

Curriculum Transformation in South African Tertiary Institutions: Current Research on Narratives of Change

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Abstract: Curriculum transformation initiatives, with specific reference to the South African context, is increasingly applied in the reflection of societal changes on teaching and learning, content, and pedagogy. However, currently limited research on the presiding narratives of change and their potential impact on practices, policy, and curricula hampers tertiary education stakeholders' ability to fully evaluate and drive effective curriculum transformation. Accordingly, this study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of existing research on narratives of change in South African tertiary education, with objectives that include identifying said narratives, analysing research trends, and highlighting interventions for stakeholders to consider in curricula transformation efforts. The research methodology comprises of a bibliometric and qualitative review. The former utilises "curriculum transformation", "South Africa", and "higher"/"tertiary" as source concepts to identify applicable publications on the SCOPUS database, which are subsequently analysed using the VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) software. The qualitative review includes an analysis of the content of the papers in line with the narratives of change identified in the network and overlay visualisations. Through these analyses, four narratives of change are identified in the bibliometric analysis, including decolonisation, e-learning, inclusive curricula, and diversity. Key interventions for curriculum transformation include integrating African perspectives, promoting inclusive teaching practices, and leveraging Information Communication Technology (ICT) for effective e-learning. Additionally, flexible teaching methods, multilingualism, industry partnerships, and the inclusion of African knowledge systems and gender-sensitive content are essential for fostering a diverse and supportive educational environment. The contribution of this paper is centred on enabling more effective and comprehensive evaluation and analysis of existing curricula by education stakeholders and institutions, and to guide successful curriculum transformation initiatives.

Keywords: Curriculum transformation, Narratives of change, Bibliometric review, Decolonisation, e-Learning

1. Introduction

Curriculum transformation in tertiary education has experienced increased importance in the context of societal changes, with reference to social, political, environmental, and economic developments in diverse education contexts (Ashari et al., 2023). This is especially applicable in the post-apartheid South African context in which objectives of socio-economic development, equality, and transformation has catalysed initiatives toward the review of curricula, teaching and learning approaches, and pedagogy (Blignaut, 2020). Said movements are driven by narratives of change – frameworks that delineate a structured account regarding the merits, nature, and required interventions to bring about respective changes within a system (Wittmayer et al., 2019). One example in this regard is the drive for sustainable development as encapsulated in the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which is guided research, policy, and industry in achieving related objectives (UN, 2024).

The potentially wide-ranging impact of narratives of change underlines the need for transformation and renewal in the pedagogies and content inherent to knowledge transfer in tertiary education and institutions. Accordingly, South African tertiary institutions have developed initiatives centred on the continuous analysis of curricula (Mashilo & Govender, 2023), of which the latter is central to ensuring the quality and relevance of related programmes, supports ongoing improvements in educational outcomes, drives innovation and competitiveness (Audunsson et al., 2024) and promotes interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge transfer. However, despite its importance, there is limited research on presiding narratives of change and the inherent shifts in practices, policy, and curricula that these narratives propagate. This inhibits tertiary education stakeholders and institutions to comprehensively evaluate and analyse curricula for effective transformation.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to provide holistic overview of existing research on narratives of change in the context of South African tertiary education. Objectives include the identification of distinct narratives of change, analysing research trends in this regard, and identifying the interventions delineated in existing research to be considered by stakeholders in the process of undertaking curricula transformation initiatives. The contribution of this study is to support and inform the implementation of systematic change and initiatives

toward the improvement of tertiary curricula over time. The research methodology applied in this regard is a bibliometric review of existing research, with focus on determining prominent research themes toward identifying narrative of change, as well as a qualitative research of the selected publications to provide insight on specific descriptions and interventions inherent to respective narratives of change. The structure of the paper is demarcated by the literature review, research methodology, findings and discussion, and conclusion sections.

2. Literature Review

The sections include in the literature review includes an introduction to curriculum and its transformation, the South African education context, and narratives of change.

2.1 'Curriculum' and the South African Education Context

The term 'curriculum' refers to a planned course of study with a clear beginning and end (Hewitt, 2006). Developing a curriculum involves creating, organising, and producing teaching materials, which integrate curriculum with instruction (Abie, 2014; Hewitt, 2006). This process addresses key questions about what should be taught and how, guiding the selection of instructional tools (Hewitt, 2006). There are two main approaches to curriculum: the product-driven model, which focuses on learning outcomes, and the process-driven model, which emphasises experiential learning through work and life experiences (Abie, 2014; O'Neil, 2010). Various curriculum development models, which can be descriptive (explaining a process), prescriptive (outlining steps or principles), practical (specific to certain practices), replicable (usable in different settings), and constructive (developed from particular models), help structure the curriculum by indicating the scope of knowledge and teaching sequence (Hewitt, 2006; Abie, 2014). The incorporation of community-based knowledge into the mentioned models may ensure continued relevance of curricula to students' sociocultural contexts, enabling engagement (Mpuangnan & Ntombela, 2024). This forms part of the broader need for curricula adaptation and evolution to retain their impact and significance (Abidin et al., 2023), highlighting the importance of flexibility and responsiveness (Kilag et al., 2023).

In South Africa, higher education curricula have evolved into well-designed and carefully developed models that support equal education for all, reflecting the country's commitment to addressing diverse educational needs within its specific context. The responsibility for ensuring quality tertiary education lies with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), including, inter alia, through the implementation of the Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa. This department seeks to provide a comprehensive education system that promotes lifelong learning and aims to improve lives and support a democratic South Africa (DHET, 2020; DBE, 2012). The DHET envisions an inclusive and accessible post-school education system for all South Africans (DHET, 2020). Universities South Africa (USAf), formerly Higher Education South Africa (HESA), is a key governing body representing all public universities in the country. USAf fosters an environment for universities to thrive, ensuring access for students from diverse backgrounds and supporting the role of universities in socio-economic and cultural development. It also addresses issues such as stability, transformation, differentiation, and internationalisation for higher education institutions (USAf, 2021; National Government of South Africa, 2012).

2.2 Curriculum Transformation and Narratives of Change

The primary goal of education is to ensure academic success and prepare students to be active citizens in a democratic society (Mohapi & Netshitangani, 2017). Education is key to social transformation, fostering equality and empowering students to address social injustices (Mohapi & Netshitangani, 2017). In South Africa, education is viewed as a transformative process, with curriculum transformation reflecting broader societal shifts (Mohapi & Netshitangani, 2017; Gumede & Biyase, 2016). Since 1994, South Africa has experienced several significant curriculum changes in line with underlying narratives of change. The introduction of Curriculum 2005 (C2005) aimed to improve education quality with a focus on social justice, human rights, and learner-centered approaches (Woest, 2018). Curricula are grounded in values that align with the goals of the South African constitution, such as social justice, human rights, environmental awareness, and respect for people from diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds (Gumede & Biyase, 2016; DBE, 2012). These curriculum changes are necessary in a society where knowledge is shaped through transformative experiences to develop ethical, democratic citizens (Mohapi & Netshitangani, 2017).

3. Research Methodology

This paper applies both a bibliometric and qualitative review of existing research within the parameters of the research objectives. The utilisation of a bibliometric review provides insights into the underlying themes of select publications, their publication trends over time, and thematic clustering (Linglin, 2024), which may be applied to delineate narratives of change. Advantages of this approach include analysis replicability, objectivity, simplicity in the context of large datasets (Pretorius et al., 2022). In applying this approach, specific source concepts are identified to demarcate the publications that are relevant to the research objectives. Accordingly, in this regard, the source concepts are “curriculum transformation”, “South Africa”, and “higher”/“tertiary”. This reflects the institutional and educational context of the research. These source concepts are used as input on the SCOPUS database, where identified publication information (including their titles, abstracts, author information, and keywords) are downloaded in comma-separated values (csv.) format. This database is utilised due to its high volume of multidisciplinary publications, related abstracts, and citations (Patel et al., 2021). The downloaded information is limited to journal and conference proceeding papers, as well as book chapters.

The csv. output is imported in the VOSviewer application (version 1.6.20), which creates various outputs to reflect the nature of the research. Relevant here is the occurrence of the different keywords in the selected publications, which highlight the underlying themes in the research, in addition to the link among keywords, which illustrates the extent to which said keywords occur together within the same publications (Van Eck & Waltman, 2018). The latter enables the identification of research clusters, which informs the delineation of narratives of change. Keyword linkages and clusters are displayed in the network visualisation, while the overlay visualisation indicates the average date of publication of the respective keywords to enable the identification of research and thematic trends over time. The qualitative review, which is the second component of the research methodology, analyses the content of the selected publications in line with the research objectives of the study (Islam et al., 2021). Informed by the narratives of change identified through the bibliometric review, the criteria for the qualitative review of the publications are centred on their description and overview of the narrative of change discussed as part of their content, and interventions suggested applicable to curriculum transformation initiatives. This component of the methodology enables a broader, in-depth analysis of the themes identified in the bibliometric review (Pretorius et al., 2022) and provides a holistic overview of presiding narratives of change in this content for the consideration of institutional stakeholders.

4. Findings and Discussion

The following section delineated the findings of the bibliometric and qualitative reviews, which constitute the two components of the research methodology.

4.1 Bibliometric Review

The structure of the bibliometric review is based on the various VOSviewer outputs, including keyword occurrence, and the network and overlay visualisations. As an introduction, an overview of the delineated research publications is provided.

4.1.1 Overview of research

In total, 28 publications were identified on the SCOPUS databased utilising the source concepts, four of which were journal papers, three book chapters, and 2 conference proceedings papers. The majority of papers (24) were relevant to the social sciences field, followed by art and humanities (two) business, management and accounting (two), and computer science (two). Most of the research (82%) were published between 2018 and 2024, with the earliest published in 2002. The most cited paper in the delineated research is Lockett and Shay (2020) with 60 citations, followed by Wilmot and McKenna (2018) (20), and Bell and Swart (2018) (10).

4.1.2 Keyword occurrence

The first VOSviewer output is centred on identifying the keywords that occur in the delineated research, with the objective of identifying potential narratives of change. Select keyword occurrences are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Keyword occurrences

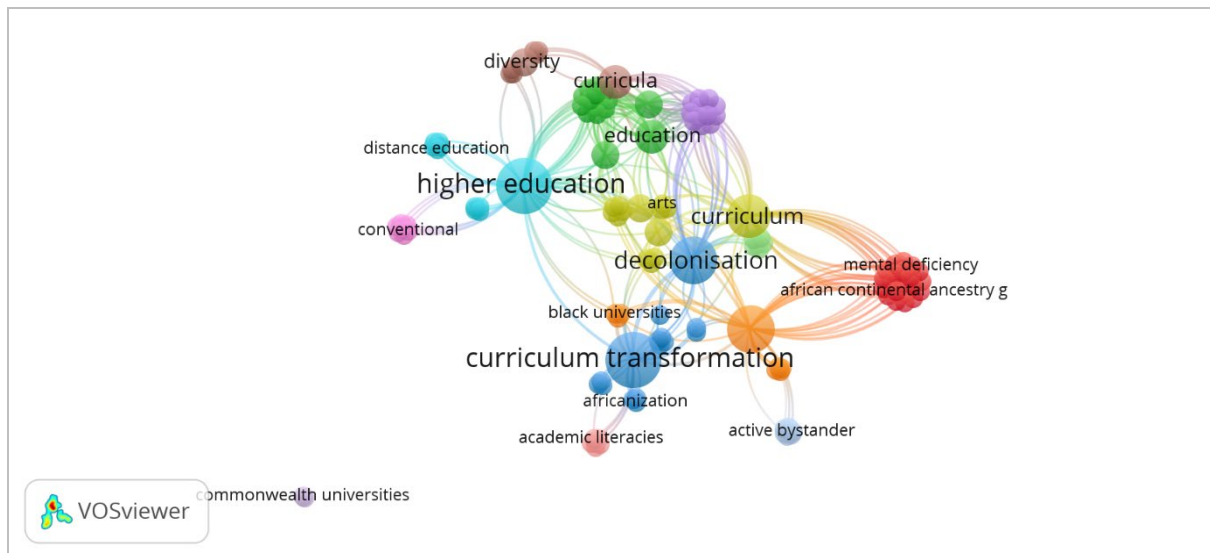
Keyword	Occurrences
Decolonisation	6
e-Learning (Distance e-learning; Open distance e-learning)	4
Deaf (Disability; Hard of hearing; hearing impairment)	4
Diversity	2
Africanisation (and Africanization)	2
Decoloniality (and Coloniality)	2
Inclusive curricula	1
Language of teaching and learning	1
Gender equality	1

Source: Authors (2024).

As per Table 1, there are various keywords that may be associated with narratives of change in this context. This includes *decolonisation*, which occurs six times in the selected research. Keywords potentially associated herewith includes *decoloniality* (and *coloniality*) and *Africanisation* (and *Africanization*), that occur twice, respectively. In addition, the *e-learning* (and *distance e-learning*, *open distance e-learning*) is also a potentially prominent narrative of change, occurring four time among the published papers. Research regarding *disability* (including *deaf*, *hard of hearing*, and *hearing impairment*) also have four occurrences, followed by *diversity* (two). The keywords *inclusive curricula*, *language of teaching and learning*, and *gender equality* all occur once in the delineated research.

4.1.3 Network visualisation

The network visualisation is utilised to the identify relationships between these and other keywords in the research. Said output delineates clusters of keywords based on their co-occurrence in publications and may thus enable improved delineation and categorisation of narratives of change as they emerge in the research. This VOSviewer output is illustrated in Figure 1.



Source: Authors (2024).

Figure 1: Network visualisation

The network visualisation, as illustrated in Figure 1, identifies 14 clusters among the 138 keywords in the research. The criterium for cluster delineation is based on intra-group link strength exceeding linkages with keywords in other clusters – keywords within a cluster occur to a greater degree in the same publications. Informed by Table 1, the network visualisation is also utilised to identify inter-cluster linkages to enable the

selection of keywords to categorise respective narratives of change present in the research. The latter is also based on thematic linkages between potentially related keywords.

Table 2 provides a delineation of said narratives of change, the keywords applied in the categorisation, and the applicable clusters from the network visualisation.

Table 2: Narratives of change

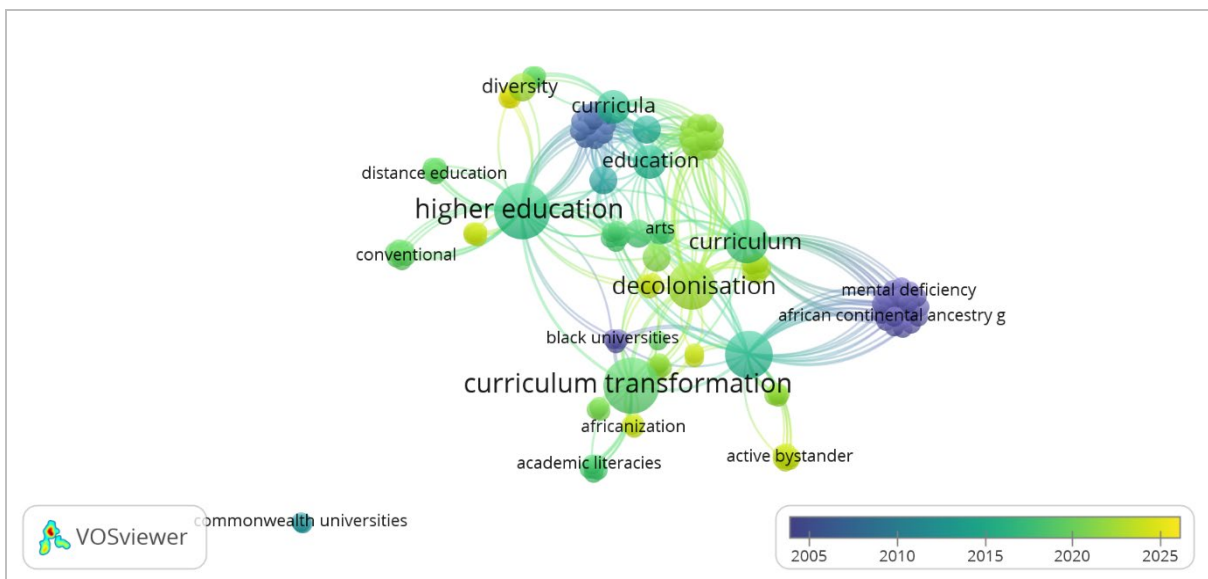
Narratives of change	Keywords	Clusters
Decolonisation	<i>Decolonisation; Africanization; locally relevant curriculum; decoloniality</i>	Cluster 3
e-Learning	<i>e-learning; computer aided instruction; distance e-learning; open distance e-learning</i>	Cluster 2, 5, 6
Inclusive curricula	<i>Inclusive curricula; hearing impairment; disability; deaf; hard of hearing</i>	Cluster 4
Diversity	<i>Diversity; epistemic pluralism; language of teaching and learning; indigenous knowledge; feminist decoloniality; microaggressions; black women faculty; gender equality</i>	Cluster 8, 12, 14

Source: Authors (2024).

Accordingly, the predominant narratives of change present in existing research are decolonisation, e-learning, inclusive curricula, and diversity. These findings inform the qualitative analysis of said publications.

4.1.4 Overlay visualisation

The overlay visualisation, which is the third VOSviewer output, is illustrated in Figure 2. This visualisation illustrates the thematic trends inherent to the publications over time through indicating the average year of publications in which keywords occur. This provides insights on the manner in which the research focus has changed within the indicated period.



Source: Authors (2024).

Figure 2: Overlay visualisation

Based on VOSviewer output, the selected research was published predominantly between 2005 and 2024 (with some due to be published in 2025). As indicated in Figure 2, research on curriculum transformation in the context of tertiary education in South Africa was initially (circa 2005) discipline-specific, with divergent focus on *engineering disciplines* (and *engineering education*), *medical education* (including *medical practice*, *health care quality*, and *medical school*), and *culture studies*. Research in these disciplines constitute respective clusters, with limited keyword linkages. However, focus has shifted toward broader themes that may have transdisciplinary relevance and application, including *teaching* (average publication year being 2013), *e-learning* (2014), and *curriculum transformation* (2019) itself. Research regarding the identified narratives of

change are mostly published during the period in with the latter keyword grows in occurrence. The average year of publication for research associated with the keywords inherent to inclusive curricula is 2018, followed by the collection of keywords related to e-learning (2019), diversity (2021), and decolonisation (2022). The latest research regarding the latter narrative of change is published in 2023 (including *locally relevant curriculum* and *Africanization*).

4.2 Qualitative Review

The following section delineates the findings of the qualitative review of the selected research publications guided by the narratives of change identified through the bibliometric analysis. This review provides an overview of existing research based on their respective descriptions of narratives of change, as well as their potential contribution to curriculum transformation initiatives. Table 3 indicates the prominent sources of decolonisation, e-learning, inclusive curricula, and diversity narratives of change, as well their description of said change within the parameters of the study.

Table 3: Sources of narratives of change

	Source	Description
1. Decolonisation	Dube (2021)	Deep curriculum transformation beyond content substitution, emphasizing the need to rethink the discipline's being and its pedagogical structures.
	Ebewo & Sirayi (2018)	Decolonisation and the Africanisation of the curriculum, incorporating African cultural content and reducing Eurocentric dominance.
	Luckett & Shay (2017)	Decolonisation through reframing the curriculum to address redistribution, recognition, and representation, based on Fraser's multi-dimensional framework for justice.
	Madhav & Baron (2022)	Decolonisation by addressing the exclusion of African worldviews and proposing a conversation-driven, cybernetic approach to curriculum transformation.
	Maistry & Le Grange (2023)	Decolonisation and challenging neoliberal structures that perpetuate colonial legacies in university governance and curricula.
	Olsson (2023)	Decolonisation, critically assessing how decolonising efforts, like those seen at Nelson Mandela University, intersect with academic freedom.
	Rink et al. (2020)	Decolonisation, emphasizing the need for reflexive pedagogies and border-crossing to dismantle inherited disciplinary and epistemological boundaries.
	Sathorar & Geduld (2019)	Decolonisation, focusing on reshaping the mindset of lecturers to engage with decolonial pedagogy in teacher education.
2. e-Learning	Zawada (2019)	Advocates for e-learning through the development of a high-quality culture in distance education, focusing on both compliance and transformative learning.
	Czerniewicz & Brown (2007)	Advocates for e-learning by examining the complexities of ICT access and usage, challenging the simplistic notion of the "digital divide" in favour of a "usage divide."
3. Inclusive curricula	Bell & Swart (2018)	Inclusive curricula and better support systems.
	De Vos & Riedel (2023)	Decolonizing language curricula by increasing the visibility of African languages and voices.
	Gumbo et al. (2019)	Curriculum pathways that retain practical skills training and work-integrated learning in urban and regional planning education.
	Khoza-Shangase & Kalenga (2024)	Inclusive Curricula by emphasizing the need for Afrocentric approaches and tailored language support in curriculum transformation.
	Wilmot & McKenna (2018)	Inclusive Curricula by using peer-led writing groups to create a safe space for students to develop academic literacy, voice, and identity.
4. Diversity	Denny & Wepener (2021)	Intercultural pluriversity pedagogy that integrates diverse cultural and epistemic perspectives.
	Eybers (2019)	Diversity by proposing the use of Ayittey's Indigenous African Institutions to create epistemic plurality in the curriculum.
	Kepe (2022)	Decolonisation by promoting biliteracy, hybrid literacy, and translanguaging in curriculum transformation.
	Moremoholo (2023)	Diversity by emphasizing the need to integrate indigenous cultural knowledge and values into the higher education curriculum.
	Morley (2007)	Diversity by promoting gender mainstreaming to address inequalities in access, curriculum transformation, and staff development.

	Source	Description
	Morley (2012)	Diversity by promoting gender mainstreaming and affirmative action to address gender imbalances in higher education.
	Zerai (2023)	Feminist Decoloniality and Diversity by addressing systemic racism and sexism in higher education through care-based, intersectional responses.

Source: Authors (2024).

As described in Table 3, existing research regarding the decolonisation narrative of change in the South African tertiary education context proposes, inter alia, the integration of diverse (Rink et al., 2020) and African perspectives into curricula (Dube, 2021) and to challenge existing Eurocentric and neoliberal foundation (Maistry & Le Grange, 2023); the incorporation of locally relevant context in curricula, with reference to the integration of African knowledge systems and arts (Ebewo & Sirayi, 2018) and inclusive conversations in technical curricula (Madhav & Baron); the dismantling of colonial power structures through utilising inclusive and pluralistic education practices (Luckett & Shay, 2017); and to enhance lecturer dispositions and promoting critical consciousness (Sathorar & Geduld, 2019). In addition, existing research on the e-learning narrative of change focus on creating strategies for effective ICT use by education participants and addressing socio-economic and disciplinary differences to enhance utilisation and thus learning in this regard (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2007); and suggest shared meaning-making between students and staff to enhance the effectiveness of distance learning, while moving beyond a narrow focus on quality assurance (Zawada, 2019).

With reference to the inclusive curricula narrative of change, as indicated in Table 3, existing research is focused on implementing flexible teaching methods and improved access for hard of hearing students (Bell & Swart, 2018); the integration of multilingualism (De Vos & Riedel, 2023) and indigenous languages (Khoza-Shangase & Kalenga, 2024) in teaching and learning to support English Additional Language (EAL) students; and the incorporation of theoretical and practical training in curricula through project-based learning and partnership with industry stakeholders (Gumbo et al., 2019). With regards to the diversity narrative of change, the selected publications are centred on, inter alia, the incorporation of the African knowledge systems alongside global and Western epistemologies within tertiary curricula (Eybers, 2019); the creation of diverse curriculum models that reflect different cultural perspectives, including African cultural heritage (Moremoholo, 2023); the integration of gender-sensitive content into curricula and gender equality policies at education institutions (Morley, 2007; 2009); and the utilisation of feminist decolonial methodologies and mentoring networks to create supporting environments for Black women with this context (Zerai, 2023).

5. Conclusion

Despite the importance of curriculum transformation, limited research has been undertaken regarding the various narratives of change in the context of tertiary education in South Africa. Accordingly, this paper provides a holistic overview of current publications to inform the decisions of stakeholders engaged with curriculum development and reform as part of broader transformation initiatives. The bibliometric review revealed keyword linkages and thematic clusters that delineate coherent narratives of change. Through the network visualisation, four narratives were identified: decolonisation, e-learning, inclusive curricula, and diversity. Furthermore, the overlay visualisation showed that research themes have evolved from discipline-specific focuses to broader curricula transformation themes with transdisciplinary applications. Notably, research supporting transformation in teaching and the use of e-learning emerged as key trends. Among the papers focused on narratives of change, decolonisation themes were published most recently (average publication year being 2022), while inclusive curricula themes, on average, were published earlier (2018).

The qualitative review component provided a deeper analysis of the identified narratives of change. This analysis of the content of the papers highlighted interventions that can inform curriculum transformation. For instance, in the case of decolonisation, integrating diverse and African perspectives into curricula while challenging Eurocentric foundations is essential to promoting more inclusive and critical teaching practices. Similarly, e-learning can be enhanced by the effective use of ICT and fostering collaboration between students and staff. Inclusive curricula benefit from flexible teaching methods, the promotion of multilingualism, and stronger partnerships with industry to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical applications. Furthermore, embedding African knowledge systems, diverse cultural perspectives, and gender-sensitive content is crucial for creating a diverse and supportive educational environment. The findings of this paper support the ongoing implementation of systematic change and the improvement of tertiary curricula over time. By providing an overview of narratives of change and potential interventions, this study offers a

framework for more effective and comprehensive evaluations of existing curricula, aiding institutions and education stakeholders in the curriculum transformation process.

Further research is recommended to explore how these narratives can be integrated into specific curricula at South African tertiary institutions and across different programmes. There is also a need to examine methodologies for curriculum reviews, as well as the monitoring and evaluation of transformation initiatives after their implementation. Knowledge-sharing best practices, particularly the role of the DHET and related institutions should also be explored to support sustained curriculum reform in the tertiary education sector. Finally, limitations of this study include the selection of source concepts, which may have affected the scope of the research included in the analyses, as well as the limited consideration of specific disciplinary domains. These limitations will need to be addressed in future research.

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