

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

Internationalisation of higher education has become a global trend, with African universities increasingly engaging in cross-border collaborations, student and faculty mobility, and curriculum internationalisation. Notable among the African countries pursuing rigorous internationalisation is South Africa, which has developed comprehensive policy frameworks aimed at addressing past inequalities and aligning with democratic values. It is against this background that this study examined the opportunities for internationalisation in higher institutions. This study adopted a qualitative research design using the case study approach. The purposive sampling technique was adopted to select academics of different nationalities with tenured appointments in South African universities. Data, which were collected using interviews and documentary analysis, were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings from the study revealed enhanced academic quality and curriculum development, increased research collaboration and knowledge exchange, faculty and student mobility, and economic and institutional growth as some of the opportunities arising from internationalisation and collaboration. The challenges identified included funding constraints and economic barriers, unfriendly policy and regulations, limited institutional capacity, geopolitical and safety concerns and brain drain. This study concluded that, as a leader in Africa's internationalisation of higher education, South Africa presents numerous opportunities for scholarly cooperation, economic development, and cross-cultural interaction. It is recommended that South Africa support the growth of higher education across Africa, among other initiatives.

Keywords: Internationalisation, Higher education, African universities, Globalisation.

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education in Africa has been a growing trend, driven by globalization, technological advancements, and a desire for improved educational quality and competitiveness while emerging as a pivotal force in shaping academic institutions worldwide. This process involves the cross-border exchange of students, faculty, curricula, research collaborations, and institutional partnerships. The internationalisation of higher education has become a global trend, with countries seeking to enhance their educational systems through cross-border collaborations, student mobility, and academic exchange programs. African universities want to increase their worldwide visibility and competitiveness as globalisation continues to integrate economies, cultures, and knowledge systems. Increased staff and student mobility, cross-border cooperation, the use of global curricula, and involvement in worldwide research networks are all part of this dynamic (Shen et al., 2022). In Africa, internationalisation presents an opportunity to bridge knowledge gaps, improve academic standards, and foster global competitiveness. The growing need for high-quality instruction and research cooperation is one of the main forces behind internationalisation in African higher education. Cross-border knowledge exchange has become necessary as a result of globalisation, leading African universities to look for collaborations with organisations in North America, Europe, and Asia. Additionally, internationalisation fosters cultural exchange, equipping students with global competencies essential for navigating international labour markets. These collaborations facilitate student and faculty mobility, joint research projects, and curriculum harmonisation, thereby enhancing the global standing of African universities (Suntharalingam, 2024).

One of the key opportunities in the internationalisation of higher education in Africa is the potential for knowledge transfer and skill development (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024). By partnering with global institutions, African universities can benefit from exchange programmes, faculty collaborations, and joint research initiatives while solving the problem of educational inequalities (Jowi, 2024). These partnerships enhance academic standards, expose students and faculty to diverse perspectives, and contribute to institutional capacity building. Moreover, international collaborations facilitate access to cutting-edge research and technological advancements that may otherwise be inaccessible due to financial and infrastructural constraints (Jowi, 2024). Private sector

engagement and public-private partnerships (PPPs) also present significant opportunities for the internationalisation of African higher education. By collaborating with industries and multinational corporations, universities can secure funding for research, develop industry-aligned curricula, and facilitate internships and job placements for graduates. Such partnerships can enhance the employability of African students while ensuring that higher education institutions remain relevant to evolving global economic needs (de Wit & Altbach, 2020).

However, the continent grapples with constraints such as inadequate funding, regulatory barriers. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the urgent need for digital transformation in higher education, as many African institutions struggled to transition to online learning models (Mugimu, 2022). Furthermore, the digital divide continues to be a major obstacle to internationalisation in African universities. While many institutions in developed countries have embraced digital learning and virtual collaboration, limited internet access and outdated technological infrastructure in Africa pose major challenges (Oladele, 2024). Higher education institutions in Africa frequently have asymmetrical relationships with their counterparts in the global north, which results in unfair collaborations and little local control (Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020). This problem is aggravated by the critical issue of brain drain, where talented students and academics migrate to institutions in developed countries in search of better opportunities. This phenomenon depletes local talent pools, weakening African universities' capacity to conduct cutting-edge research and provide quality education (Scholarworks & Osigbesan, 2021).

Language and cultural barriers also pose challenges to the internationalisation of higher education in Africa (Msomphora, 2025). While many African colleges use English, French, and Portuguese as their main languages of instruction; nonetheless, linguistic diversity across the continent can make regional and global cooperation more difficult. Additionally, Western-dominated academic frameworks often overlook indigenous knowledge systems, limiting Africa's contribution to global scholarship. Addressing these challenges requires a more inclusive approach to internationalisation that values local knowledge systems while promoting multilingual competencies (Murove, 2018; Ndaipa et al., 2023).

Despite these hurdles, African countries should take proactive steps to enhance the internationalisation of their higher education sectors. Initiatives such as the

African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) 2016–2025 aim to foster academic mobility, strengthen research networks, and harmonise higher education systems across the continent (African Union, 2016). Additionally, regional frameworks like the African Higher Education Harmonisation and Quality Assurance Initiative (HAQAA) seek to align academic standards with international benchmarks, thereby improving the global recognition of African degrees (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). There is a significant push towards intra-regional academic collaboration in Africa. This includes the establishment of agreements and cooperation within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and other regional bodies to enhance academic mobility and curriculum internationalisation (Kabeya et al., 2022; Southern African Development Community (SADC), 2022). This initiative has attracted the European union collaboration (European Union, 2021); showing that South Africa, is one of the continent's leading higher education hubs. It is therefore not surprising that 6.5 per cent of the total number of enrolments in universities in the country are international students, which is a significant proportion of the student body as reported by the Council for Higher Education reported (Banda & Zungu, 2024). Furthermore, South Africa has created extensive policy frameworks to direct the internationalisation of higher education to remedy historical injustices and conform to democratic ideals. The reported statistics and policy effort provide a compelling case for this study. In the light of this, this study investigated the prospects for internationalisation in higher education and explored both the opportunities and challenges associated with internationalisation in South Africa.

Objectives of the Study

1. Examine the strategies of internationalisation of higher education in South Africa.
2. Determine the opportunities of internationalisation of higher education in South Africa.
3. Examine the challenges of internationalisation of higher education in South Africa.

Research Questions

1. What are the strategies of internationalisation of higher education in South Africa?

2. What are the opportunities of internationalisation of higher education in South Africa?
3. What are the challenges of internationalisation of higher education in South Africa?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study examined key themes on internationalisation of higher education in Africa, consisting of strategies, challenges and opportunities as shown in Figure 1.

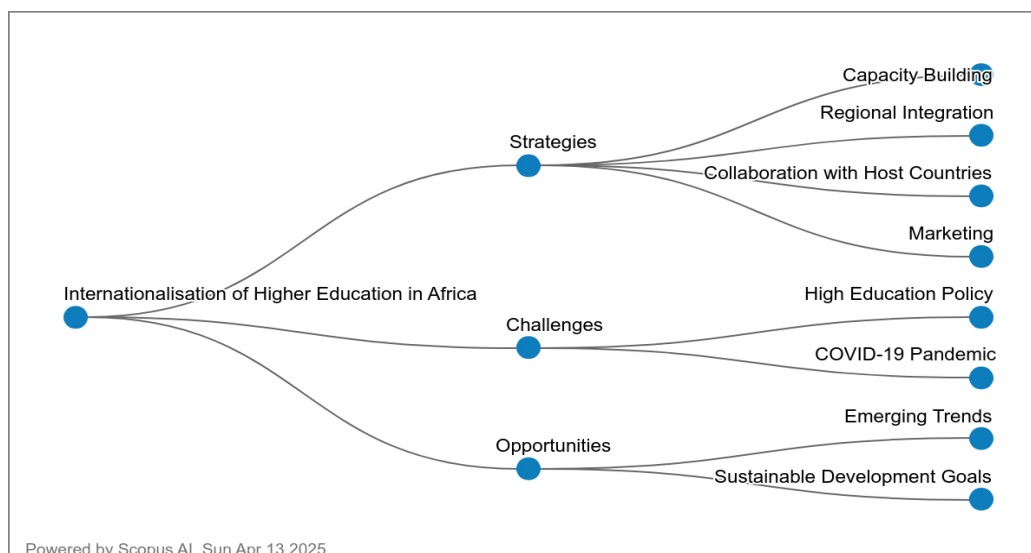


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework on Strategies, Challenges and Opportunities for Internationalisation in Africa

Internationalisation can be critical in assisting developing nations in overcoming issues like poverty, climate change, and educational disparities, as the need to push the frontiers of research to create new technologies and significant global projects grows. However, there is a dearth of research on the internationalisation of higher education in less developed African nations, even though higher education institutions have long experienced difficulties in this process, which have drawn scholarly attention in recent decades (Moshtari & Safarpou, 2024). While internationalisation is an emerging area, there are challenges in understanding the nitty-gritty of the concept. Some of these challenges are a lack of clear policies and inefficient organisational structures, which hinder internationalisation efforts (Kasenene, 2011; Pindado et al.,

2023). Other significant barriers are limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and equipment shortages (Dirckinck-Holmfeld et al., 2023; Oladele, 2024). Weaknesses in scientific, skill, and language competencies, along with cultural differences, are also a major concern (Ram, 2020; Zickafoose et al., 2024), while the problem of brain drain constitutes another major challenge (Bhardwaj & Sharma, 2023). The loss of talent can impede economic growth and development, as this has become a major worry, especially for developing countries.

Despite these challenges, internationalisation offers many opportunities in the areas of developing clear policies and visions, planning for human resource development, and sustainable budgeting (Moshtari & Safarpou, 2024). National and international collaboration can aid the development of national policies and participation in international meetings to leverage scientific and economic capacities. Haley et al. (2024), however, stressed the possibility of universities in the wealthy and powerful global North using international cooperation more and more to become more competitive and market-oriented. Additionally, regional approaches and collaborations, such as the proposed continental credit accumulation and transfer system, can facilitate academic mobility and curriculum internationalisation (Ayadi & Ronco, 2023; Jowi, 2024).

The impact of internationalisation on higher education in Africa manifests in the areas of ensuring the quality and relevance of education through re-assessment of academic degrees and diplomas (Mkwanzanji & Mukwambo, 2024; Ndaipa et al., 2023). It also helps in addressing issues of access and equity in higher education, particularly in the context of regional research and developmental needs (Amutuhair, 2023; Dervin, 2024; Tight, 2022) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, with higher education institutions playing a crucial role in its achievement, particularly in providing quality education and promoting sustainable development (Association of African Universities, 2021; Berchin et al., 2023; Lim, 2024; Toman et al., 2023).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study research design, which entailed collecting and analysing data from reports, documents, and interviews. This design was deemed appropriate for exploring and understanding the opportunities and challenges of the internationalisation of higher education in Africa, while delving in depth into how it is being pursued in South Africa (Falaye, 2018). The population of this research comprised foreign academics and researchers at South African universities, from whom key informants were purposively sampled using a random purposive sampling technique. Therefore, faculty and postdoctoral researchers who were non-nationals of South Africa were sampled for the study, with a sample size of 7 participants. This sample met the minimum requirement of four to five cases for a qualitative case study design (Creswell, 2014; Ahmed, 2025).

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with key informants, an approach appropriate for understanding a broad range of people and settings, collecting detailed information, and studying past events of significance. The interviews were conducted face-to-face using Microsoft Teams, and each session lasted for about twenty to forty minutes. On the other hand, secondary data were generated from screenshots of documented evidence of postdoctoral research fellows' institutional access, based on their affiliations to universities in South Africa. In analysing the collected data, the recordings were automatically transcribed via Teams during the interview session to produce the interview scripts, which were thematically analysed according to the study's research questions.

Ethical Considerations: All requirements for studies involving human participants were adhered to in line with the ethical standards for research.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the strategies for the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa?

Based on the coded data, the findings suggest that the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa is primarily driven by government-supported incentive structures and the recruitment of international academic talent. Two overarching themes emerged.

Theme 1: Policy and Funding Mechanisms as Drivers of Internationalisation. This theme captures how government policies and funding structures encourage universities to internationalise their academic communities and research output.

Sub-theme 1.1: Performance-Based Funding: Participants indicated that government funding is largely linked to institutional performance. Universities are therefore motivated to enhance their competitiveness by recruiting high-quality scholars and students from different countries who can contribute to institutional productivity.

“The majority of the fund they provide in South Africa is performance-based funding, where the funding you get sometimes depends on your level of performance.”

Sub-theme 1.2: Publication Incentives: Publication productivity emerged as a key mechanism supporting internationalisation. Participants explained that institutions receive financial rewards for high research output, encouraging them to attract internationally experienced academics and researchers who can strengthen publication performance.

“When universities publish very well in South Africa, they actually get more funding. So this also encourages them to seek diverse nationalities that can enhance their publication profiles.”

Sub-theme 1.3: Government-Incorporated Strategies

The findings further suggest that many internationalisation initiatives originate from national policy directives. Universities align their recruitment and research strategies with government expectations regarding performance and academic excellence.

“The strategy was actually incorporated from the government.”

These findings show that internationalisation is not only institutionally driven but is embedded within a policy framework that uses funding incentives to encourage universities to engage globally through enhanced research productivity and international participation.

Theme 2: International Recruitment and Mobility of Academic Talent

This theme reflects the deliberate recruitment of international students, researchers, and academics as a key strategy for internationalisation.

Sub-theme 2.1: International PhD Recruitment

Recruiting doctoral students from across Africa and other regions emerged as one of the most common internationalisation practices. PhD students contribute to cultural diversity, knowledge exchange, and international research networks.

“They recruited a lot of Ph.Ds all over the world, most especially within African countries.”

Sub-theme 2.2: Recruitment of International Postdoctoral Researchers

Participants highlighted the increasing reliance on international postdoctoral researchers, many of whom are foreign nationals. These researchers enhance research capacity and facilitate international collaboration.

“There are some universities that specialise in the recruitment of postdocs, who these days are 90% foreigners.”

Sub-theme 2.3: Direct Recruitment of International Faculty

South African universities also recruit academic staff directly from other countries, including Asia, Europe, and North America. This strategy introduces diverse expertise, strengthens global networks, and enriches teaching and research environments.

“They also recruit faculties directly from outside the continent... Asia, China, United States, United Kingdom, etc.”

The findings show that internationalisation is operationalised through the strategic recruitment of international human capital at multiple academic levels, including doctoral students, postdoctoral researchers, and faculty members. This approach promotes global knowledge exchange, enhances research quality, and strengthens international institutional linkages. The findings indicate that the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa is mainly pursued through government-driven funding and performance incentives, as well as the strategic recruitment of international doctoral students, postdoctoral researchers, and faculty members. These strategies enhance research productivity, diversify academic communities, foster global collaboration, and strengthen the international competitiveness of South African universities. The findings are further illustrated in the Thematic mapping in Figure 2.

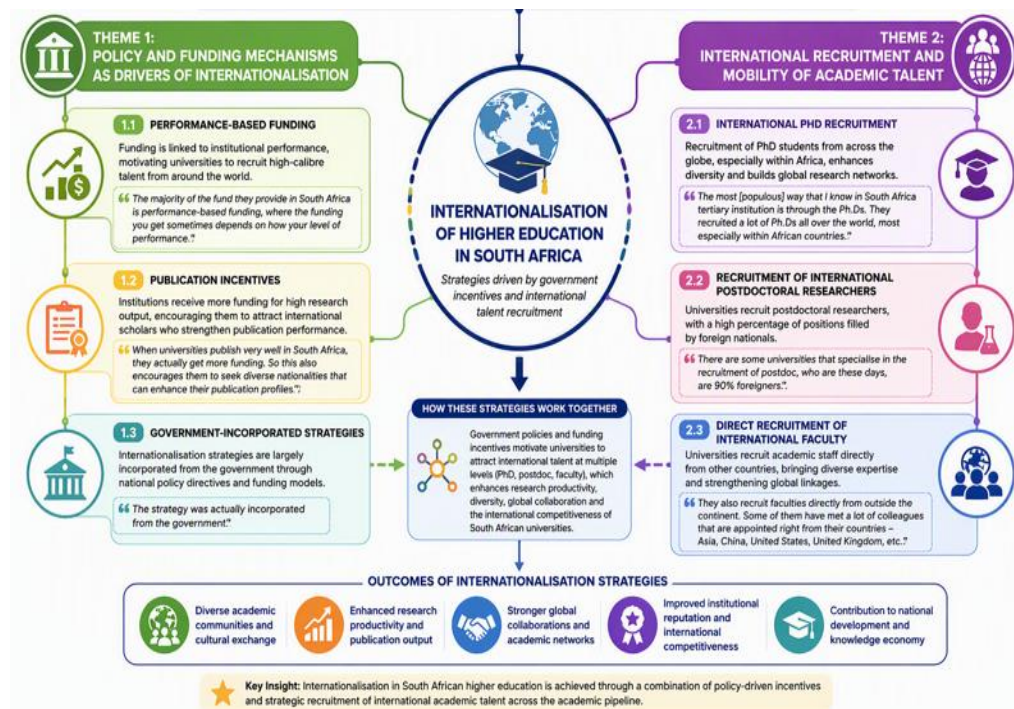


Figure 2: Thematic mapping of strategies for the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa

The thematic map reveals that the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa is driven by the interaction between policy and funding mechanisms, as well as by international recruitment of academic talent. The first theme, Policy and Funding Mechanisms as Drivers of Internationalisation, demonstrates how government policies create incentives for universities to engage globally. The literature indicates that internationalisation has become a strategic response to globalisation, with universities seeking to improve educational quality, research productivity, and global competitiveness through cross-border engagement (Shen et al., 2022; Suntharalingam, 2024). The performance-based funding and publication incentives identified by participants align with the broader objective of enhancing institutional visibility and academic excellence through international collaboration and knowledge exchange. The second theme, International Recruitment and Mobility of Academic Talent, reflects the practical implementation of internationalisation through the recruitment of international PhD students, postdoctoral researchers, and faculty members. According to the literature,

internationalisation involves the cross-border movement of students and academics, participation in global research networks, and institutional partnerships that facilitate knowledge transfer and capacity building (Shen et al., 2022; Jowi, 2024). Such recruitment enhances research output, cultural diversity, and academic quality while strengthening international networks. Furthermore, South Africa's policy frameworks and its status as a regional higher education hub support these recruitment efforts, enabling universities to attract talent from across Africa and beyond (Banda & Zungu, 2024). Together, these themes demonstrate that internationalisation is a policy-supported and talent-driven strategy for achieving global competitiveness and academic excellence.

Research Question 2: What are the opportunities of the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa?

The analysis of participants' responses reveals that the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa presents significant opportunities for expanding research collaboration, enhancing academic mobility through technology, strengthening regional partnerships, and improving policy environments that support global engagement. Two overarching themes emerged from the data.

Theme 1: Enhanced Global and Regional Research Collaboration

This theme reflects the opportunities created by international and regional partnerships that facilitate collaborative research, access to funding, and knowledge exchange.

Sub-theme 1.1: Funding Opportunities for International Research

Participants highlighted South Africa's ability to fund research projects that extend beyond national borders. Such funding promotes multinational research partnerships and increases the international visibility of South African scholarship.

“In South Africa, I have seen a project funded by NRF, but it's been implemented in other countries.”

This finding aligns with the literature, which suggests that internationalisation facilitates research collaborations and knowledge sharing between institutions across different countries. Through global partnerships, universities gain access

to diverse expertise, research resources, and innovation opportunities (Jowi, 2024).

Sub-theme 1.2: Regional Cooperation and Academic Partnerships

Participants emphasised opportunities for collaboration between South African universities and institutions across Africa. Such collaborations strengthen regional integration, academic networking, and research capacity.

“Some countries provide funding that is even extended to other countries to do research.”

The literature similarly notes a growing emphasis on intra-African academic collaboration through regional initiatives such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union, which promote academic mobility, research networks, and curriculum harmonisation (Kabeya et al., 2022; SADC, 2022).

This theme demonstrates that internationalisation provides South African universities with opportunities to establish regional and global research networks, attract collaborative funding, strengthen research capacity, and expand the impact of their scholarship beyond national boundaries.

Theme 2: Flexible Academic Mobility and Institutional Development: This theme captures opportunities created through technology-enhanced mobility, alternative academic appointments, and policy improvements that facilitate international engagement.

Sub-theme 2.1: Leveraging Technology for Virtual Internationalisation

Participants noted that technological advancements enable academics to contribute to South African higher education without being physically present in the country.

“For example, you can be employed as a postdoc. You can be employed as a research fellow, when you will not need to live in the country.”

This finding supports literature arguing that technological developments and digital platforms have become important enablers of internationalisation, facilitating virtual collaboration, online research partnerships, and cross-border knowledge exchange (Mugimu, 2022; Oladele, 2024).

Sub-theme 2.2: Research Fellowships and Proxy Appointments

Participants described opportunities for international scholars to engage with South African institutions through flexible appointments such as research professorships and fellowships.

“You can be appointed as a Research Professor, which can be a proxy appointment.”

These arrangements provide mechanisms for international academic engagement while reducing geographical barriers. Such opportunities contribute to knowledge transfer, institutional capacity building, and the development of international research communities (Jowi, 2024).

Sub-theme 2.3: Policy Reforms as Enablers of Internationalisation

Participants suggested that policy reform offers further opportunities to strengthen internationalisation by addressing barriers that currently limit international engagement.

“The majority of these challenges that I’m talking about are not the challenges that any policy has taken care of.”

Literature similarly highlights the importance of policy frameworks in fostering academic mobility, research collaboration, and international partnerships. South Africa has already developed extensive policy frameworks to guide internationalisation, and further reforms could expand these opportunities (Banda & Zungu, 2024). The analysis reveals that the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa is achieved through a combination of policy-driven incentives and strategic international recruitment practices. Government funding mechanisms, particularly performance-based funding and publication rewards, create institutional motivations for international engagement. In response, universities actively recruit international PhD students, postdoctoral researchers, and academic staff to enhance research productivity, diversify institutional cultures, and strengthen global academic networks. These interconnected strategies position internationalisation as both a national policy objective and an institutional strategy for academic excellence. The findings are further illustrated in the Thematic mapping in Figure 3.

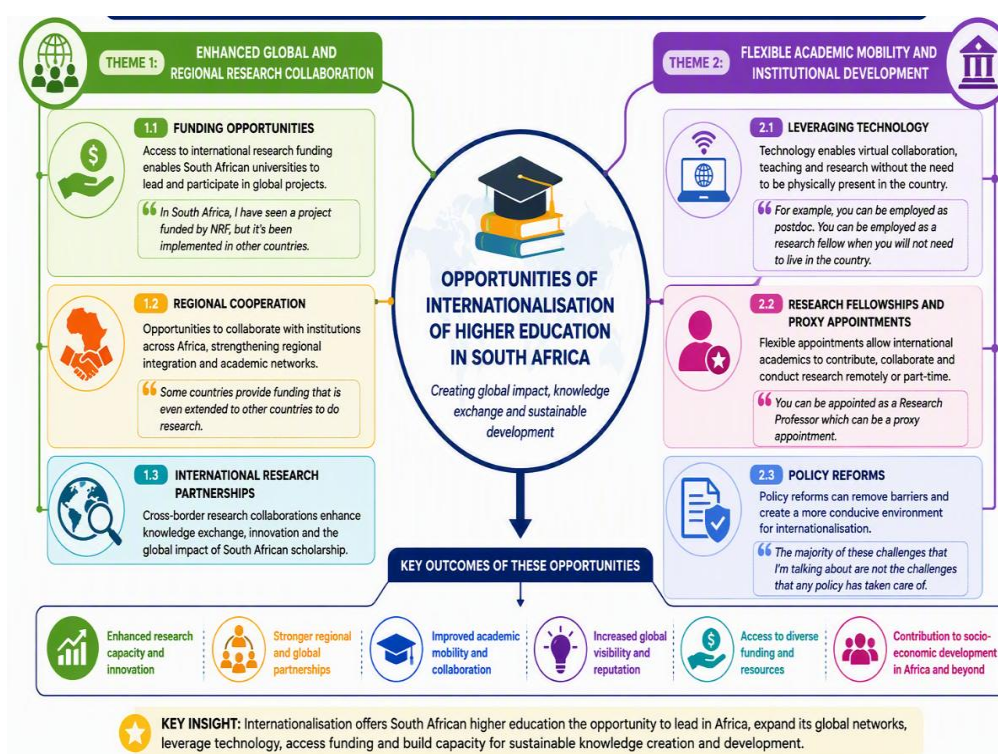


Figure 3: Thematic mapping of the opportunities for the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa

The thematic map illustrates that the opportunities associated with the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa are centred on enhanced research collaboration, flexible academic mobility, and institutional development. The first theme highlights how internationalisation creates opportunities for research funding, regional cooperation, and cross-border academic partnerships. The literature review emphasises that internationalisation enables universities to engage in collaborative research, student and faculty mobility, and institutional partnerships that enhance academic quality, global visibility, and competitiveness. These collaborations support knowledge exchange, curriculum development, and access to global research networks (Shen et al., 2022; Suntharalingam, 2024). Furthermore, partnerships with international institutions facilitate knowledge transfer, skill development, capacity building, and access to advanced research resources and technological innovations (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024; Jowi, 2024). The second theme demonstrates how technology, research fellowship programmes, proxy appointments, and policy reforms expand opportunities for international

engagement. The literature notes that technological advancement is a major driver of internationalisation in higher education, enabling virtual collaboration and academic participation across borders (Mugimu, 2022; Oladele, 2024). In addition, regional initiatives such as the African Union's Continental Education Strategy and SADC frameworks promote academic mobility, research networking, and institutional cooperation across Africa (Kabeya et al., 2022; SADC, 2022). South Africa's extensive internationalisation policy frameworks further strengthen these opportunities and position the country as a leading higher education hub on the continent (Banda & Zungu, 2024). This theme suggests that internationalisation is increasingly facilitated by technological innovation and institutional flexibility, creating opportunities for broader participation in global knowledge networks while reducing traditional mobility constraints. Collectively, the thematic map demonstrates that internationalisation offers South African universities opportunities for research excellence, global partnerships, technology-enabled collaboration, capacity building, and sustainable institutional development.

Research Question 3: What are the challenges of the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa?

The analysis of participants' responses reveals that the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa is constrained by social exclusion and inequality, as well as institutional and structural barriers. Two overarching themes emerged from the data.

Theme 1: Social Exclusion and Barriers to International Academic Integration: This theme captures the social and institutional challenges faced by international academics and students in South African higher education institutions.

Sub-theme 1.1: Discrimination Against International Academics and Students: Participants reported that foreign academics and students often experience difficulties integrating into university environments and communities. These challenges affect their sense of belonging and ability to participate fully in academic life.

"Discrimination in the sense that the majority of foreign people find it difficult to acclimatise themselves, or some universities find it difficult to welcome them."

Literature similarly identifies cultural and social barriers as significant obstacles to internationalisation. Language differences, cultural exclusion, and limited inclusivity can hinder effective collaboration and mobility within higher education systems (Msomphora, 2025; Murove, 2018).

Sub-theme 1.2: Systematic Xenophobia and Institutional Barriers: Participants highlighted the existence of institutional practices and policies that disadvantage foreign academics despite their contributions and performance. These experiences suggest the presence of systemic inequities within some institutions.

“There are some policies. There are some artificial policies you find in some of these organisations. That actually worked against you...”

The literature review supports this concern by noting that unequal institutional structures and asymmetrical relationships often limit fair participation and decision-making opportunities for some groups within international collaborations (Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020). This theme suggests that while internationalisation promotes global engagement, discriminatory practices and xenophobic tendencies can undermine its objectives by restricting inclusion, diversity, and equitable participation.

Theme 2: Structural and Institutional Constraints to Internationalisation: This theme reflects challenges associated with resources, infrastructure, funding disparities, talent retention, and unequal international partnerships.

Sub-theme 2.1: Brain Drain and Loss of Academic Talent

Participants described the departure of highly skilled international academics from South Africa in search of better opportunities elsewhere.

“These challenges have sent so many foreign lecturers away from the country.”

This finding aligns with the literature identifying brain drain as a major challenge facing African higher education. The migration of talented academics weakens institutional research capacity and limits universities' ability to sustain quality education and innovation (Scholarworks & Osigbesan, 2021).

Sub-theme 2.2: Funding Inequality

Participants noted substantial differences in salaries, publication incentives, and institutional resources among universities. These disparities affect the capacity of some institutions to attract and retain international talent.

“There are variations in salaries. There are variations in how universities compensate publications.”

The literature identifies inadequate funding and resource constraints as major barriers to internationalisation across African universities (Mugimu, 2022).

Sub-theme 2.3: Limited Infrastructure

Participants observed that while some South African universities possess world-class facilities, others lack adequate infrastructure to support internationalisation initiatives.

“There are some universities that are infrastructurally superb in South Africa. There are some that are deficient...”

This finding resonates with studies highlighting infrastructural limitations and technological disparities as obstacles to international engagement and research collaboration (Oladele, 2024; Mugimu, 2022).

Sub-theme 2.4: Inequality in International Collaboration

Participants further indicated that some international partnerships are unequal, with foreign institutions often benefiting more from collaborations than local universities.

“Some of those collaborations we sought for outside the continent...”

The literature similarly argues that collaborations between African universities and institutions in the Global North can be asymmetrical, resulting in unequal power relations and limited local control over research agendas (Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020). This theme demonstrates that internationalisation is constrained by resource disparities, infrastructure deficiencies, unequal partnerships, and the continued loss of skilled academics. These challenges limit universities' ability to maximise the benefits of global engagement. The findings reveal that the challenges of internationalising higher education in South Africa stem from both social exclusion and institutional constraints. Discrimination, xenophobia, and difficulties in integrating international academics undermine inclusivity and diversity within universities. At the same

time, brain drain, funding inequalities, inadequate infrastructure, and unequal international collaborations restrict the effectiveness and sustainability of internationalisation efforts. These findings support the existing literature, which identifies social barriers, resource constraints, unequal global partnerships, and talent migration as major impediments to higher education internationalisation in Africa (Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020; Mugimu, 2022; Scholarworks & Osigbesan, 2021; Msomphora, 2025). The findings are further illustrated in the Thematic mapping in Figure 4.

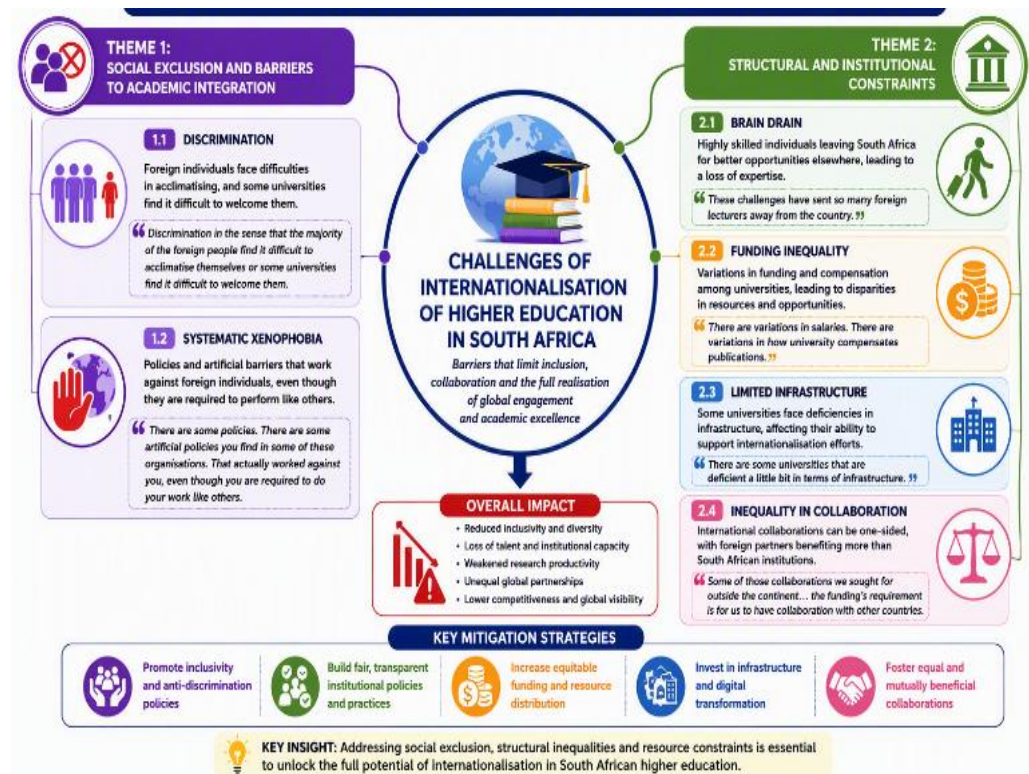


Figure 4: Thematic mapping of the Challenges of internationalisation of higher education in South Africa

The thematic map shows that the challenges of internationalisation in South African higher education operate at both social and structural levels. The first theme, Social Exclusion and Barriers to Academic Integration, encompasses discrimination and systematic xenophobia experienced by international academics and students. These challenges hinder successful integration into university communities and undermine the inclusiveness that internationalisation seeks to promote. The literature review similarly identifies

cultural and linguistic barriers as obstacles to effective internationalisation, noting that differences in language, culture, and institutional practices can limit regional and global cooperation (Msomphora, 2025; Murove, 2018). Furthermore, the literature emphasises that internationalisation should promote cultural exchange and global engagement, but exclusionary practices can restrict these benefits. The second theme, Structural and Institutional Constraints, comprises brain drain, funding inequality, limited infrastructure, and unequal collaborations. Participants reported that skilled academics often leave South Africa for better opportunities elsewhere, reflecting the broader challenge of brain drain identified in the literature. According to the literature review, brain drain weakens local research capacity and reduces universities' ability to provide quality education and conduct cutting-edge research (Scholarworks & Osigbesan, 2021). The literature also highlights inadequate funding, technological limitations, and asymmetrical partnerships with institutions from the Global North as major barriers to internationalisation (Mugimu, 2022; Oladele, 2024; Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020). Together, these challenges reduce institutional competitiveness, limit equitable participation in global knowledge production, and constrain the full realisation of internationalisation goals in South African higher education

Conclusion

Therefore, the study concludes that South Africa remains one of Africa's leading hubs for higher education internationalisation, with considerable potential to advance research collaboration, academic mobility, and institutional development. However, achieving the full benefits of internationalisation requires deliberate efforts to address social exclusion, strengthen institutional capacity, promote equitable partnerships, and create supportive policy environments for international scholars. Addressing these challenges will not only enhance South Africa's global competitiveness but also contribute to the broader development of higher education across the African continent.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are given to help South Africa maximise the opportunities offered by internationalisation while addressing the social and structural challenges that currently limit its effectiveness.

1. Strengthen inclusive institutional policies and support systems for international academics and students: South African universities should develop and implement comprehensive institutional policies that address discrimination, xenophobia, and barriers to integration faced by international academics and students. Such policies should include diversity and inclusion programmes, intercultural awareness training, mentorship schemes, and transparent recruitment, promotion, and remuneration practices. Creating a welcoming and supportive academic environment will enhance the retention of international talent, promote equitable participation, and strengthen multicultural learning experiences central to internationalisation. Addressing social exclusion will also help universities realise the full benefits of international collaboration, knowledge exchange, and global engagement.
2. Enhance equitable funding, infrastructure development, and collaborative partnerships: The government and higher education institutions should invest in reducing funding disparities and improving infrastructure across universities to support sustainable internationalisation. Increased investment in digital technologies, research facilities, and virtual collaboration platforms would expand access to international opportunities and strengthen institutional competitiveness. In addition, universities should pursue mutually beneficial international partnerships that promote shared decision-making, equitable resource distribution, and local research leadership. Such measures would reduce the effects of brain drain, strengthen research capacity, and ensure that international collaborations contribute meaningfully to national and continental development.

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