods that allowed us to select participants and research sites based on their accessibility, availability, and relevance to the study phenomenon (Kanyopa, 2018). The purposive and convenience sampling methods were employed because “they are useful for quick data generation and ideal for the targeted sample population to gain in-depth knowledge about a particular group or phenomenon” (Andrade, 2021, p. 87). Therefore, the sample population in this study comprised one hundred (100) academic staff from five (5) South African universities, that is, twenty (20) participants from each university. The sample comprised forty-five (45) female academics, forty-five (45) male academics, and ten (10) academics of other gender orientations.

3.4. Data generation instrument

In line with the research approach and research design of this study, data were generated using a 6-point Likert-scale survey questionnaire and reflective writing. According to Batterton and Hale (2017) and Kanyopa et al. (2024), a 6-point Likert scale is effective for measuring individuals' satisfaction levels, behaviors, attitudes, and perspectives on a given issue. The 6-point Likert-scale data generation method was useful for this study because it provided a greater range while eliminating lower-end choices and encouraging more nuanced responses (Okunbanjo et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the study employed reflective writing as the second data generation method. Reflective writing, as noted by Kanyopa (2022), allows for the interpretation and analysis of participants' lived experiences and insights. A total of twenty-five (25) participants (5 from each university) were invited to write a reflective paragraph detailing their experiences throughout their academic careers within South African universities. Hence, the participants' reflections complemented their responses to the 6-point Likert-scale questionnaire.

In this study, the combination of the questionnaire and reflective writing proved valuable for examining situations, events, and concepts with direct implications for people's lives. These methods not only revealed what is happening in South African universities regarding staff diversity but also

uncovered how academic staff's experiences influence their perspectives and relationships within their professional environments.

3.5. Data analysis

Explanatory data analysis (EDA) was employed to examine the quantitative data collected via the 6-point Likert-scale questionnaires. Explanatory data analysis aims to identify useful patterns in data to better understand the research issue (Mambang et al., 2022). In this study, EDA allowed us to gain an in-depth understanding of the characteristics of the current state of academic staff diversity in South African universities. Furthermore, the study employed thematic analysis, which is a qualitative data analysis method focused on identifying, explaining, and interpreting patterns and codes emerging from the data (Labra et al., 2020).

3.6. Trustworthiness of the study

In this study, the credibility, validity, and appropriateness of the findings were ensured by employing methodological triangulation using two data-generation methods, as explained above. Additionally, the study's trustworthiness was enhanced by meticulously recording both quantitative and qualitative data throughout the study. In line with this, all transcribed data were presented to the participants for checking and to ensure that the interpretation and analysis were carried out correctly. The following sections present and discuss the themes that emerged from this analysis.

4. Results

This section presents and discusses findings on diversity among academic staff in South African universities. Drawing from participants' responses, the analysis revealed critical insights into the current state and dynamics of staff diversity within the sector. The findings highlight patterns of representation, the persistence of historical inequalities, and the institutional practices shaping employment demographics. Through careful thematic analysis of both the survey data and participants' reflective narratives, two overarching themes emerged, capturing the key issues and perspectives raised by respondents. These themes not only illustrate the extent and nature of diversity within universities but also shed light on the underlying factors influencing inclusivity, equity, and transformation in the academic workforce.

4.1. The current situation of academic staff diversity in South African universities

This theme emerged from the data generated to address the study's first objective, which sought to explore the current state of academic staff diversity in South African universities. Analysis of the questionnaire responses revealed that the staff demographic remains characterized by unequal racial representation, ineffective equity and inclusion policies, an institutional culture that inadequately supports diversity, and limited representation of diverse gender orientations in leadership positions. These findings suggest that while policies promoting transformation exist, their implementation and impact on staff diversity remain limited, resulting in persistent disparities within the academic workforce. The following sub-sections present sub-themes on the current state of academic staff diversity in South African universities.

4.1.1. Ineffective equity and inclusion policies

Participants' responses indicate that ineffective equity and inclusion policies are due to a lack of strong leadership commitment and accountability. The findings reveal that these failures often manifest as persistent bias and a lack of meaningful engagement with academic staff, particularly for those from underrepresented groups. The following comments were derived from participants' reflective writing:

"Our diversity in our university does not reflect the whole country's racial demographics."

“People with disabilities are largely absent among the academic staff population.”

“Practically, our universities are still operating under the favoritism of certain demographic groups over others.”

These perspectives highlight the persistence of structural inequality despite decades of transformation discourse. The study postulates that ineffective equity and inclusion policies reinforce hierarchical, top-down management structures within universities. Such systems hinder participatory decision-making, limit accountability, and obscure progress in tracking academic staff participation and diversity outcomes. This aligns with Breetzke and Hedding (2018), who argued that transformation in South African universities remains uneven due to limited leadership support and weak monitoring mechanisms. Similarly, Lumadi (2021) and Maringe and Prew (2015) emphasized that transformation can only succeed when university leadership expands search and recruitment committees to ensure diverse representation and transparent accountability structures. This implies that without leadership commitment and measurable accountability frameworks, equity policies risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative instruments.

4.1.2. Lack of visible diverse gender orientation in leadership

Data analysis revealed that while many South African universities initiate diversity programs, these often fail to explicitly recognize and address diverse gender orientations as part of their success indicators. This omission makes it difficult to monitor how many academic staff identify within or outside the binary gender system. The absence of such recognition not only limits the accuracy of demographic data but also undermines efforts to create truly inclusive leadership structures. Participants’ reflections highlighted this gap as follows:

“Other gender orientations are underrepresented in senior academic levels as well as in leadership roles.”

“I feel like promotion criteria disadvantage academic staff from underrepresented groups.”

“The recruitment process at my university does not actively promote gender diversity at all.”

“Our institutional culture excludes and marginalizes certain gender orientations of academic staff”

The findings suggest that a lack of recognition of diverse gender identities fosters marginalization and invisibility within academic spaces, leading to hostile work environments that affect both well-being and performance. Kanyopa (2025) and Letuma (2023) confirmed that environments lacking visible gender diversity contribute to alienation, anxiety, and reduced participation among non-binary and gender-diverse academics.

Additionally, the failure to collect inclusive gender data undermines evidence-based policy development. Munyanyi and Mothibi (2024) affirmed that the poor recognition of diverse gender orientations ultimately affects academic performance, social integration, and mental health, while Sitoyi and Buthelezi (2025) added that institutional neglect of non-binary staff can perpetuate microaggressions and bias. Furthermore, the findings underscore the need for leadership training and mentorship programs that intentionally empower underrepresented gender groups (Botha, 2015; Mzangwa, 2019).

4.1.3. Power dynamics hindering transformation

Data analysis revealed both overt and subtle power dynamics that significantly hinder transformation in South African universities. This study also found that issues such as ineffective communication, poor collaboration, and unequal decision-making opportunities contribute to

misunderstanding among academic staff in South African universities. Narrative responses from the participants demonstrated this:

“With existing power dynamics in our university, most of us are hesitant to speak up or share our ideas.”

“Power dynamics always result in information distortion as our leaders will only share what benefits their interests”

“It is true... power dynamics contribute to existing social hierarchies which tend to marginalize certain groups in our university.”

The findings suggest that power hierarchies perpetuate privilege and exclusion, particularly among senior management structures that are resistant to change. These dynamics sustain a culture of fear and silence, thereby limiting transformation initiatives. Mashwama and Madubela (2024) similarly noted that “individuals may actively resist efforts to change as transformation can threaten their privileges or influence” (p. 47). Furthermore, institutional culture transformation, as supported by Dlamini and Dlamini (2024) and Magida et al. (2024), is essential for demolishing hierarchies and fostering open communication. This study argues that cultural change in South African universities must accompany policy reform by integrating anti-bias and cultural competence training to address unconscious bias and challenge dominant power relations.

Table 1 presents a descriptive statistical analysis of the 6-point Likert-scale questionnaire.

Table 1. Summary of questionnaire data

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score
1. Equal racial representation	33%	24%	15%	14%	7%	7%	2.59
2. Diverse gender orientation in leadership	37%	28%	10%	10%	10%	5%	2.43
3. Effective equity and inclusion policies	32%	28%	11%	9%	10%	10%	2.67
4. Persistence of power dynamics that hinder transformation	6%	7%	10%	18%	24%	35%	4.52
5. Effective employment equity policies	30%	25%	18%	15%	8%	4%	2.58
6. Supportive institutional culture for diversity and inclusion	35%	28%	22%	5%	5%	5%	2.32

Some of the questionnaire statements received a high number of strongly disagree ratings. These statements include issues of power dynamics that hinder transformation, with the highest mean score of 4.52, followed by unequal racial representation ($M = 2.59$), ineffective employment equity policies ($M = 2.58$), and other statements, as shown in the table above.

Notwithstanding this, this finding reveals that persistent power dynamics in South African universities hinder the transformation agenda of the higher education sector and limit the effectiveness of social movements such as Gender Identity Equality (GIE). In addition, about 35% of

the sample strongly disagreed with the statement about the diversity of gender representation in leadership positions.

Drawing on the findings of the first theme, which examined the current state of academic staff diversity in South African universities, this study suggests that enhancing staff diversity is a critical step toward building an equitable and representative higher education sector in South Africa. Therefore, the transformation agenda will only be successful if deliberate, sustained, and evidence-based approaches are adopted to help South African universities move beyond symbolic gestures and actively embrace diversity for institutional excellence and social justice for all.

4.2. Proposed strategic approaches for enhancing academic staff diversity in South African universities

To address the second research objective, this study highlighted the need for actionable interventions that moved beyond compliance to achieve sustainable staff diversity in South African universities. Overall, the data analysis revealed that enhancing academic staff diversity requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both structural and cultural barriers to inclusion and diversity.

4.2.1. Targeted recruitment and retention policies

Literature defines targeted recruitment and retention policy as the process of prioritizing inclusion and diversity in the process of hiring and keeping employees who align with an institution's specific goals and needs (Munyanyi & Mothibi, 2024; Walker, 2018). Thus, to enhance academic staff diversity in South African universities, participants of this study propose open job advertisements that intentionally seek out a qualified diverse population, to ensure that the transformation agenda is not stalled. In this regard, in their reflective writing, some participants revealed that:

"Recruitment process should actively target underrepresented racial, gender, and ethnic groups."

"It is important that all employees are coupled with retention incentives such as career development, mentorship sessions, etc., to enhance equitable promotion pathways for all."

The responses of the participants of the study align with the findings of Keebine-Sibanda (2021), who asserted that transformation in higher education cannot be achieved without deliberate and transparent recruitment mechanisms that attract a diverse pool of candidates. Similarly, Kanyopa et al. (2024) and Magida et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of expanding search committees and diversifying appointment panels to avoid bias and ensure inclusivity. Furthermore, this study maintains that the retention process must go hand in hand with recruitment. This will offer professional development, mentoring, and equitable promotion opportunities, which can significantly enhance staff satisfaction and retention (Wheeler & Wiese, 2025). This study, therefore, sustains that diversity will not occur by chance; it must be intentionally embedded in recruitment and retention frameworks to create an equitable and representative academic workforce.

4.2.2. Leadership development programs for underrepresented groups

Participants of this study also proposed leadership development programs for underrepresented groups. The focus of these programs should be on tailoring support, resources, and inclusive opportunities that will help academic staff from marginalized communities to advance and occupy leadership roles. Participants of the study further mentioned that:

"Leadership development programs will eradicate systemic barriers while promoting inclusivity and equity to the diverse academic staff population."

"It is important for these programs to target training on topics such as unconscious bias, inclusive leadership skills, and practices to build cultural competence among academic staff."

These findings are consistent with the arguments of Gumede (2020) and Mzangwa (2019), who advocated for leadership programs that empower women and other marginalized groups to navigate institutional barriers and assume leadership responsibilities. Similarly, Jackson (2023) and Munyanyi and Mothibi (2024) stressed that building a diverse academic leadership pipeline is central to sustaining transformation and avoiding tokenistic representation. This study states that leadership training programs should mainly focus on inclusive practices, equity-based decision-making, and mentorship to cultivate a new generation of leaders committed to transformation. Furthermore, the study contends that developing leadership capacity among underrepresented groups not only diversifies senior management structures but also drives institutional cultural change from the top down.

4.2.3. Institutional cultural change

Participants of this study proposed a shift in institutional culture through the promotion of diversity awareness training, anti-discriminatory workshops, and inclusive decision-making processes that value diverse perspectives. In this regard, participants commented as follows:

“Transformation in our universities should start with institutional norms and values to align with new strategic goals that address exclusion and inequalities.”

“It is crucial for our universities to employ strategic shifts that replace outdated and inherited cultures with ones that foster diverse perceptions, innovations, and positive teaching and learning outcomes for all.”

This finding resonates with the arguments by Dlamini and Dlamini (2024) and Magida et al. (2024), who maintained that institutional transformation is impossible without changing entrenched attitudes and practices that perpetuate exclusion. Similarly, Munyanyi and Mothibi (2024) advocated for anti-bias and cultural-competence training as integral components of institutional transformation, while Kanyopa (2025) underscored the role of inclusive decision-making processes that recognize diverse perspectives and promote equity across academic structures. In this regard, an inclusive institutional culture must therefore encourage open dialogue, transparency, and shared accountability for diversity outcomes. As Walker (2018) noted, transformation efforts often fail when leadership neglects involving staff meaningfully in the process. Consequently, this study asserts that cultural transformation should not only be policy-driven but must also be reflected in the everyday attitudes, behaviors, and practices of academic staff.

5. Discussion

This study revealed that enhancing academic staff diversity in South African universities requires a multifaceted and strategic approach that deliberately addresses entrenched inequalities in staff representation. Achieving meaningful inclusivity and equity demands more than policy compliance. This study maintains that the process requires sustained institutional commitment to redressing the country’s historical imbalances. To ensure inclusivity and diversity among academic staff, this study views targeted recruitment and retention as essential to correcting the country’s historical imbalances and ensuring that equity and equality are intentional during the appointment of academic staff in South African universities. This finding aligns with the arguments of Cloete (2014), Kanyopa et al. (2024), and Mashwama and Madubela (2024), who emphasized that universities should broaden their search committees to include diverse representation and proactively encourage applications from historically underrepresented groups. In this context, diversity should not be treated as an administrative target but rather as an institutional value that shapes recruitment, development, and leadership opportunities.

Accordingly, targeted recruitment and retention strategies were identified by Gumede (2020) as crucial mechanisms for transforming the academic workforce. This includes expanding the search for

candidates beyond traditional networks, ensuring fair hiring practices, and developing equitable promotion pathways. Such measures are vital for rectifying the racial and gender disparities that persist in academic staffing (Dlamini & Dlamini, 2024; Lumadi, 2021).

The findings also reveal that the establishment of leadership training programs, particularly for underrepresented groups, is crucial for enhancing academic staff diversity in South African universities. Participants recommended that underrepresented groups, such as women, early-career academics, and non-binary individuals, be considered in the creation of a diverse senior management staff complement. Hence, South African universities must implement intentional strategies that prepare these groups for leadership roles. This includes mentorship initiatives, succession planning, and leadership development programs tailored to their needs. As supported by Munyanyi and Mothibi (2024) and Raciti and Motala (2025), developing a diverse leadership pipeline ensures that transformation efforts are sustainable and not tokenistic. Similarly, Mpofu et al. (2024) argued that leadership training programs targeting marginalized groups are essential for fostering institutional cultures that value diversity and inclusion.

Moreover, the study's findings point to the transformation of institutional culture as a critical component of enhancing academic staff diversity. Policies alone are insufficient unless accompanied by genuine attitudinal and behavioral shifts within the academic community (Lumadi, 2021). This study maintains that creating inclusive institutional cultures is vital to South African universities, which requires embedding anti-discriminatory practices, promoting cultural competence, and ensuring psychologically safe environments where all staff members can thrive. Studies such as those by Dlamini and Dlamini (2024) and Magida et al. (2024) agree that institutional policy change must go hand in hand with a shift in individuals' attitudes for its success. In addition, Letuma (2023) noted that institutional cultural change should include anti-bias and cultural-competence training for all university academic staff.

All in all, the unique contribution of the findings in this study lies in its holistic framing of academic staff diversity as both a structural and a cultural imperative, integrating leadership development and institutional policy reform. While previous studies have often treated these dimensions separately, this research demonstrates their interdependence and emphasizes that sustainable transformation requires that attention be paid to all these dimensions simultaneously. By offering this integrated framework, the study maintains that inclusive decision-making, recognition of diverse perspectives, and transparent dialogue on gender, race, and inequality play a crucial role in creating diversity awareness and inclusivity among academic staff in South African universities.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the current situation of academic staff diversity in South African universities and to identify strategic approaches for enhancing such diversity. The findings reveal that while universities have made some progress in transforming their academic workforce since 1994, significant inequalities persist. However, the issue of racial and gender imbalances remains apparent, as well as the representation of historically marginalized groups, particularly black women and persons with disabilities, which this study views as an obstacle to the national transformation agenda. These inequalities highlight that policy intentions have not always translated into equitable representation and inclusion at higher education institutions.

In response to the second research question, the study identified several strategic measures for enhancing academic staff diversity. These include implementing targeted recruitment and retention programs, strengthening mentorship and professional development initiatives for underrepresented academics, and fostering inclusive institutional cultures that go beyond compliance. Drawing from the findings of this study, leadership accountability, transparent promotion pathways, and resource allocation were recognized as essential drivers of sustainable transformation. Overall, the study

contributes to the ongoing discourse on equality and transformation in the South African higher education sector by moving the conversation beyond student diversity to focus on academic staff equity. It emphasizes that true transformation requires systemic change, guided by evidence-based strategies and strong leadership commitment. By embedding diversity within institutional culture and everyday practices, universities can not only redress historical inequalities but also enhance academic excellence, innovation, and social relevance within a globally competitive higher education landscape.

7. Suggestion

Based on the findings, this study suggests that enhancing academic diversity among staff in South African universities demands sustained, intentional, and evidence-based strategies. Universities should implement proactive recruitment policies that deliberately target underrepresented groups, coupled with pipeline development initiatives that nurture future academics from postgraduate through early-career stages. Retention strategies must be strengthened by creating equitable promotion systems, fair workload distribution, and accessible research support. Leadership transformation should be prioritized to ensure greater representation of historically marginalized groups in senior management roles. Furthermore, institutional culture must be reshaped through anti-bias training, inclusive program structures, and the recognition of diverse perspectives. Collectively, these measures will not only address historical inequalities but also foster a more inclusive, innovative, and representative academic staff workforce that reflects the diversity of South African society.

Declarations

Author Contributions. T. J. K: Conceptualization of study, research methodology, and data generation and analysis. M. M. M: Drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript, and editing and reviewing the final draft. All authors have read and approved the final version of the article.

Conflict of Interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding. No funding supported this study.

Ethical Approval. Ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, anonymity, and informed consent were well maintained. The study was approved by the General Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State with registration number REC-11922-058.

Data Availability Statement. The data generated for this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgments. The authors thank all academic staff who voluntarily participated in the study, regardless of their teaching and administration responsibilities.

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