



A Critical Reflection of Higher Education in the Era of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall: A South African Perspective

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Abstract

This study critically examines the transformation of South African higher education following the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements (2015–2017), which challenged racialised institutional cultures, Eurocentric epistemologies and neoliberal governance. Anchored in decolonial theory and critical pedagogy – drawing on Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, Paulo Freire and scholars of pluriversal knowledge systems – the study situates ‘Fallist’ activism within broader critiques of corporatisation, managerialism, and statutory constraints imposed by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Employing qualitative documentary analysis and narrative inquiry, the study draws on primary protest texts, student manifestos, media reports, policy documents and academic literature. Findings highlight the movements’ demands for curriculum decolonisation, free education, epistemic justice and institutional inclusivity, while revealing post-movement challenges such as intensified managerial control, audit-driven cultures and marginalisation of student agency. The study argues that while symbolic and material gains were achieved, sustainable transformation remains fragile, underscoring the need for structural, epistemic and ethical reform beyond episodic protest.

Keywords: Corporatisation of universities, curriculum decolonisation, decolonial theory, epistemic justice, #FeesMustFall, neoliberal governance, pluriversal knowledge, #RhodesMustFall, South African higher education, statutory bodies (DHET, CHE, SAQA), student activism

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Résumé

Cette étude examine de manière critique la transformation de l'enseignement supérieur sud-africain à la suite des mouvements #RhodesMustFall et #FeesMustFall (2015–2017), qui ont contesté des cultures institutionnelles racialisées, des épistémologies eurocentriques et une gouvernance néolibérale. Ancrée dans la théorie décoloniale et la pédagogie critique – s'appuyant sur les travaux de Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Paulo Freire et des chercheurs des systèmes de savoirs pluriversels – l'étude situe l'activisme « falliste » dans des critiques plus larges de la corporatisation, du managérialisme et des contraintes statutaires imposées par le Département de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Formation (DHET), le Conseil de l'Enseignement Supérieur (CHE) et l'Autorité sud-africaine des qualifications (SAQA). En mobilisant une analyse documentaire qualitative et une enquête narrative, l'étude s'appuie sur des textes de protestation primaires, des manifestes étudiants, des rapports médiatiques, des documents de politiques publiques et la littérature académique. Les résultats mettent en lumière les revendications des mouvements en faveur de la décolonisation des programmes, de la gratuité de l'enseignement, de la justice épistémique et de l'inclusivité institutionnelle, tout en révélant des défis post-mouvement tels que l'intensification du contrôle managérial, les cultures axées sur l'audit et la marginalisation de l'agencité étudiante. L'étude soutient que, bien que des avancées symboliques et matérielles aient été réalisées, une transformation durable reste fragile, soulignant ainsi la nécessité de réformes structurelles, épistémiques et éthiques au-delà des mobilisations ponctuelles.

Mots-clés : corporatisation des universités, décolonisation des programmes, théorie décoloniale, justice épistémique, #FeesMustFall, gouvernance néolibérale, savoirs pluriversels, #RhodesMustFall, enseignement supérieur sud-africain, instances statutaires (DHET, CHE, SAQA), activisme étudiant

Introduction

The post-apartheid period in South Africa has been marked by both optimism and enduring complexity in the transformation of higher education. While democratic reforms have expanded access to universities for previously marginalised populations, the sector continues to be shaped by deeply embedded colonial epistemologies, racialised institutional cultures, widening socio-economic inequalities and increasingly neoliberal governance frameworks. These tensions came sharply into focus with the eruption of the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2015, followed by the nationwide #FeesMustFall

(FMF) protests between 2015 and 2017. Together, these movements constituted a critical rupture in South African higher education, forcing universities, statutory bodies and the state to confront unresolved questions of epistemic justice, material exclusion and institutional power.

The RMF movement initially emerged around the symbolic demand to remove the statue of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes. However, it rapidly evolved into a broader critique of the colonial foundations of university knowledge systems, institutional cultures and governance structures. Similarly, the FMF movement foregrounded the material realities of financial exclusion, highlighting how escalating tuition fees, outsourcing and debt-driven funding models disproportionately marginalised working-class and Black students. Taken together, these movements challenged not only the symbolic legacies of colonialism but also the political economy of South African higher education itself (Booyesen 2016; Heleta 2016; Langa 2017).

Scholars such as Jansen (2017) argue that South African universities have failed to dismantle the structural, symbolic and epistemological architectures inherited from apartheid and colonial rule. This failure has produced pervasive feelings of alienation among Black students and staff, for whom the university often remains an exclusionary and dehumanising space. While much of the literature has focused on the racialised nature of institutional culture, less attention has been paid to how corporatised university environments – characterised by managerialism, audit cultures, performance metrics and market-driven logics – have intensified these experiences of exclusion across the sector. In this sense, the ‘Fallist’ movements can be understood not merely as episodic protests, but as epistemological and political interventions that sought to reimagine knowledge, pedagogy, governance and the very purpose of the university in society (Le Grange 2019).

At the same time, South African universities operate within a tightly regulated sector governed by statutory bodies such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). These bodies impose complex bureaucratic and policy frameworks that shape institutional autonomy, funding models, curriculum structures and quality assurance processes. While the Fallist movements achieved certain symbolic and policy concession – such as fee freezes and commitments to curriculum transformation – the extent to which universities can meaningfully transform remains constrained by these broader sectoral governance arrangements. Indeed, paradoxically, the post-Fallist period has coincided

with an apparent acceleration of corporatisation, evidenced by the rise of managerial discourse, third-stream income imperatives, performance-driven academic labour, and executive remuneration structures increasingly comparable to those of corporate CEOs.

This raises the following critical questions that remain underexplored in the literature: Why has corporatisation continued largely unabated in South African universities after the Fallist movements? Does this represent a form of sectoral pushback against demands for free and decolonised education or is it an intensification of neoliberal materialities shaped by global competitiveness and funding scarcity? Furthermore, to what extent did the Fallist movements themselves interrogate the hierarchies of knowledge production across disciplines or challenge the bureaucratic and regulatory architectures that govern the sector?

Recent scholarship has begun to caution against superficial or co-opted forms of transformation. Lockett and Shay (2021) warn that decolonial discourse risks being absorbed into institutional policy frameworks without altering underlying power relations. Similarly, Badat (2022) emphasises the need to engage seriously with the philosophical, pedagogical and political questions raised by student activism, rather than reducing transformation to symbolic gestures or compliance-driven reforms. This study situates itself within this critical scholarship by examining both the transformative possibilities and the structural limits of the RMF and FMF movements in a highly regulated, neoliberal higher education sector.

Guided by these concerns, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How have the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements reshaped debates around curriculum, access and institutional culture in South African universities?
2. What theoretical and pedagogical insights emerge from these movements for ongoing transformation under neoliberal and bureaucratic constraints?
3. To what extent have institutional and sectoral responses addressed, diluted or reconfigured the core demands of student activists?

The study is underpinned by critical theory, drawing particularly on Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, which conceptualises education as a site of struggle, emancipation and social transformation. Critical theory provides an analytical lens for interrogating how historical inequalities, colonial legacies and neoliberal governance structures continue to shape knowledge production and institutional practices in South African higher education.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design, employing document analysis as its primary method. The data corpus consists of selected student manifestos, protest statements, protest literature, university policy documents, DHET and CHE policy texts and media reports produced during and immediately after the RMF and FMF movements (2015–17), alongside relevant scholarly literature. These documents were analysed as primary data sources where possible and as secondary sources when accessed through existing scholarly analyses (for example, Le Grange 2019). Following Scott (1990) and Bowen (2009), documents were examined for authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. This approach enables a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of student activism, institutional responses and the broader governance constraints shape transformation in South Africa's higher education sector.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this study draws primarily on decolonial theory and critical pedagogy, which together provide a robust and complementary lens for interrogating the epistemological, political and structural dynamics of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. These frameworks are particularly well suited to analysing the intellectual and political claims advanced by the RMF and FMF movements, especially their critique of Eurocentric knowledge systems, exclusionary institutional cultures and the broader political economy of higher education.

Taken together, decolonial theory and critical pedagogy enable an analysis that goes beyond surface-level institutional reform to examine how colonial legacies, neoliberal governance regimes and bureaucratic regulatory structures shape what universities can know, teach and become. This theoretical orientation allows the study to assess both the transformative aspirations of the Fallist movements and the structural constraints within which South African universities operate.

Decolonial theory

Decolonial theory offers a critical framework for understanding the persistence of coloniality in contemporary institutions, including higher education. Scholars such as Wa Thiong'o (1986), Mignolo (2011), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Mbembe (2016) argue that although formal political decolonisation has occurred across much of the Global South, colonial modes of power, knowledge and being continue to structure social life. In

the university context, this persistence is evident in curricula that privilege Western epistemologies, disciplinary canons and academic norms while marginalising African, indigenous and other subaltern ways of knowing.

The demand to ‘decolonise the university’, articulated forcefully by RMF and FMF activists, must therefore be understood as an epistemological and ontological critique rather than a call for symbolic change alone. It challenges entrenched hierarchies of knowledge production and raises fundamental questions about whose knowledge is legitimised, whose histories are centred and whose experiences are rendered peripheral. From a decolonial perspective, the Fallist movements represent a struggle for cognitive justice, seeking to reclaim African intellectual traditions and affirm the dignity and humanity of historically marginalised subjects within academic spaces (Wa Thiong’o 1986; Mbembe 2016).

However, decolonial theory also highlights the structural limits of transformation. Universities in South Africa are embedded in global knowledge economies shaped by neoliberal imperatives, international rankings and competitive research metrics. These conditions often constrain the scope of decolonial change, as institutions are compelled to align with global (largely Western) academic standards, even as they profess commitments to transformation. Decolonial theory thus provides a lens for analysing both the radical critique posed by the Fallist movements and the ways in which their demands are mediated, diluted or contained within existing institutional and sectoral frameworks.

Critical pedagogy

Complementing decolonial theory, critical pedagogy, particularly as articulated by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), foregrounds the emancipatory potential of education when it is dialogical, participatory and grounded in learners’ lived realities. Freire’s critique of the ‘banking model’ of education – in which students are treated as passive recipients of knowledge – resonates strongly with student critiques of South African higher education, where teaching practices and curricula often remain detached from the socio-economic and cultural contexts of the majority of students.

Within the context of the FMF protests, Freirean concepts such as conscientisation, dialogue and praxis illuminate how students mobilised education itself as a site of resistance. The protests can thus be read as pedagogical acts through which students asserted agency, challenged oppressive institutional arrangements and articulated alternative visions of

the university (Pillay 2021). Critical pedagogy underscores the inherently political nature of education and calls on institutions to recognise how pedagogical practices either reproduce or challenge inequality, exclusion and domination.

Importantly, critical pedagogy also enables an interrogation of managerial and corporatised university cultures. The increasing emphasis on performance indicators, audit regimes and market-oriented outcomes often undermines dialogical and transformative pedagogies, reducing education to measurable outputs rather than human development. From a Freirean perspective, such conditions risk reproducing dehumanising educational environments that affect both students and academic staff, particularly those already marginalised by race, class and gender.

Intersection of decolonial theory and critical pedagogy

By bringing decolonial theory and critical pedagogy into dialogue, this study approaches the RMF and FMF movements as both epistemic disruptions and educational interventions situated within broader political-economic structures. Tuck and Yang's (2012) insistence that decolonisation is not a metaphor is particularly instructive here, as it cautions against symbolic or rhetorical appropriations of decolonial language that leave underlying structures intact. Their work foregrounds the necessity of material, epistemic and institutional transformation rather than performative compliance.

Building on this, Morreira et al. (2023) explore how decolonial commitments can inform concrete pedagogical practices across diverse institutional and geopolitical contexts, while Omodan and Diko's (2021) concept of Ubuntu pedagogy advances a decolonial pedagogy rooted in African relational ethics and indigenous knowledge systems. Ubuntu pedagogy foregrounds communal learning, relational accountability and humanisation, offering an alternative to Eurocentric and market-driven educational models.

The intersection of these theoretical perspectives enables a multidimensional analysis of power – historical, epistemological, pedagogical and institutional. It provides the conceptual tools to evaluate whether institutional responses to the Fallist movements have resulted in substantive transformation or whether they represent adaptive strategies that absorb protest discourse while reproducing colonial and neoliberal logics under new guises. This theoretical lens also guides the study's interpretive analysis of student narratives, policy documents and post-protest institutional reforms, particularly regarding curriculum change, governance structures and the corporatisation of South African higher education.

Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design (Denzin and Lincoln 1994), which is appropriate for examining the complex, context-dependent dynamics of student activism and higher education transformation associated with the RMF and FMF movements. A qualitative approach enables an in-depth exploration of meanings, narratives and discourses articulated by students, institutions and the broader higher education sector, rather than measuring variables or outcomes in a positivist sense.

The study adopts a multiple-case study approach, focusing on South African universities that were central sites of mobilisation during the 2015–17 protest cycle, including the University of Cape Town (UCT), Stellenbosch University and the University of the Witwatersrand (Heleta 2016; Bosch 2017). These institutions were selected because of their historical significance, symbolic visibility and documented role in shaping national debates on decolonisation, access and transformation. The case study approach allows for contextualised analysis while also enabling cross-institutional comparison of protest dynamics and institutional responses.

Data collection methods

The primary method of data collection was document analysis, which involved the systematic examination of texts produced during and immediately after the RMF and FMF movements, covering the period 2015–17, with selective inclusion of institutional and policy responses up to 2019. Following Scott (1990) and Bowen (2009), documents were treated as social artefacts that reflect ideological positions, power relations and institutional priorities.

Primary documentary sources included:

- Student-produced texts, such as selected RMF and FMF manifestos, memoranda, open letters and protest statements issued by student collectives at UCT, Stellenbosch University and the University of the Witwatersrand between 2015 and 2017.
- Protest literature, including pamphlets, posters and publicly circulated statements associated with the movements.
- Institutional documents, such as university transformation frameworks, curriculum review reports, senate statements and official responses to the protests.
- Media reports from national newspapers and digital platforms that documented protest events, institutional reactions and state interventions during the protest period.

These documents were analysed as primary data where they directly represented the voices, positions and actions of students and institutions.

Secondary sources included:

Peer-reviewed scholarly analyses of the Fallist movements (for example, Booysen 2016; Heleta 2016; Le Grange 2016, 2019; Langa 2017), which were used to contextualise, interpret and triangulate findings derived from the primary documentary data. While earlier studies by scholars such as Le Grange informed the analytical framing of this research, the present study does not rely exclusively on secondary interpretations. Rather, it engages directly with selected primary texts produced during the protest period, supplemented by scholarly literature to enhance analytical depth and credibility.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, which involved iterative reading, coding, and categorisation of documents to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and silences across the data set (Luckett and Shay 2021). Thematic analysis enabled the identification of key themes such as:

1. Access, affordability and financial exclusion
2. Curriculum transformation and knowledge decolonisation
3. Institutional culture and experiences of alienation
4. Student governance and participation
5. Institutional resistance and accommodation
6. Corporatisation, managerialism and bureaucratic governance

Thus, the analysis also explicitly considers sectoral and governance constraints shaping institutional responses to the protests. Particular attention is paid to the regulatory role of statutory bodies such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Policy frameworks related to funding models, quality assurance, accreditation and curriculum regulation were analysed to assess how they enable or limit institutional transformation. This approach situates university-level responses within the broader governance architecture of South African higher education, rather than treating institutions as fully autonomous actors.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed triangulation by cross-referencing multiple data sources, institutional cases and scholarly interpretations (Heleta 2016). This process strengthened the credibility of the analysis and mitigated the limitations associated with reliance on a single type of document or perspective.

The #RhodesMustFall Movement: Symbolism and Decolonisation

The #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement, which erupted at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in March 2015, marked a significant turning point in South African higher education. Sparked by a student-led call for the removal of the statue of British colonialist Cecil John Rhodes from the UCT campus, the movement quickly expanded into a broader demand for the decolonisation of universities (Booyesen 2016; Heleta 2016). RMF challenged not only the visible symbols of colonial oppression but also the deeper structural legacies of racism, cultural exclusion and epistemic dominance that continue to shape academic institutions in South Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Mbembe 2016). As such, the movement articulated a critique that was simultaneously symbolic, epistemological and institutional.

The following sub-sections illuminate four key dimensions of the RMF movement: symbolism and the politics of space; curriculum reform and epistemic decolonisation; institutional culture and racial inequity; and global resonance and legacy.

Symbolism and the politics of space

The statue of Rhodes served as a powerful metaphor for the unresolved legacies of colonialism in South Africa's higher education system. Students argued, in public statements and memoranda directed to university management, that the continued presence of such symbols normalised colonial violence and alienated Black students who were daily reminded of their historical marginalisation (Nyamnjoh 2016; Bosch 2017;). According to Mbembe (2016), the university campus is not a neutral space but an 'archive of power', where architecture, iconography and institutional rituals reproduce colonial ideologies under the guise of tradition and academic excellence.

The removal of the Rhodes statue on 9 April 2015 was therefore widely interpreted as a symbolic victory for the movement. However, student leaders and scholars consistently emphasised that symbolism alone was insufficient. The act of removal was framed as an entry point into a broader struggle that would interrogate curricula, institutional cultures, language policies and governance structures within the university (Booyesen 2016; Nyamnjoh 2016; Bosch 2017). In this regard, RMF exposed the limits of symbolic transformation when deeper structural arrangements remain intact.

Curriculum reform and epistemic decolonisation

At the heart of RMF was a sustained call for the decolonisation of knowledge. Students and academics argued that South African universities continued to privilege Eurocentric epistemologies that marginalised African perspectives, histories and lived experiences (Heleta 2016; Le Grange 2016). The curriculum was criticised for prioritising Western canons, theories and methodologies, often at the expense of local knowledge systems, African languages and indigenous philosophies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Mbembe 2016).

This epistemic critique aligns closely with Wa Thiong'o (1986) call for the 'decolonisation of the mind', which involves dismantling internalised hierarchies of knowledge and reclaiming African intellectual agency. The RMF activists demanded not only the inclusion of African authors and texts, but also a fundamental reconfiguration of pedagogical practices to promote dialogical, inclusive and contextually relevant learning environments (Le Grange 2016). As Luckett and Shay (2021) argue, meaningful curriculum transformation requires more than content substitution; it entails a critical rethinking of what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose voices are authorised within academic disciplines.

Institutional culture and racial inequity

Beyond curriculum, RMF drew sustained attention to the racialised nature of institutional culture in South African universities (Chigudu 2020: 302–12). Black students and academic staff reported experiences of marginalisation, micro-aggressions and systemic bias in hiring, promotion and academic recognition, particularly within historically White institutions (Heleta 2016; Langa 2017). The movement's demands therefore extended to calls for more representative academic staffing, anti-racist institutional training and accountability mechanisms to address discrimination and exclusion.

Some scholars have critiqued aspects of the RMF movement, cautioning against an overemphasis on identity politics and the risk of essentialism (Jansen 2017). However, Langa (2017) and Booysen (2016) contend that such critiques often overlook the lived realities of Black students and staff and deflect attention from the structural violence embedded in institutional cultures. Moreover, emerging scholarship suggests that these racialised experiences are compounded by increasingly corporatised and managerial university environments, which intensify alienation through audit cultures, performance metrics and bureaucratic governance regimes (Badat 2022).

Global resonance and legacy

Although rooted in the specific context of South African higher education, the RMF movement resonated far beyond national borders. Appadurai's (1996) theory of global cultural flows provides a useful lens for understanding how RMF ideas circulated transnationally through media, activist networks and academic discourse. His concepts of the global cultural economy and various 'scapes' (ethnoscapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes) help explain how locally grounded struggles acquire global visibility and influence.

The RMF movement inspired similar campaigns internationally, most notably at Oxford University in the United Kingdom and contributed to broader debates about colonial memory, institutional accountability and epistemic justice in higher education worldwide (Nyamnjoh 2016). In this sense, RMF can be understood as part of a wider transnational decolonial and alter-globalisation discourse that links student activism across borders in a shared struggle against Eurocentrism and neoliberal dominance in knowledge production.

Today, the legacy of RMF continues to shape debates on transformation, inclusion and curriculum reform within South African universities. While some institutions have implemented policy changes and strategic commitments to transformation, critics argue that many of these reforms have been slow, uneven and largely symbolic (Luckett and Shay 2021; Badat 2022). Students and scholars alike contend that without addressing deeper structural, governance and political-economic constraints, institutional responses risk reproducing colonial legacies under the guise of transformation.

The #FeesMustFall Movement: Struggles for Economic Justice

Emerging in October 2015, the #FeesMustFall (FMF) movement was a national, student-led campaign that sought to address the inaccessibility and commodification of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. Although it followed closely on the heels of the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement, FMF had a distinct focus on the material and economic conditions that inhibited equitable access to higher education, particularly for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (Booyesen 2016; Langa 2017). The movement fundamentally challenged neoliberal policy orientations in the higher education sector, exposing the persistence of structural inequalities despite South Africa's democratic transition (Habib 2019; Badat 2022).

The following discussion examines the movement through five interrelated dimensions: genesis and national impact; inequality and economic exclusion; the role of the state and institutional responses; intersections with RMF and broader struggles; and enduring impact and ongoing debates.

Genesis and national impact

The genesis of the FMF movement can be traced to mid-October 2015, when students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) mobilised against proposed tuition fee increases. These protests rapidly spread to other institutions, including the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of Pretoria, Rhodes University, and the University of the Western Cape, signalling a nationwide crisis in the affordability of higher education (Booyesen 2016; Langa 2017).

What initially began as resistance to fee hikes, quickly evolved into broader demands for free, quality and decolonised higher education, linking economic justice to historical patterns of racial and class exclusion (Habib 2019). As Jansen (2017) observes, FMF represented an unprecedented moment in post-apartheid South Africa, where predominantly Black and working-class students collectively challenged the commodification of education and the failure of the post-1994 state to fully dismantle apartheid-era inequalities.

The protests significantly disrupted university operations, resulting in the suspension of academic programmes, the securitisation of campuses, and confrontations with the police, thereby intensifying the national debate about the role of higher education in social transformation (Booyesen 2016; Langa 2017). Importantly, FMF exposed the everyday material struggles of students, including the inability to afford fees, accommodation and food, as well as the psychological burden of navigating historically White institutional cultures (Badat 2022).

In response to sustained pressure, President Jacob Zuma announced a zero fee increase for 2016 and later declared the implementation of free higher education for students from households earning below R350,000 per annum (Habib 2019). While widely regarded as a landmark policy shift, scholars caution that the announcement raised serious concerns regarding feasibility, sustainability and the extent to which the deeper structural critiques raised by FMF were adequately addressed (Pillay 2021; Badat 2022).

Inequality and economic exclusion

The FMF movement laid bare the contradiction between South Africa's constitutional commitment to equality and the lived realities of persistent socio-economic exclusion within higher education (Habib 2019). Despite formal access, many Black students continue to face financial constraints that undermine both entry into and success within the university system, particularly in relation to tuition fees, accommodation, food security and learning resources (Booyesen 2016).

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), while designed to mitigate these inequalities, was widely criticised for administrative inefficiencies, delayed disbursements and inadequate coverage, reinforcing student precarity rather than alleviating it (Langa 2017; Pillay 2021). FMF thus constituted a broader critique of how poverty and inequality are reproduced through higher education financing structures, rather than merely a reaction to incremental fee increases (Habib 2019).

The role of the state and institutional responses

State and institutional responses to FMF were characterised by ambivalence and coercion. While government officials initially acknowledged the legitimacy of students' grievances, responses increasingly shifted toward securitisation, including the deployment of police and private security on campuses (Langa 2017). Violent confrontations, arrests and legal actions against student leaders raised serious concerns about the criminalisation of protest and the erosion of democratic spaces within universities (Booyesen 2016; Jansen 2017).

At the institutional level, university management adopted uneven strategies, ranging from dialogue and mediation to disciplinary sanctions and court interdicts. These divergent responses reflected deeper tensions surrounding university autonomy, governance and the limits of transformation within a market-oriented higher education framework (Badat 2022).

Intersections with #RhodesMustFall and broader struggles

Although FMF foregrounded economic justice, it was deeply interconnected with the epistemic and symbolic critiques articulated by the RMF movement. Both movements shared a common analysis of higher education as a site where racial, economic and epistemic injustices converge (Heleta

2016; Le Grange 2016). Leadership and participation often overlapped, demonstrating a shared activist consciousness linking access to education to curriculum transformation and institutional culture.

As Pillay (2017) argues, FMF should not be narrowly understood as a protest against tuition fees alone. Rather, it articulated a broader vision of structural transformation that encompassed issues of housing, language policy, gender justice and participatory governance (Booyesen 2016; Badat 2022). Both FMF and RMF highlighted the persistence of colonial and apartheid-era legacies within contemporary universities, particularly in relation to Eurocentric curricula, linguistic exclusion and racialised power relations (Heleta 2016).

Gendered forms of exclusion and violence also featured prominently in both movements. Black women and queer students foregrounded issues of sexual harassment, gender-based violence and marginalisation within activist spaces and institutional structures, expanding the movements' social justice agenda (Le Grange 2016; Pillay 2017). Additionally, demands for the recognition and incorporation of African languages underscored critiques of English linguistic dominance as a continuation of colonial epistemic hierarchies (Heleta 2016).

Enduring impact and ongoing debates

The FMF movement has had a lasting impact on higher education policy and discourse in South Africa. The introduction of free higher education for students from low-income households stands as one of its most tangible outcomes (Habib 2019). Nevertheless, implementation challenges – particularly related to funding sustainability, administrative capacity and institutional readiness – remain significant (Pillay 2021).

Scholars caution that without a coherent and sustainable funding model, free education risks becoming fiscally untenable or compromising educational quality (Habib 2019; Badat 2022). Debates have also emerged regarding differentiated funding approaches and the potential role of public–private partnerships in sustaining the sector (Bosch 2017).

Beyond funding, many of the deeper structural demands raised by FMF – such as decolonisation of curricula, inclusive pedagogy and participatory governance – remain only partially addressed (Heleta 2016; Le Grange 2016). Critics argue that institutional reforms have often been symbolic or incremental, failing to confront the entrenched power relations that continue to shape South African higher education (Jansen 2017; Badat 2022).

Curriculum Transformation and Knowledge Decolonisation

Curriculum transformation and the decolonisation of knowledge emerged as central demands across both RMF and FMF. These demands reflected sustained dissatisfaction with the persistence of Eurocentric epistemologies within post-apartheid universities, despite political liberation in 1994. Students argued that higher education continued to reproduce colonial hierarchies of knowledge, positioning African epistemologies as peripheral or supplementary rather than foundational (Heleta 2016; Le Grange 2016).

The meaning of decolonising the curriculum

Decolonising the curriculum entails a fundamental interrogation of what counts as legitimate knowledge, who produces it and for whom it is produced. Le Grange (2016) emphasises that decolonisation cannot be reduced to the inclusion of African authors alone but requires dismantling epistemic hierarchies that privilege Western canons. This includes reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems, incorporating African languages, rethinking disciplinary boundaries and adopting dialogical pedagogies rooted in local contexts.

This understanding aligns with Wa Thiong'o's (1986) call for the decolonisation of the mind and Ramose's (2003) insistence on epistemic justice grounded in African philosophy. More recently, decolonial scholars such as Mignolo (2011) and Santos (2014) have articulated pluriversality as a framework that recognises multiple, co-existing epistemologies rather than a single universal knowledge system.

Student voices and protest literature

The analysis draws directly on primary protest texts, including:

1. The #RhodesMustFall Mission Statement (UCT, March 2015),
2. RMF: A Call for Decolonised Education (UCT Student Collective, 2015),
3. #FeesMustFall National Shutdown Memorandum (October 2015),
4. Open letters addressed to university management and the DHET published between 2015 and 2017.

These documents consistently articulated students' experiences of being 'alienated in institutions that claim to be African but teach Africa as an object rather than a subject'. Protest literature critiqued curricula that marginalised African histories, philosophies and lived realities, while reproducing colonial power relations in the classroom. As Heleta (2016) notes, these texts reveal

that students were not rejecting academic rigour, but demanding curricula that are socially responsive, historically grounded and epistemically inclusive. Knowledge, students argued, should be co-produced rather than transmitted uncritically through inherited disciplinary hierarchies.

Institutional efforts, governance constraints and corporatisation

In response, universities established transformation task teams, curriculum review committees and decolonial forums. While some reforms – such as revised reading lists and African philosophy modules – were introduced, these initiatives were constrained by sectoral governance frameworks imposed by the DHET and CHE, which prioritise standardisation, accreditation compliance and market competitiveness (CHE 2016; Badat 2022).

Critically, many scholars argue that the perceived ‘victories’ of the Fallist movements may have been followed by sectoral pushback, manifesting in intensified managerial control, securitisation and corporatisation (Jansen 2017; Badat 2022). Rather than dismantling neoliberal governance, universities increasingly embraced business metaphors, revenue diversification and performance metrics, arguably as a defensive response to demands for free education.

African-centred and alter-global perspectives

African-centred approaches advanced by Chinweizu (1987), Ramose (2003) and Wa Thiong’o (1986) continue to inform debates on epistemic justice. At the same time, the Fallist movements can be understood as part of broader alter-globalisation struggles, resisting the homogenising pressures of global neoliberal academia while challenging South Africa’s aspiration to compete within anglophone knowledge economies (Appadurai 1996; Santos 2014).

Conclusion and Future Directions

The Fallist movements represent a watershed moment in South African higher education, fundamentally challenging entrenched structures of power, knowledge and inequality. These movements articulated the frustrations and aspirations of a generation of students determined not only to reclaim access to higher education but also to redefine the very purpose, identity and social responsibility of the university in a post-apartheid society. In doing so, RMF and FMF raised critical questions about the persistence of racialised and class-based exclusion, the dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies and the role of universities in either reproducing or dismantling structural injustice (Heleta 2016; Mbembe 2016; Langa 2017).

Undeniably, the movements achieved significant symbolic and material victories. The suspension of tuition fee increases in 2015, and the subsequent announcement of free higher education for students from households earning below a specified income threshold marked unprecedented policy shifts in the democratic era (Booyesen 2016; Habib 2019). These moments demonstrated the power of collective student action and exposed the vulnerability of entrenched political and economic arrangements when confronted by sustained mobilisation. However, as several scholars caution, these victories were partial and fragile. The implementation of free education has been uneven, bureaucratically constrained and fiscally contested, leaving many students still vulnerable to exclusion due to accommodation shortages, delayed funding, and administrative inefficiencies (Pillay 2021; Badat 2022).

More critically, the 'Fallist' movements revealed the structural limits of transformation within a higher education sector increasingly governed by neoliberal rationalities. While universities publicly adopted the language of decolonisation and transformation, the period following the protests has been marked by intensified corporatisation, managerialism and securitisation. Vice-chancellors' remuneration structures comparable to those of corporate executives, the expansion of third-stream income imperatives, and the dominance of business-oriented discourses of efficiency, productivity, and outputs suggest that neoliberal governance has not been dismantled but, in some respects, accelerated (Jansen 2017; Badat 2022). This raises a fundamental question: Does the sector's post-Fallist trajectory represent institutional pushback against demands for free and decolonised education or does it reflect the inescapable pressures of neoliberal materialities within a globalised higher education economy?

Importantly, universities do not operate autonomously. Transformation is structurally constrained by powerful statutory bodies such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). These institutions impose regulatory, accreditation and funding frameworks that prioritise compliance, standardisation and international competitiveness, often at the expense of radical epistemic and pedagogical reform (CHE 2016; Badat 2022). The relative absence of sustained critique of these sectoral governance mechanisms within Fallist discourse – and in much of the scholarship reflecting on the movements – suggests a critical gap that future research and activism must address.

Furthermore, while RMF and FMF foregrounded the racialised nature of institutional culture, the increasing corporatisation of universities has also produced dehumanising environments that affect staff and students across racial and class lines. Academic labour is increasingly casualised, surveilled and measured through performance metrics, while students are reconfigured as consumers rather than co-producers of knowledge. For Black academics and students, these dynamics intersect with historical and ongoing racial marginalisation, intensifying experiences of alienation and exploitation (Luckett and Shay 2021).

Looking ahead, the legacy of RMF and FMF must be understood not as a completed project but as an unfinished struggle. Sustainable transformation will require a shift from episodic protest toward long-term, strategic engagement that confronts not only institutional cultures and curricula but also the political economy and governance architecture of higher education. This includes interrogating South Africa's positioning within global anglophone academia and exploring whether 'Fallism' can be meaningfully linked to broader alter-globalisation movements that resist the commodification of knowledge (Appadurai 1996; Santos 2014).

In light of these insights, several key areas demand urgent attention:

1. *Economic accessibility*: The promise of free education must be realised through sustainable, redistributive funding models that extend beyond tuition to include accommodation, transport and living costs, particularly for students from rural and peri-urban contexts (Habib 2019; Pillay 2021).
2. *Curriculum decolonisation*: Universities must move beyond symbolic inclusion toward genuine epistemic transformation that centres African knowledge systems, languages and philosophies within teaching, research and assessment (Le Grange 2016; Wa Thiong'o 1986).
3. *Democratic governance*: Meaningful decolonisation requires reimagining governance structures to include students, academic staff and communities as active participants in decision-making, while critically engaging the regulatory power of statutory bodies such as the DHET and CHE.
4. *Social justice and institutional purpose*: Universities must resist being reduced to training grounds for the global labour market and instead reaffirm their role as sites of critical inquiry, social responsibility and human flourishing (Freire 1970; Mbembe 2016).

Thus, the future of South African higher education hinges on whether institutions are willing – and structurally enabled – to confront the contradictions between decolonial aspirations and neoliberal governance. The conversations ignited by #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall must therefore be sustained, deepened and radicalised if universities are to become spaces where knowledge, dignity and justice genuinely flourish.

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