

ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING

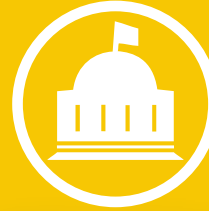
2025

OFFICE FOR INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGY

PESTELE - THE MACRO-ENVIRONMENT

TRENDS & DEVELOPMENTS





POLITICAL

FACTORS	IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
• Geopolitical tensions and rising populism, nationalism, and protectionism: Global and regional conflicts may impact student mobility, international collaboration, and research partnerships.	• The Higher Education (HE) sector may face challenges in securing international research funding, maintaining student exchange programmes, and attracting international students.
• International relations: South Africa's alignment with the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) and global trade agreements shape international relations.	• Shifts in the political landscape might require the University to adjust institutional plans and strategies. • Political alignment and/or misalignment with major global economic players could affect foreign investment in education, research, international partnerships, and student exchange programmes.
• South Africa's G20 Presidency is an opportunity to strengthen the country's global positioning. South Africa has identified four priorities - action to strengthen disaster resilience and response; ensuring debt sustainability for low-income countries; mobilising finance for a just energy transition; and harnessing critical minerals for inclusive growth and sustainable development. Other high-level deliverables include inclusive economic growth, industrialisation, employment and reduced inequality, food security, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data governance, and innovation for sustainable development.	• Universities should leverage the country's G20 Presidency by encouraging students and staff to participate in G20-related activities (e.g. conferences, research outputs). This will involve aligning academic programmes with G20 priorities, fostering global citizenship, and using Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as platforms for knowledge sharing and policy dialogue.
• Lag in the attainment of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General noted that only 12% of the SDGs are on track, 50% require substantial progress, and over 30% have stalled or reversed.	• The lag in attaining the SDGs increases political pressure and may result in policy shifts nationally and globally. Universities may need to review and adjust their research priorities to inform national, continental, and global policies and strategies through evidence-based recommendations.
• Political uncertainty: Internal disagreements within the Government of National Unity (GNU) could create uncertainty in governance and delay policy implementation (e.g., the rejection of key legislation by some GNU partners, such as the National Health Insurance (NHI) Act, the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act, the Expropriation Act, and the Budget). Instability in municipalities and local government coalitions further heightens uncertainty.	• Cabinet reshuffles and policy shifts may disrupt operational continuity in the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). • Delays in approving education policies [e.g. BELA Act] could indirectly impact HE. The BELA Act will potentially impact on the quality of learners exiting basic education, and its implementation could further increase the demand for access to HE. • Instability in local government affects delivery of basic services and infrastructure maintenance that can impact university operations (e.g., water and energy security) and thus divert funding from other priority areas.
• The South African Government's Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) 2024-2029 strategic priorities are: • Driving inclusive economic growth and job creation • Reducing poverty and tackling the high cost of living • Building a capable, ethical, and developmental state	• The HE sector will play a critical role in producing the necessary human resources to improve South Africa's global competitiveness, and by contributing innovative ideas, actions, processes, and products to boost the country's economic performance and foster entrepreneurship. • HEIs need to review curricula and qualifications to ensure they are relevant and responsive to evolving workplace needs; identify existing skills gaps and mismatches in the labour market and address these through targeted training programmes/ initiatives; and promote scarce skills fields. The HE sector should focus on unlocking workplace learning opportunities for graduates in partnership with the private sector. • The high cost of living, income inequality, and poverty significantly impact student access and success. Wrap-around student support interventions will need to be intensified. Tackling the high cost of living includes addressing the rising costs of food, transport, and other essential goods and services, which disproportionately affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their families. • Universities should promote multilingualism, respect for diversity, and continue to address the many forms of intolerance in South African society (including racism, xenophobia and sexism). • HEIs should produce graduates with strong values, ethical principles, and attributes that equip them to contribute positively to the professionalisation of the public sector and to society more broadly.



ECONOMIC

FACTORS	IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
• Globalisation involves the integration of the world economy, driven by advances in information and communication technology (ICT), the growth of international knowledge networks, the expansion of trade, student and labour mobility, and access to global opportunities.	• Globalisation has expanded academic and career opportunities for academic staff and students, with cross-border education, both physical and virtual, becoming increasingly accessible. • To remain competitive and equip students for the future of work, HEIs must align learning and teaching with global trends by embracing more diverse and flexible approaches. Universities must also cultivate institutional cultures that promote diversity and inclusivity, while advancing arts, languages, and cultural heritage to enhance social cohesion and national unity.
• Geo-economic tensions and the rise of nationalism: intensified geo-economic tensions, protectionism, populism, and nationalism have resulted in threatened supply chains, increased trade disputes, trade and investment restrictions, and increased government subsidies and industrial policies. Measures such as sanctions, tariffs, and trade restrictions are a significant global risk.	• The HE sector may experience spillover effects from the potential economic impact of geo-economic confrontations. Trade tensions between countries can potentially disrupt supply chains and increase economic costs. This has significant implications for cooperation and funds dedicated to cutting-edge research and innovation. Internationalisation, global engagement, and student and staff exchanges are also under threat.
• Economic instability and a constrained national fiscus: Rising inflation, higher interest rates, economic downturns, and escalating national debt are placing increasing financial pressure on households, businesses, and the government. The fiscus is under significant strain, and these conditions can undermine investor confidence, slow economic growth, and lead to budget cuts and a recession.	• Economic strain may lead to more students struggling to afford the cost of HE, thereby increasing reliance on financial aid. At the same time, government fiscal constraints may result in reduced public subsidies for HE and cuts to National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) allocations. Public universities thus face the risk of operational budget shortfalls. Third-stream income sources may decline due to broader economic instability.
• Household debt and high cost-of-living: The rising cost-of-living and increasing household debt affects students' ability to fund their studies.	• Increased demand for financial support and compromised student well-being may impact academic performance, ultimately affecting student retention and throughput.
• Shifts in the job market: The increasing demand for skills-based and vocational learning is increasing the probability of skills mismatches if universities do not adapt.	• Universities need to update curricula, embrace new operating models and offering types (e.g. stackable credentials) and strengthen industry, government, and civil society partnerships to enhance graduate employability and entrepreneurship.
• Growth of the gig economy and hybrid work: The gig economy and flexible/hybrid work environments are becoming more attractive to skilled professionals, challenging traditional employment models.	• Universities risk losing experienced and highly qualified employees who prefer flexible/hybrid working arrangements, leading to skills shortages and disruptions in teaching, postgraduate supervision, and other University operations.
• Youth unemployment: South Africa faces persistently high youth unemployment, which rose to 46.1% in Q2 2025. The graduate unemployment rate also increased to 12.2%. Factors contributing to (graduate) unemployment include skills mismatches, limited workplace readiness, and a slow response to the growing demands of increasingly digital and technology-driven environments.	• Some unemployed graduates become demotivated and accept any available work, often unrelated to their qualifications. While others remain within the academic system, pursuing further studies without gaining practical work experience, making them overqualified for entry-level roles and underqualified for positions that require work experience. • Universities must address the skills mismatch and better prepare graduates for the rapidly evolving job market by providing targeted support to enhance both AI and technological readiness, as well as entrepreneurship development, and graduate employability. • South African universities are strengthening support for student entrepreneurship through dedicated innovation hubs and centres/business incubators that provide mentorship, technical support, incubation programmes, entrepreneurship skills and training, real-world experience, internships, startup competitions, and seed funding.
• Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), and Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprise (SMME) development, and localisation: B-BBEE is a key policy instrument aimed at redressing historical racial inequalities by promoting the inclusive economic participation of black South Africans. Localisation and the development of SMMEs and the informal economy support inclusive economic growth, innovation, and job creation.	• HEIs must actively support B-BBEE, SMME development, and localisation. This includes expanding support for student-led enterprises and diversifying their staff demographic profiles. Universities should also contribute to regional economic development by fostering local innovation, implementing institutional procurement practices that support local suppliers and industries, and encouraging research that responds to community and industry needs.



SOCIAL

FACTORS	IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
• Widening inequality gap: There is an increasing disparity in wealth, income, and opportunities between the richest and poorest segments of the population within and between countries. This results in uneven access to healthcare, education and other resources.	• Inequality results in restricted access to education. Government interventions, such as NSFAS and the Comprehensive Student Funding Model, assist in broadening access yet are unable to fully address the demand for student funding, including insufficient funding for students to pursue postgraduate studies. For disadvantaged students, a lack of access to good nutrition, healthcare, and other resources and infrastructure can significantly influence learning outcomes and heighten mental and emotional strain.
• Human settlements: South Africa is experiencing rapid urbanisation, resulting in increased human settlements highly concentrated around the major cities and economic hubs. However, settlement patterns still reflect historical spatial inequalities, with many of the poor housed in informal settlements or townships located far from the city/places of work, with no, or inadequate, access to basic services and social amenities (such as transport, education, health, and digital infrastructure).	• Students may be drawn from rural areas/or increasingly reside in areas with informal housing with limited access to basic services and infrastructure. These patterns require that universities must develop targeted interventions and support services to assist students, such as safe and reliable shuttle services, as well as access to devices/ computer labs and reliable Wi-Fi access.
• Societal polarisation: Growing ideological, cultural, and socio-economic divisions within and across communities contribute to declining social cohesion and a widening political divide. This can result in social instability, often manifesting through protests, riots, and hate crimes.	• Societal polarisation may result in heightened tensions within HEIs and vulnerability to protests and unrest, which can compromise staff and student safety and well-being. Thus, universities should promote an inclusive institutional culture and social cohesion through dialogues and other interventions, prioritise campus safety, and develop clear crisis management and communication strategies.
• Migration: An increase in migration into South Africa has resulted in strain on already limited resources and infrastructure, potential economic impacts, and social tensions (due to perceptions of competition for resources, jobs, and other opportunities). Migrants contribute to the economy by filling labour gaps, but face discrimination and exploitation. In tandem with these developments, skilled South Africans are seeking employment opportunities in other countries.	• Universities face challenges in navigating immigration policies and procedures for both international staff and students. There is a need for clearer policies and improved collaboration between universities and government departments like Home Affairs. Universities need to provide comprehensive support services for international students with diverse needs, including academic support, language assistance, and social integration programmes.
	• The emigration of skilled staff has resulted in a shortage of academic and PASS staff, especially in scarce skills areas.
• Infectious and communicable diseases: These continue to pose a significant societal challenge, impacting public health and education systems.	• Infectious disease outbreaks can disrupt traditional learning and teaching, laboratory-based research, and other operations. They may also lead to increased absenteeism, mental health challenges, and long-term health complications, potentially affecting staff capacity and student enrolments. Universities must invest in robust emergency health and safety protocols, hybrid learning and working models, and strengthen institutional readiness, and preparedness for disruptions.
• Population growth and demographic profile, including the youth dividend: South Africa is undergoing a demographic shift, characterised by a rising proportion of young people. Individuals aged 15 to 34 years constitute one-third of South Africa's total population and account for nearly half of the working-age population (those aged 15 to 64 years). This shift puts pressure on the education system and labour market. However, it can present opportunities such as a larger youthful working-age population to boost economic growth.	• To leverage the advantages of the youth bulge, universities must support students to graduate on time and capacitate them with entrepreneurial skills. Inclusive job creation in economies with a youthful population is a critical issue. South Africa has a high proportion of young people Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET). This crisis is fueled by factors such as poor education, skills mismatches, lack of work experience, and systemic issues like corruption, leading to cycles of poverty, social exclusion, and long-term "scarring effects" on future employment and well-being.



SOCIAL

FACTORS	IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
• Improving matric results: The record-setting matric pass rate of 87.3% for the class of 2024, with half of the pupils achieving a bachelor's pass, reflects notable progress in the basic education system.	• The growing number of qualifying matriculants may necessitate the expansion of HE infrastructure, student accommodation, and staff capacity. However, with the current economic climate, universities face significant financial constraints, including declining subsidies, rising operational costs, and student debt. As a result, institutions face a trade-off between accommodating more academically eligible, but unfunded students, and maintaining financial sustainability.
• Poor Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) performance and digital literacy in basic education: This can affect student enrolment in scarce skills qualifications requiring satisfactory performance in Mathematics and/or Physical Science.	• Poor STEM performance among school leavers often leads to enrolment in programmes with lower employment prospects and under-enrolment in scarce skills fields. • Universities will need to strengthen STEM outreach and digital literacy programmes in partnership with feeder schools to expand enrolments in scarce skills fields and improve demographic diversity in these programmes.
• Food insecurity, hunger and poor nutrition: In 2024, an estimated 638 to 720 million of the global population experienced hunger, while 2.3 billion were moderately or severely food insecure.	• Food insecurity negatively impacts students' well-being and reduces class attendance, weakens concentration, and increases stress and mental health challenges. This, in turn, lowers academic performance and graduate outputs. Institutions of higher learning must implement targeted support initiatives such as subsidised meals, nutrition programmes, food parcels, and campus gardens to address food insecurity.
• Discrimination based on gender, race, nationality, and other forms of identity continues to affect institutions and communities. In South Africa, these issues are rooted not only in the legacies of apartheid and colonialism but also in persistent structural inequalities and contemporary social dynamics that perpetuate exclusion and injustice. South African legislation and policy frameworks, call for the transformation of institutional culture to eliminate all forms of discrimination, including racism, sexism, and xenophobia.	• Universities should promote equity of access and success, diversity, democratic values, and human rights, and embed cultural inclusivity and social justice in curricula, governance, and campus life. Higher education institutions must actively work towards building non-racist, non-sexist, values-driven and humane living, learning, and working environments.
• Health and well-being is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, including emotional balance, life satisfaction, and a sense of purpose. Over 4.5 billion people globally lack access to essential health services.	• Student and staff health and well-being are critical for academic success, productivity, and institutional effectiveness. Poor health can lead to absenteeism, and low staff morale. Students facing mental health challenges may turn to self-harm or drop out. Universities must promote holistic health and well-being through well-resourced, accessible medical and counselling services, support systems, empathetic leadership, flexible learning and working arrangements, and awareness programmes.
• Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBV+F) remains a pervasive societal challenge with women being disproportionately impacted by crimes such as rape, assault, and murder. In South Africa, 33.1% of women aged 18 and older have experienced physical violence in their lifetime. In response, the President announced the enactment of the National Council on GBV and Femicide Bill, which aims to strengthen and coordinate national efforts to combat GBV+F.	• Universities should support staff and students affected by GBV+F through accessible support services and by aligning institutional policies with national GBV+F frameworks. Institutional policies must clearly define all forms of GBV, outline reporting procedures (whistleblowing), protective measures, avenues for redress, and disciplinary consequences for perpetrators. Awareness should also be raised through targeted campaigns and the creation of safe spaces. Campus safety must be strengthened through improved lighting, enhanced security infrastructure, and a visible commitment to a zero-tolerance policy. Collaborations with off-campus student housing providers must be strengthened to prioritise student safety in surrounding communities.



TECHNOLOGICAL

FACTORS	IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
• Rapid technological advancements and digitalisation: are revolutionising all sectors, leveraging digital tools, data, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) for enhanced efficiency, innovation, and economic growth. This transformation, however, is uneven, creating a digital divide between developed and developing regions. Bridging these access and skills gaps is imperative to ensure equitable participation and prevent exacerbating existing inequalities.	• There is a need for global stewardship and human-centric, ethical frameworks for data governance, as well as increased regulation of the use of AI.
	• Digitalisation has fundamentally reshaped higher education, revolutionising learning and teaching, as well as support service delivery and operating models. Digital tools and platforms offer new opportunities for accessibility, engagement, and operational efficiency. Emerging technologies and evolving student expectations are driving more personalised educational experiences.
• Emerging technologies: AI stands out as a foundational amplifier of other emerging technological trends. Technological convergence, by bringing together previously unrelated technologies—often within a single device, product, or system to perform multiple tasks—is fostering a more integrated, systems-based approach to technology.	• HEIs must offer programmes and qualifications aligned to evolving workplace needs and technological advancements.
	• Advancements in AI, robotics, and increasing digital access will drive the fastest growing job roles by 2030 – such as Big Data Specialists, FinTech Engineers, AI and Machine Learning Specialists, Software and Applications Developers, and security-related roles such as Security Management Specialists.
	• AI-driven systems for energy and waste management align financial savings with sustainability goals, reducing environmental impact and increasing operational efficiency and sustainability. The shift toward sustainable practices will require specialised expertise which has implications for transition costs and green skilling. Green and energy-transition roles, including Autonomous and Electric Vehicle Specialists, Environmental Engineers, and Renewable Energy Engineers, also feature within the top 15 fastest-growing roles by 2030.
	• High-income economies with shrinking labour forces might increasingly look to deeper automation to counterbalance the demographic shift. They may also prioritise re-skilling and upskilling.
	• Updating curricula and expanding digital literacy programmes, cybersecurity training, and preparedness workshops for both staff and students are needed.
• Widening digital divide: While AI technologies are easily accessible and do not require physical infrastructure, they widen digital inequality for those without reliable internet access.	• Digital inequality affects equitable access to HE and inclusivity, and can delay the adoption of flexible, hybrid models of learning and teaching. Universities must invest in Wi-Fi connectivity, access to digital devices, and the skills needed to use them effectively. They must also overcome the common challenges with integration of digital tools like software usability, device compatibility, and poor internet connectivity.
	• In embracing AI and emerging technologies, universities must ensure equitable access to digital tools and resources for all staff and students



TECHNOLOGICAL

FACTORS	IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
• Future world of work: Employers are seeking graduates with knowledge and skills better aligned with the requirements of a future-ready workforce. AI, technological literacy, big data, networks and cybersecurity are among the fastest-growing skills sets globally. Demand for social and emotional skills is also expected to increase (e.g., analytical and creative thinking, resilience, and agility). The skill sets of employees are likely to become outdated, with many in the global workforce requiring retraining and upskilling. The resulting instability in job security is prompting a societal shift towards lifelong and life-wide learning with adult learners seeking more flexible offerings.	• Universities must prepare students and graduates for innovation-driven careers. This involves preparing them to work with AI rather than be displaced by it. Universities must accommodate the societal shift towards lifelong and life-wide learning with the provision of more flexible offerings, short learning programmes (SLPs) and stackable credentials.
	• Demand for occupations such as health and other STEM-related professionals is expected to grow in the short term.
	• Declines are expected in the demand for employees in food services, production, customer service, sales, and office support.
• Cybersecurity: There are growing concerns around censorship, surveillance, and measures to curb widespread cybercrime.	• Universities must design and implement cybersecurity measures to protect sensitive academic data, research outputs, and intellectual property. This may require increased investment in IT infrastructure and training.
• Cyberbullying and online harms: The digital age introduced a rise in online harms and cyberbullying, threatening the safety and well-being of students and staff in digital spaces. This includes mis- and disinformation, which has reputational risks.	• Interventions by universities to address cyberbullying and online harms may be limited to offering support to affected students and staff, ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable under the law (if their identity is known), and managing reputational damage through effective crisis communication.



ENVIRONMENTAL

FACTORS	IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
• Climate change poses a significant risk to infrastructure resilience and sustainability. Increased temperatures, extreme weather, and rising sea levels can cause damage, disruption, and failure across critical infrastructure systems, thereby jeopardising public services and economic stability.	• Universities must strengthen infrastructure resilience and prioritise sustainable planning and maintenance to ensure that infrastructure can withstand, adapt to, and recover from adverse conditions.
• Extreme weather events and natural disasters, such as droughts and floods, create widespread disruption and risk to communities.	• Disaster preparedness and response plans for both students and staff, and emergency management protocols must be prepared.
• Biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse: are escalating environmental concerns that threaten global food security, human health, and overall sustainability.	• Universities need to adopt sustainable and responsible policies that encourage environmental stewardship among staff and students. Research and collaboration efforts must contribute to addressing grand challenges such as climate change and environmental degradation.
• Water security: Water is fundamental to human survival and sustainable development. It is essential for public health, sanitation, hygiene. However, water insecurity is shaped by the complex interplay of environmental, social, technological, and institutional factors, and it intersects with broader global challenges, including food and energy security, and climate change.	• HEIs must equip students with competencies in sustainable water management, climate resilience planning, ecosystem protection and natural resource stewardship. These should be integrated across curricula, research agendas, and engagement initiatives to prepare students and graduates to promote environmental sustainability.
	• Addressing water security requires innovation and inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration, since it cannot be fully resolved through a single discipline.
	• HEIs should manage water resources on their campuses and encourage sustainable water use amongst staff and students.
• Energy security and South Africa's Just Energy Transition (JET): The demand for green technologies and sustainable energy solutions is intensifying. South Africa's JET seeks to build a low-carbon, climate-resilient society through the adoption of cleaner, renewable energy sources and the strengthening of long-term energy security and a climate-resilient future.	• The transition to green technologies and sustainability will see jobs in high-emission industries declining while opportunities are created in green sectors, along with new avenues for research, innovation, and funding in environmental science and renewable energy disciplines.
	• Opportunities for providing the re- and upskilling needed by employees in various renewable energy sectors must be optimised.
	• Universities must align academic qualifications, and inter- and transdisciplinary research agendas with national and global sustainability goals, integrate sustainability principles across curricula, and invest in clean energy solutions to build institutional climate resilience.
• Energy supply challenges and sector reform: In response to South Africa's ongoing electricity crisis, the Electricity Regulation Amendment Act, Act 38 of 2024 establishes a competitive electricity market, enabling independent power producers (IPPs), municipalities, and private entities to participate in market and system operations. This supports a transition towards a more decentralised, sustainable, and resilient energy system, with potential environmental benefits such as increased investment in renewable energy and reduced reliance on coal-based electricity.	• Universities need to invest in alternative energy solutions and consider partnering with independent energy producers to improve campus sustainability, manage operational costs, reduce reliance on the national grid, and ensure long-term energy resilience.
• Pollution and ocean sustainability: Pollution originating from land, marine, and other sources poses a significant threat to sustainability. Marine pollution is one of the most severe risks to ocean health, biodiversity, and the livelihoods of coastal communities worldwide.	• Universities, especially those located in coastal regions, must advance sustainability through research, innovation, advocacy, and community engagement. HEIs must embed environmental stewardship in institutional policies, operations, and curricula. This includes promoting sustainability education, empowering students and staff with environmental stewardship skills, and supporting initiatives such as campus waste management and recycling programmes, beach clean-ups, awareness campaigns, and partnerships that promote sustainable practices.



LEGAL

FACTORS	IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
• Regulatory frameworks on data privacy, such as compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), impact university operations and expose the institution to risks in the event of violations (e.g., data sharing).	• Universities must ensure strict adherence to data privacy laws and best practices in handling student and staff information. Non-compliance may result in legal repercussions (lawsuits), reputational damage, and loss of trust from students and stakeholders.
• The management of intellectual property policies and practices is critical for protecting research outputs and innovations.	• Lack of policies to safeguard intellectual property might lead to potential disputes over ownership and ultimately loss of potential revenue for the University.
• Accreditation and quality advancement: The Council on Higher Education (CHE) is the Quality Council for Higher Education and oversees quality assurance and development of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), under the National Qualification Framework (NQF) overseen by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Professional bodies also play a role in programme-specific accreditation and recognition.	• Universities must meet CHE quality assurance requirements, align their qualifications with the NQF, and meet accreditation criteria set by relevant professional bodies. They must also strengthen both internal and external quality assurance systems. The CHE is implementing a new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) to streamline its external quality assurance (EQA) model. The QAF aims to simplify processes and grant HEIs increased self-regulation, responsibility, and accountability for quality management through their internal quality assurance (IQA) systems. As the Quality Council for HE, the CHE will perform its EQA duties via standards development, quality promotion and capacity development (QPCD), quality reviews, and accreditation. The framework promotes a developmental approach to IQA, balanced with accountability for meeting HE standards. The QAF specifically focuses on student learning, teaching, and educational experiences, preparing graduates for global citizenship, capable of addressing complex issues and driving innovation.
• Higher education legislation: The Higher Education Act, Act No. 101 of 1997 (HE Act) aims to establish a single coordinated HE system, while the 2013 White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (PSET) sets out a vision of a differentiated PSET system that overcomes historical inequalities. The National Plan for PSET (NPPSET, 2023) is a roadmap to ensure the delivery of a diverse range of quality post-school qualifications that are responsive to the needs of students, society, and the world of work.	• HEIs must balance academic freedom and institutional autonomy with their obligation to maintain public accountability and responsiveness to national and global development priorities. This requires universities to uphold democratic values, foster transparent governance, and ensure that autonomy is exercised responsibly, supporting transformation agendas and ethical leadership.
	• Access to higher education remains a high priority. Universities should commit strongly to ensuring that higher education is universally accessible to all. Which may involve subsidies, scholarships, or other financial aid programmes. The quality of HEIs and programmes should be high, providing students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their chosen fields. Universities should be inclusive and welcoming environments for all students, creating spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds feel comfortable and supported thus addressing equity and transformation. Universities must create safe living and learning environments with wrap around support services in place to support all students. Graduates must develop graduate attributes, technical and practical skills, and gain experience through internships and other hands-on learning experiences needed to perform effectively. Entrepreneurship should be encouraged and access provided to funding, mentorship, and training for young entrepreneurs.



ETHICAL

FACTORS	IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
• Corruption and dysfunction within the HE system pose a threat to good governance and management, credibility, academic integrity, and long-term sustainability in the sector. Moreover, corruption compromises responsible resource stewardship, ethical practices, and stakeholder trust.	• Universities must strengthen governance systems, ensure consistent enforcement of policies, and internal controls, utilise integrated technology systems, whilst fostering ethical leadership, ethical conduct and accountability at all levels to prevent corruption. Effective governance includes transparent procurement processes, embedding institutional values, and leadership development focused on ethics and good governance. Internal controls such as segregation of duties, risk assessments, and audit activities help mitigate fraud risks. Internal oversight units require robust authority and independence to monitor and review all decisions, including those of senior leadership, thereby enabling early detection of impropriety. Transparency and accountability mechanisms, such as e-procurement and e-budgeting, enhance integrity and curtail corruption opportunities.
• Lack of ethical regulations for AI and biotechnology could lead to several serious consequences such as: bioweapon development; data privacy violations; unethical enhancements (e.g. genetically modified organisms, or human enhancements that could have unintended consequences for human health or the environment); lack of transparency and accountability; environmental impacts; health risks; or food security threats.	• Universities should embrace a human-centred approach to sustainable AI integration. This prioritises human values, user experience, and societal well-being by designing AI systems to augment, not replace, human capabilities. Key elements include, ensuring transparency and fairness, building trust and accountability, and involving diverse stakeholders in the development process.
• Impact of digital tools, AI, and frontier technologies: These offer significant opportunities for enhancing learning and teaching and educational outcomes. AI-powered personalised learning platforms improve student engagement and retention through tailored learning experiences and adaptive curricula, while predictive analytics provide timely interventions for at-risk students. AI automates administrative tasks, freeing educators to focus on student engagement. While AI and other digital tools enhance learning and research capabilities, misuse can negatively impact academic integrity and the credibility of scholarly outputs. Challenges introduced by AI and other technologies in the context of learning and teaching, and e-assessments, conducted with no or minimal invigilation, potentially include risks of AI-assisted plagiarism data manipulation, and generating incomplete or false data. Additionally, over-reliance on AI may have adverse effects on students' critical thinking and cognitive development.	• Universities must ensure the ethical, safe, and responsible use of AI and other technologies. Universities must take proactive steps to monitor the use of AI, foster critical dialogue on its ethical implications and use, and responsibly integrate it into learning, teaching, and assessment. Major challenges include data privacy, algorithmic bias, and deepening the digital divide and access inequality. Institutional policies and strategies should prioritise the balance between automation and pedagogical practices that preserve and promote critical thinking and academic integrity. Universities should also develop balanced AI guidelines which include promoting AI literacy among students and staff to understand both ethical risks and benefits and encourage transparency regarding AI tool use. In integrating AI to enhance personalised learning experiences and providing automated feedback, the university and its teaching and learning designers, should design safeguards to avoid automation bias, privacy breaches, or algorithmic discrimination. Assessment formats should be redesigned to emphasize critical thinking and original work rather than rote responses. For minimal invigilation assessments, universities could employ AI-assisted plagiarism detection tools.



ETHICAL

FACTORS	IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
• Academic misconduct, research conduct and research ethics: Students are often not adequately prepared for or aware of what constitutes ethical conduct, which contributes to an increase in cheating and plagiarism.	• Universities should collaborate with academic staff to identify and implement solutions that uphold academic integrity of scholarly work and fair assessment practices, and effectively manage misconduct in learning environments, including digital/ online learning environments. This underscores the need to regularly update academic policies, and establish robust systems to monitor, detect, and respond to various forms of academic dishonesty and misconduct.
	• To promote responsible and ethical AI use, as an academic or research tool, institutions should establish clear guidelines for AI integration, emphasising critical evaluation, transparent use, proper citation, human oversight, and the primacy of original scholarship. Institutions must, foster open communication regarding AI between students and staff to promote trust and academic integrity. It is imperative concomitantly to strengthen ethics education for students and staff, teaching both under- and postgraduate students ethical conduct in research, as well as ensuring ongoing staff training and capacitation in ethical research conduct and academic writing. Research ethics frameworks must be updated to include AI-related considerations such as data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and the responsible authorship of AI-generated content.
• Knowledge and data management and sharing issues: this relates to both the management of institutional data and knowledge to ensure regulatory adherence, as well as promoting collaborative knowledge exchange for institutional efficacy and innovation.	• To effectively leverage technology, University's must use modern encryption, security audits, and data storage, invest in upgrading legacy systems and ensure egalitarian access to technology, and training. Policies and clear frameworks should be developed for data stewardship, including training faculty, staff, and students in knowledge management best practices and data stewardship competencies to prevent potential misuses of student, staff or other university data. This requires the development of clear governance frameworks and policies to protect student and staff privacy and balance technological innovation with ethical standards and academic integrity.
	• Universities also need ethical leadership to prevent knowledge hiding and to promote a culture of collaboration and trust amongst staff.
• Unethical behaviours or immoral practices of staff and students: this encompasses concerns regarding behaviours or inappropriate interpersonal relationships within the institution that raise concerns regarding fairness and conflicts of interest.	• Universities must foster a values-based institutional culture and uphold appropriate codes of conduct. Up-to-date, clear policies must define unacceptable behaviours, including inappropriate interpersonal relationships, conflicts of interest, and academic misconduct, establishing expectations and consequences to ensure fair, consistent issue resolution. Imperative are: robust processes for confidential, impartial investigations of allegations, subsequent disciplinary procedures, and the application of sanctions or corrective actions. Furthermore, secure and protected channels for reporting misconduct (whistleblowing) must be established.

STRENGTHS

- Stable, ethical governance and management
- Largest comprehensive higher education institution in the Eastern Cape with a wide range of programmes and qualifications from certificate to doctoral level
- One of two universities in the Eastern Cape with a medical school, and an innovative, interprofessional approach to medical and health education
- Humanising pedagogies and proactive student support interventions (academic, psychosocial, and financial) that enhance student access for success
- Growing contribution to public intellectual discourse through institutional public lectures, seminars, and conferences
- Extensive engagement and collaboration with communities, business, industry, government, and civil society in the service of society
- Strategic partnerships locally, provincially, nationally, and internationally
- Wide-ranging efforts to promote social justice, equality, and non-discrimination including disability and LGBTQI+ support
- Leader in transdisciplinary sustainability sciences, to develop innovative solutions to complex challenges
- Socially responsive and impactful research, innovation, and technology to promote the public good
- University with the only dedicated ocean sciences campus in South Africa
- Expansive support for student entrepreneurship and youth employability
- Investment in technologically enabled learning and teaching spaces and modernised infrastructure
- Multi-campus university with distinct niches for each campus
- New state-of-the-art Science Centre and digital dome to advance science for society
- Dedicated, highly skilled employees
- Growing pool of research associates, postdoctoral fellows, and honorary, emeritus, ad personam, visiting, and adjunct (HEAVA) professors to bolster postgraduate supervisory capacity
- Expanding international partnership footprint, particularly in Africa and the global South
- Dedicated signature programmatic interventions to promote a transformative, values-driven institutional culture



WEAKNESSES

- Constrained fiscus and relatively high dependence on government funding
- Inadequate unencumbered third-stream income to fund strategic imperatives and aspirations
- Limited financial assistance for “missing middle” and postgraduate students
- Study loan burden for the “missing middle”
- Cost of rising demands for wraparound student support (e.g., accommodation, transport, catering, etc.)
- Rising student debt levels
- Study loan burden for the “missing middle”
- Need to accelerate digitalisation of cumbersome institutional systems and processes
- Slow adoption of online learning and insufficient flexible educational offerings for the adult market
- Inadequate on-campus student accommodation
- Need to review programme and qualification mix, academic size and shape, modes of delivery, and pedagogical approaches to enhance responsiveness
- Declining postgraduate and international student enrolments and graduates
- Proportion of academic staff with doctoral qualifications is below the national average
- Uneven research productivity among permanent academic staff
- High student: staff ratios and limited postgraduate supervisory capacity in certain academic disciplines/ fields of study
- Fluctuating student success and throughput rates, and graduate outputs
- Inadequate career pathing and promotion opportunities for professional, administrative and support service (PASS) employees
- Attraction and retention of talented, diverse employees, especially in scarce and critical skills
- Need for proactive succession/talent continuity planning, to replace experienced academic and PASS employees who are retiring or resigning over the next five years
- Need for holistic student and employee well-being interventions



OPPORTUNITIES

- Africa’s demographic dividend – expanding youth population
- Collaboration with industry and employers to enhance curriculum responsiveness and graduate employability
- Stackable credentials and fully online offerings in support of lifelong learning
- Digitalisation – leverage innovative technologies, artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, machine learning, 5G, cloud and edge computing, and innovative cybersecurity systems
- Flexible/hybrid ways of working to enhance the employee value proposition
- Strengthened engagement and partnerships with Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and community colleges
- Partnerships with schools to improve the quality of basic education, especially in languages, mathematics, and science
- Education and skills for the future world of work
- High-technology industrialisation, automotive sector, and e-mobility
- Nano- and biotechnologies - integrating science and engineering to create advanced materials and systems for diverse sectors
- Oceans economy - programmes in marine tourism and hospitality, marine transport and manufacturing, marine engineering, offshore oil and gas, and marine environmental studies
- Improving agricultural production (e.g. via drones & digital technology & smart irrigation systems); producing new crops (e.g. hemp/ cannabis); and exploring agro-processing to transform raw agricultural products into e.g. food, fuel, fiber, or industrial raw materials
- Tourism - developing management, marketing, event planning, and sustainable tourism skills
- Improving access to quality healthcare and exploring new drug therapies e.g. engineered living therapeutics
- Just energy transition - renewable energy sources, hydrogen economy, and sustainable technologies
- Localisation and Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMME) development
- Implementation of a new streamlined work visa application system to attract skilled immigrants
- Opportunities presented through the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) economic bloc and its expansion to ten member countries
- The Presidential PhD Initiative - increase doctoral enrolments, strengthen research capacity, foster international partnerships, and contribute to the renewal of the academic profession
- The Comprehensive Student Funding Model to address the funding needs of “missing middle” students
- Student debt relief initiatives focusing on scarce skills programmes
- Leveraging private-public partnerships and collaborations in building needed new infrastructure (e.g. residences)



THREATS

- Weakening global and national economy
- Financial sustainability within the higher education sector – rising costs and declining State funding
- Rising global geo-political tensions, conflicts, nationalism, and protectionism
- Impact of trade wars and shifts in Government fiscal policy
- Impact of United States’ aid cuts on funding for research programmes
- High interest rates, inflation, and households under pressure due to the cost-of-living crisis (annual Consumer Price Index (CPI) increased to 3.0% in June 2025)
- Persistently high levels of unemployment, poverty, inequality and malnutrition (33.2% national unemployment rate in Q2:2025; 63.4% poverty rate in 2025; Gini coefficient of 0.67)
- Pervasive food insecurity and hunger
- Uncertainty regarding the political stability of the Government of National Unity (GNU)
- Increasing number of unemployed graduates (12.2% nationally in Q2:2025)
- Lack of social cohesion and increasing polarisation
- Rapid urbanisation and uneven access to quality human settlements
- Environmental risks – water, food, and energy insecurity, as well as the impacts of climate change, natural disasters, and pollution
- Quality of basic education and schooling, especially the poor performance of school leavers in mathematics and science.
- Low literacy and numeracy levels in schools
- Increased national and global competition for talent
- Crime, violence, and substance abuse
- Gender-based violence, and inequality
- Digital divide and unequal access to mobile devices, data connectivity, and high data costs
- Rising cybersecurity and data privacy concerns
- Mis- and disinformation, particularly on social media and other online platforms
- Poor performance of local government and service delivery failures



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