

Mapping Institutional Culture and Transformation in Higher Education: A Bibliometric Analysis of Scopus Publications (1990-2024)

ABSTRACT

Authors: Olushola Adebayo
Olatunji^{1*}, Loquitur Maka²

Affiliation: ¹University of the Free State, South Africa, ²University of Mpumalanga, South Africa
*Corresponding author:
Olatunji.OA@ufs.ac.za

Received: 30 September 2025 |
First revision: 12 January 2026 |
Second revision: 10 June 2026 |
Accepted: 15 June 2026

This work is licensed under a



Creative Commons Attribution 4.0
International License

APA citation for this article:
Olatunji, O.A., & Maka, L. (2026).
Mapping institutional culture and
transformation in higher education: A
bibliometric analysis of Scopus
publications (1990-2024). *Journal of
Institutional Research South East
Asia*, 24(1), 33-54.

Institutional culture is essential in transforming the attitudes, behaviours, and decision-making processes of higher education institutions. However, despite its frequent use in the literature, no consensus exists on its origin or meaning. In South Africa, there appears to be limited awareness of the role institutional culture plays in enabling transformation. This paper analyses Scopus-indexed publications from 1990 to 2024 to map research trends, emerging themes, and key contributors. Using bibliometric analysis, it identifies influential publications, researchers, and institutions, providing an objective, data-driven understanding of how institutional culture intersects with educational transformation. The study finds that research on institutional culture benefits from robust collaboration networks and that the field is interdisciplinary and internationally relevant. Future research should examine the evolution of institutional culture in response to policy shifts, digital transformation, and globalisation.

Keywords: Institutional Culture, Higher Education, Organisational Culture, Transformation, South Africa

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions globally are under growing pressure to examine and transform their institutional cultures in response to shifting social, political, and policy landscapes (Dee, Nakajima & Korbek-Erdogmus, 2023; Alzahmi et al., 2025). Institutional culture, broadly understood as the shared values, assumptions, and practices that shape how people behave and make decisions within an organisation (Schein, 2010), has emerged as a central concept in understanding why transformation in higher education succeeds or stalls. Despite its prominence, institutional culture remains a contested concept with no consensus on its origins or a universally accepted definition (Bopape, 2022; Sousa et al., 2022). This conceptual uncertainty makes it all the more important to systematically map how the concept has been studied, theorised, and applied.

South African higher education provides a particularly instructive context for interpreting global scholarship on institutional culture. The higher education sector confronts challenges rooted in its complex history of apartheid, compounded by persistent socio-economic inequalities and governance tensions (Bopape, 2022; Dube, 2024). Institutions such as Stellenbosch University, North-West University, and the University of Pretoria have experienced well-documented difficulties meeting government expectations for timely cultural transformation due to deeply embedded institutional norms (Mzangwa, 2019). Understanding these complexities requires a systems-thinking approach that accounts for the interplay between institutional theory, behavioural dimensions, and management practice (Keet & Swartz, 2015).

While bibliometric studies have examined related dimensions of higher education, including leadership development (Altynbassov et al., 2024), organisational change in universities (Alzahmi et al., 2025), and higher education internationalisation (Aypay & Ertem, 2022), no comprehensive bibliometric mapping of institutional culture and its relationship to higher education transformation has been conducted. This gap is significant in the South African context, where the empirical base for understanding the impact of institutional culture on transformation remains limited (van Wyk, 2005; Du Preez et al., 2016). Given these entrenched practices and the ongoing barriers to transformation in South African HEIs, there is a need to examine comprehensively how institutional culture influences, and is influenced by, policies aimed at fostering diversity and inclusion, particularly with regard to historically underrepresented groups (Adewale & Potokri, 2023; Fauzi et al., 2024).

This study addresses that gap by conducting a bibliometric analysis of 1,474 Scopus-indexed publications from 1990 to 2024, guided by the following main research question: How has research on institutional culture and its relationship to higher education transformation evolved from 1990 to 2024?

Three sub-questions structure the analysis:

- RQ1: What are the dominant research trends and publication patterns characterising scholarship on institutional culture in higher education?
- RQ2: Which authors, institutions, and journals have been most influential in shaping research on institutional culture and transformation in higher education?
- RQ3: What thematic clusters and intellectual structures underpin the global scholarly discourse on institutional culture in higher education?

Problem Statement

Research on institutional culture and its role in the transformation of higher education has gained significance, yet comprehensive insights into its evolution remain limited. South African HEI leaders continue to struggle to understand the cultural conditions that impact everyday decision-making (Mlambo & Mpanza, 2024). Institutional culture is often recognised only when conflicts arise from student diversity, rather than being treated as a strategic driver of inclusive change (Human-Hendricks & Meier, 2024). This reactive stance hinders transformation and underscores the need for systematic, evidence-based understanding of how institutional culture shapes, and is shaped by, higher education policy and practice (Motala, Sayed & De Kock, 2023).

To effectively transform higher education, institutions must streamline decision-making processes, resolve conflicts through appropriate information, enhance employee awareness, and cultivate a sense of identity and purpose within their communities.

2. Literature Review

Institutional Culture in Higher Education

The academic community continues to pay increasing attention to institutional culture as a critical factor in higher education transformation, yet no consensus exists on its origins or definition (Bopape, 2022; Sousa et al., 2022). Bopape (2022) contends that, despite its widespread use in the prevailing literature, the concept of institutional culture remains without a universally agreed upon meaning. For instance, Gamsakhurdia (2020) insists that institutional culture emanates from sociology, psychology, anthropology, and semiotics, whereas Weisgrau, Rosman, and Rubel (2023) and Vesga-Rodriguez et al. (2020) maintain that current conceptions originate from only two disciplines: anthropology and sociology.

According to Schein (2010), institutional culture represents the shared assumptions a group learns and considers valid, compelling new members to adopt these as the correct way to behave, perceive, and think. While Dee, Nakajima, and Korbek-Erdogmus (2023), on the other hand, describe it as the totality of values, interaction styles, and collective measures that people come to know through lived experience within an institution. Leland (2020) situates institutional culture at the intersection of internal artefacts and values and external national policies, making it both a product and a driver of its environment. In higher education specifically, Kuh and Whitt (1988) define it as the norms, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the behaviours of individuals and groups within academic settings, making it a central tool for understanding organisational behaviour in relation to strategy, performance, and management (Sousa et al., 2022).

The concept has evolved from a fixed set of shared values to a layered understanding that distinguishes between observable artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions (Barnes et al., 2021). This evolution deepens appreciation of how institutional culture simultaneously facilitates and constrains transformation, and how it responds to social, political, and policy developments (Ehrhart, Schneider & Macey, 2025). Institutional culture is also vital in shaping mindsets and informal codes of conduct that either challenge or consolidate institutional dominance (Alenezi, 2021), making it a prerequisite for the kind of meaningful and sustained change that South African HEIs require (Önday, 2016).

Institutional Transformation in South Africa

In South Africa, higher education transformation is both a legislative mandate and a moral imperative. The Education White Paper 3 and the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education require institutions to build cultures that are inclusive, sensitive to diversity, and protective of human dignity (Council for Higher Education, 2025). The White Paper outlines comprehensive initiatives to establish a coordinated higher education framework with improved planning, funding, and governance, and specifically calls for institutional cultures that are inclusive and sensitive to diversity, that promote respect for human dignity, and that protect individuals from sexual and racial harassment (Human-Hendricks & Meier, 2024). Similarly, the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education supports democratic values, human rights, and educational practices that foster creative thinking, critical discourse, cultural tolerance, and a shared commitment to a non-sexist, humane, and non-racist social order (Department of Higher Education, 2024).

Despite this strong policy framework, the translation of transformation mandates into institutional practice has remained uneven. Empirical studies have shown that institutions such as Stellenbosch University, North-West University, and the University of Pretoria have experienced ongoing difficulties in meeting government expectations for timely cultural transformation, primarily due to deep-seated institutional barriers (Mzangwa, 2019). Mzangwa (2019) further noted that resistance to change, reinforced by the historical context of the apartheid era, continues to impede efforts to reform organisational culture at these institutions. According to Keet and Swartz (2015), understanding these complexities requires a systems-thinking approach that accounts for the interplay between institutional theory, behavioural dimensions, and management practice. In essence, institutional culture has evolved from a descriptive to a strategic concept in the South African context, with increasing emphasis on institutional effectiveness and responsiveness to change (Barnes et al., 2021; Bopape, 2022).

Many South African HEIs have adopted Integrated Transformation Plans (ITPs) as formal mechanisms for change. The University of the Free State's ITP emphasises inclusivity and intellectual experimentation (University of the Free State, 2024), while Vaal University of Technology's ITP foregrounds diversity across religion, gender, race, and identity (Vaal University of Technology, 2025). However, researchers such as van Wyk (2005) and Du Preez et al. (2016) observe a persistent gap between the rhetorical prominence of institutional culture in policy discourse and the limited empirical evidence measuring its actual impact on transformation. This gap underscores the need for systematic, data-driven analysis of how scholarship in this field has developed globally and what it means for South Africa specifically.

Bibliometric Analysis in Education Research

Bibliometric analysis is the systematic study of scholarly publications to identify patterns, track trends, and assess research influence (Passas, 2024). As a methodological tool, it offers what narrative reviews cannot: an objective, large-scale view of a field's intellectual landscape, capable of tracing the evolution of ideas across thousands of publications over extended time periods (Donthu et al., 2021).

Several key bibliometric studies have shaped the understanding of research trends in higher education. Alzahmi et al. (2025) conducted a thematic mapping of organisational change in HEIs using Scopus data spanning 25 years, identifying fragmentation across research clusters and a lack of integrative reviews. Altynbassov et al. (2024) mapped leadership development in higher education across 2,188 Scopus-indexed articles from 2013 to 2023, finding a significant

increase in research output after 2020 and highlighting the dominance of Global North institutions. Aypay and Ertem (2022) conducted a bibliometric review of student outcomes in higher education from 1960 to 2020, revealing concentrated scholarly attention in a narrow set of journals and geographical contexts. Collectively, these studies confirm both the utility of bibliometrics and the persistent underrepresentation of Global South scholarship. In the South African context, a bibliometric approach enables scholars to situate local scholarship within the global discourse while identifying internationally recognised practices aligned with national policy priorities.

Grant and Osanloo (2014) define a conceptual framework as a visual representation of the systematic steps in a research study and how its concepts interconnect. The conceptual framework for the present study, illustrated in Figure 1, integrates bibliometric methods with a theoretically informed interpretive lens, ensuring that the analysis is both empirically grounded and contextually relevant to the South African higher education landscape.



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed bibliometric analysis, a quantitative method that uses statistical techniques to examine large bodies of scholarly literature to map publication trends, research impact, collaboration patterns, and intellectual structures (Donthu et al., 2021). The method was applied to trace how research on institutional culture and transformation in higher education evolved from 1990 to 2024, identifying growth trajectories, influential contributors, and dominant thematic areas.

Data Source and Retrieval

The bibliographic data for this study were retrieved from Scopus, a widely recognised and comprehensive multidisciplinary citation database with strong coverage of peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings. Scopus was selected over

alternative databases such as the Web of Science for several reasons. First, Scopus offers broader journal coverage, particularly in the social sciences and education, making it more suitable for a study spanning interdisciplinary themes such as institutional culture and higher education transformation (Donthu et al., 2021). Second, Scopus provides robust metadata, including author affiliations, country of origin, citation counts, and keyword fields, all of which are essential for the bibliometric and science-mapping analyses employed in this study. Third, Scopus applies rigorous quality-control processes to ensure the reliability and consistency of the indexed data.

Collection of data was done on the 4th February 2025. The initial search retrieved 1,977 documents. To ensure a focused analysis of the evolution of the field, a publication period spanning 1990 to 2024 was applied, resulting in 1,956 documents. This extended timeframe enabled the capture of both historical developments and contemporary trends in research on institutional culture and higher education transformation. Several refinement criteria were subsequently applied. First, the document types were limited to journal articles and book chapters, reducing the dataset to 1,609 documents. Second, only publications written in English were retained, resulting in 1,509 documents. Finally, only documents at the final publication stage were included, yielding a final dataset of 1,474 documents for analysis. The bibliographic records were then exported in CSV format for subsequent data cleaning, processing, and bibliometric analysis.

Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

The search combined keywords and Boolean operators to capture terminological variation related to institutional culture and transformation:

TITLE-ABS-KEY("institutional culture" OR "institutional climate" OR "institutional transformation" OR "university culture" OR "organisational culture" OR "organizational culture" OR "higher education transformation" AND "higher education") AND PUBYEAR > 1989 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ch")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE, "final"))*

Inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters in English addressing institutional culture or transformation in higher education. Exclusion criteria: editorials, book reviews, non-peer-reviewed material, non-English publications, and studies focused solely on corporate or non-academic organisational cultures.

Data Cleaning and Pre-processing

Following retrieval, the dataset underwent systematic cleaning to ensure analytical accuracy and reliability. Biblioshiny, the graphical interface of the Bibliometrix R package, was also used as the primary tool for all subsequent analyses. Additionally, variations in author names, institutional affiliations, journal titles, and geographical metadata were standardised manually to ensure consistency across the dataset. Keyword data were further refined by correcting spelling inconsistencies, merging singular and plural forms, and consolidating synonymous terms. For example, harmonising “organizational” and “organisational” culture as equivalent terms. These procedures improved the reliability of collaboration, keyword, and citation analyses and ensured that the final dataset of 1,474 publications was analytically clean and suitable for science mapping.

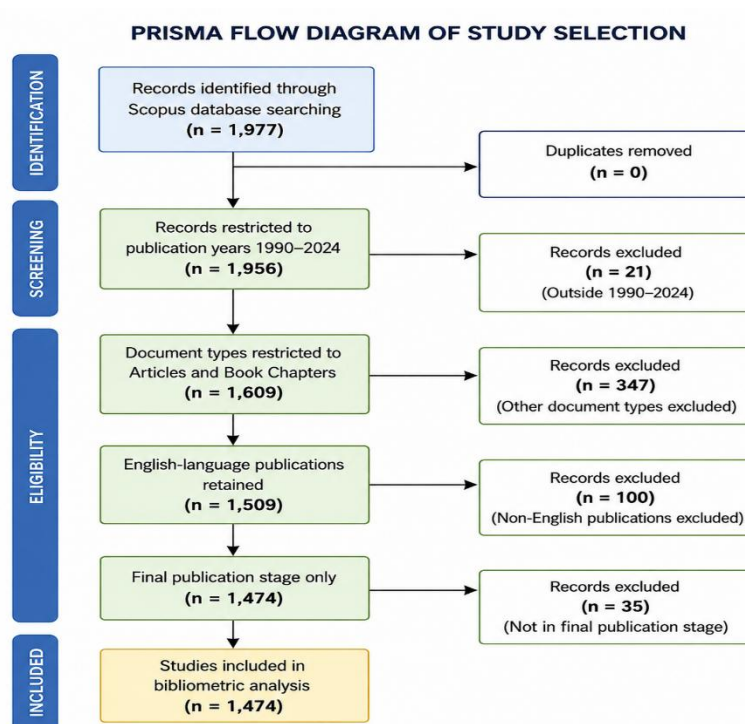


Figure 2: PRISMA-Style Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process

Bibliometric Indicators and Analytical Techniques

Analysis was conducted using Biblioshiny, the graphical interface of the Bibliometrix R package. This tool was selected for its ability to integrate multiple bibliometric techniques within a single analytical environment and for its suitability for science-mapping applications using Scopus data. Because several bibliometric indicators employed in this study may be unfamiliar to readers outside the field, each is defined and explained below before the analytical techniques are described.

Betweenness centrality measures the extent to which a node lies on the shortest path between other nodes in a network. A high score indicates the node acts as a critical bridge between otherwise disconnected knowledge clusters, making it a key indicator of interdisciplinary connectivity (Donthu et al., 2021).

PageRank assesses a node's importance based on the quality of its connections rather than their number alone. A keyword linked to other highly influential keywords receives a higher PageRank score, capturing dimensions of scholarly influence that raw citation counts cannot (Donthu et al., 2021; Massucci & Docampo, 2019).

Co-occurrence analysis examines how frequently terms appear together across publications, revealing dominant themes, emerging topics, and conceptual relationships. Co-citation analysis examines how often two publications are cited together, revealing the shared intellectual foundations of a field (Donthu et al., 2021; Chen, Tsang & Wu, 2023).

Multiple complementary bibliometric techniques were applied in this study:

- Descriptive analysis to examine publication trends, leading journals, and geographical and institutional contributions.
 - Co-authorship analysis to map collaboration networks among authors and institutions, identifying key nodes and patterns of international collaboration.
 - Keyword co-occurrence analysis to identify dominant themes, emerging topics, and conceptual relationships across the dataset, using betweenness centrality and PageRank to assess the relative importance of each keyword node (Donthu et al., 2021; Chen, Tsang & Wu, 2023).
 - Citation and co-citation analyses to identify the most influential publications and map the intellectual foundations of the field (Massucci & Docampo, 2019).
- Together, these techniques provide a multi-dimensional understanding of the social, conceptual, and intellectual structures within the research domain.

Analytical Scope

While the methodology is global in scope, drawing on 1,474 publications spanning 35 years, the interpretive lens is explicitly oriented towards identifying implications for the South African higher education context, particularly regarding inclusion, governance, leadership, and institutional transformation.

4. Results

Overview of the Dataset

The dataset comprises 1,474 publications sourced from 852 outlets (Figure 3) spanning 1990 to 2024, with an annual growth rate of 13.33%. Publications average 8.36 years in document age and 15.19 citations per document, with 64,265 total references cited. The dataset contains 1,277 Keywords Plus (ID) and 3,439 author keywords (DE), providing insights into dominant themes and emerging trends in the field.

Authorship trends reveal a diverse group of 3,307 authors, 426 of whom produced single-authored works, with an average of 2.45 co-authors per document. International collaborations account for 13.23% of publications, highlighting growing global engagement in research on higher education transformation. Regarding document types, the dataset primarily consists of 1,224 journal articles, which form the core of scholarly discourse, alongside 250 book chapters that offer in-depth theoretical perspectives. These findings provide a comprehensive overview of the academic landscape on institutional culture and transformation in higher education, and establish the foundation for the more detailed analyses that follow.

Annual Scientific Production

The annual scientific production data presented in Figure 4 reveal a steady increase in research output on institutional culture and transformation in higher education from 1990 to 2024. In the early years (1990–2005), the field had notably low publication activity, with fewer than 15 articles published annually. From 2006 onward, a significant growth trend emerged, with publications increasing from 22 articles in 2006 to 40 in 2009 and rising to 71 by 2015. Between 2016 and 2020, publication rates remained consistently high, exceeding 75 articles per year,

with notable spikes in 2019 (99 articles) and 2020 (127 articles), peaking in 2023 (147 articles) and sustained output in 2024 (141 articles).

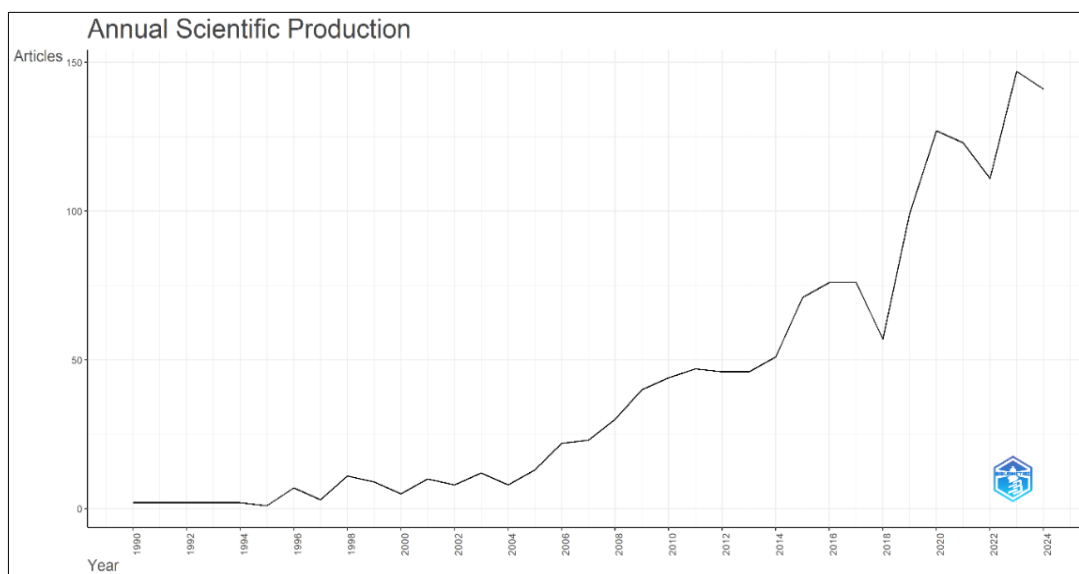


Figure 3: Annual Scientific Production

Most Relevant Sources

Figure 5 shows the most relevant sources in this bibliometric analysis, highlighting the leading journals contributing to research on institutional culture and transformation in higher education. The top two sources are Higher Education (28 articles) and Studies in Higher Education (28 articles). Nurse Education Today and Sustainability (Switzerland) (17 articles each) among the top sources may suggest an important cross-disciplinary influence, with research extending beyond general higher education to specialised areas such as healthcare education and environmental sustainability. Other leading sources are: Higher Education Quarterly and Innovative Higher Education (16 articles each), the International Journal of Educational Management and the International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education (14 articles each), and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Higher Education Policy (12 articles each)

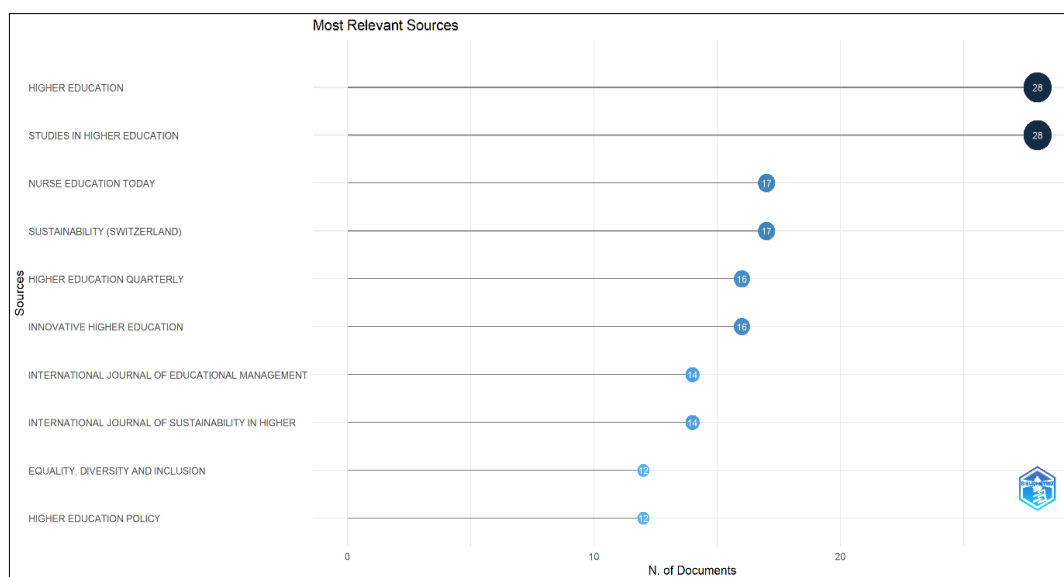


Figure 4: Most Relevant Sources

Most Influential Authors and Theoretical Contributions

Figure 6 presents the most prolific authors in this dataset and their contributions to research on institutional culture and transformation in higher education. Rather than simply noting publication counts, this section identifies each leading author's primary theoretical orientation and keywords, as these reveal the intellectual architecture that has shaped the field's development.

The five most prolific authors are: Deem, R. (6 articles), whose work centres on new managerialism, governance, and gender in higher education (Deem, 1998); Kezar, A. (5 articles), known for multi-framework approaches to organisational change, equity, and leadership (Connors, Hughes & Lewis, 2024); Mabokela, R.O. (5 articles), whose scholarship examines race, diversity, and historically marginalised groups in academic culture; and Liu, S. and Thomas, L. (5 articles each), whose work addresses institutional effectiveness, student belonging, and retention. Additional contributors, Blessinger, P., Chidambaranathan, K., Eckel, P.D., and Skoumpopoulou, D. (4 articles each), reflect the field's interdisciplinary breadth across educational leadership, management, and organisational behaviour.

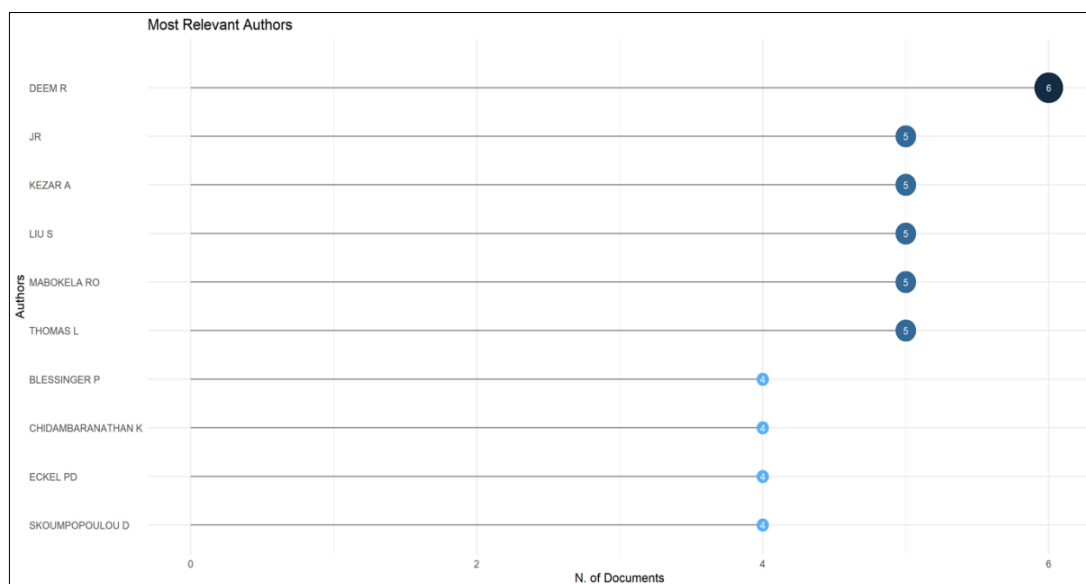


Figure 5: Most Influential Authors

Geographic Distribution and Collaboration Networks

A geographic analysis of the dataset reveals that research on institutional culture and transformation in higher education is predominantly concentrated in a small number of countries. The five most productive countries are the United States of America, the United Kingdom, China, Australia, and Canada.

Collaboration network analysis (Figure 7) reveals that the dataset is characterised by both individual and collaborative research modes. International co-authorships account for 13.23% of publications.

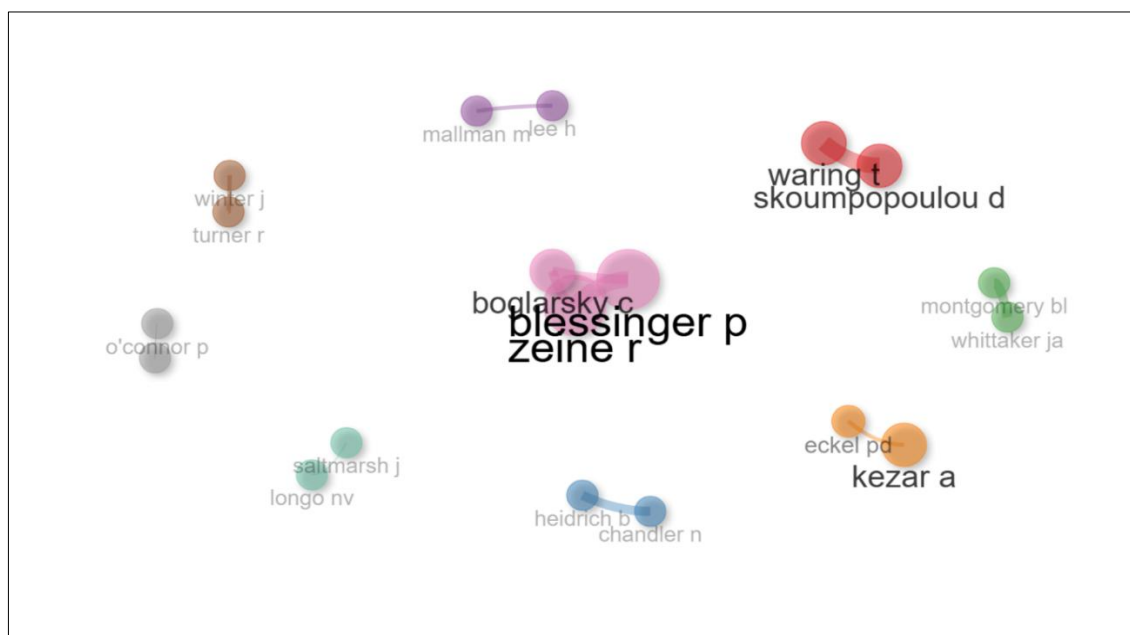


Figure 6: Collaboration Networks

Most Cited Publications

The analysis of the most cited publications (Figure 8) reveals several seminal works that have significantly shaped the academic landscape of institutional culture and transformation in higher education. The most cited work is Stephens et al. (2012), with 787 citations and an annual citation rate of 56.21. Deem (1998) follows with 543 citations, and Kezar (2002) with 357. Žalėnienė (2021) and Rienties (2013) show growing normalised citation rates of 25.17 and 6.75, respectively.

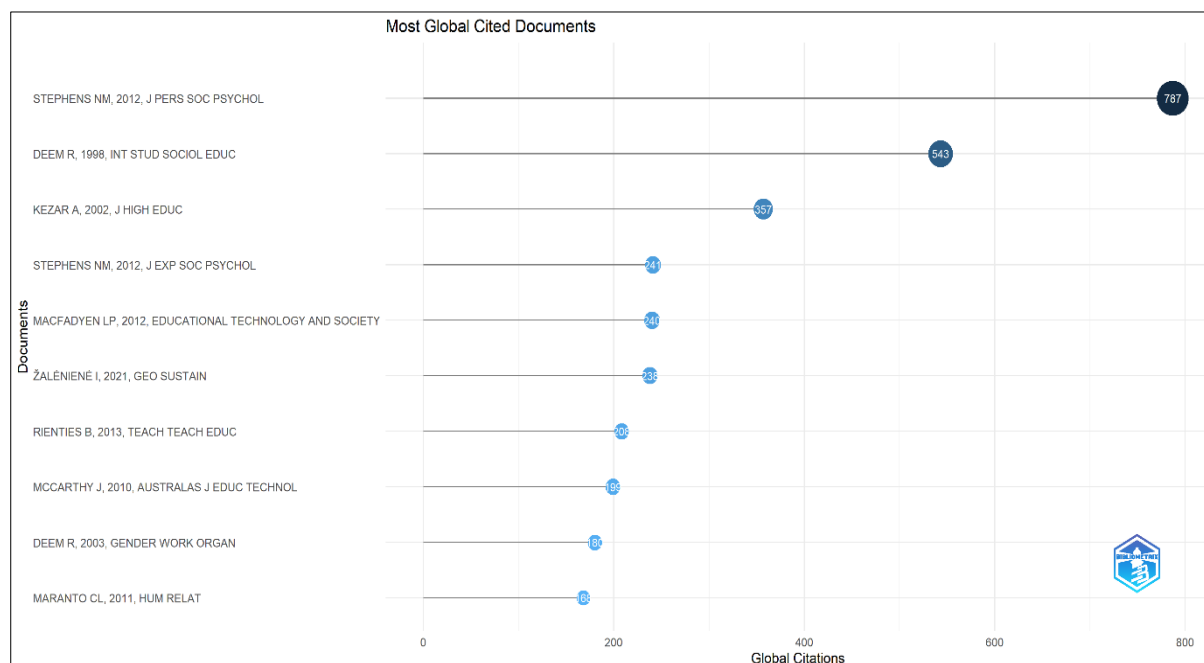


Figure 7: Most Global Cited Documents

Conceptual, Intellectual, and Social Structure Analysis

The analysis of conceptual, intellectual, and social structures in the field of institutional culture in higher education reveals a rich and interconnected scholarly landscape. The dominant themes of higher education, student experience, leadership, and organisational culture form a cohesive intellectual framework that guides current and future research. The central role of foundational scholars and the growing global collaboration network reflect the field's dynamic nature, with ongoing debates and exchanges shaping the direction of higher education research.

a. Co-occurrence Network

The co-occurrence network identifies 'higher education' as the most structurally central concept, with a betweenness centrality score of 58.78 and PageRank of 0.021 (Table 1). 'Organisational culture' records the highest PageRank (0.059) and second-highest betweenness centrality (42.312). Additional key nodes include 'leadership', 'students', and 'teaching' (Cluster 2). Betweenness centrality and PageRank reflect structural network properties, not raw citation frequencies. As Donthu et al. (2021) explain, betweenness centrality measures a node's bridging role between other nodes, while PageRank assesses influence based on the quality of connections, meaning that a term ranked highly on PageRank is connected to other highly influential terms, not merely to many terms. These distinctions are important for interpreting the relative significance of keywords within the network.

Table 1: Co-occurrence Network

Node	Cluster	Betweenness	Closeness	PageRank
higher education	1	58,78	0,015	0,021
university sector	1	2,097	0,012	0,009
student	2	3,631	0,015	0,02
leadership	2	16,93	0,016	0,015
students	2	21,139	0,014	0,015
teaching	2	19,523	0,015	0,012
curriculum	2	1,102	0,014	0,011
perception	2	2,391	0,014	0,011
organizational culture	3	42,312	0,018	0,059
organization	3	38,554	0,019	0,043

b. Thematic Map

The thematic map (Figure 9) further highlights the relationships between various concepts and their intellectual clusters. The thematic map shows an 'education' cluster as the dominant thematic area, linking student, leadership, teaching, curriculum, and decision-making. China appears as a recurring keyword, reflecting its growing presence in both publication volume and conceptual contribution.

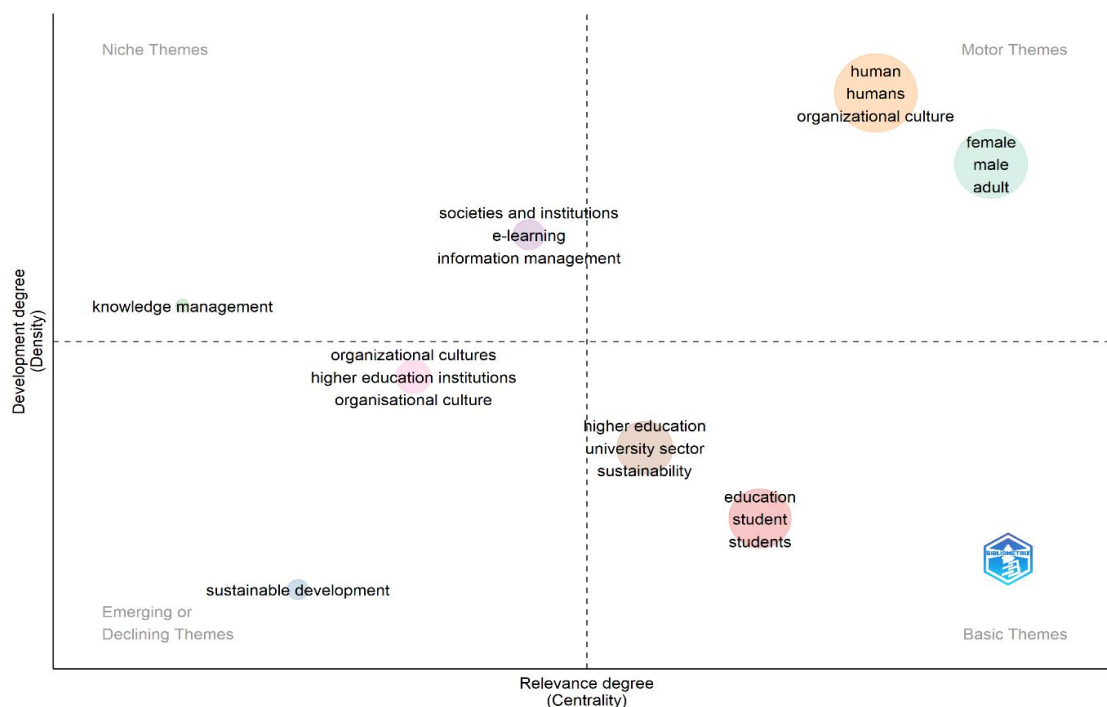


Figure 8: Thematic Map

c. Co-citation Network

The co-citation network (Figure 10) identifies Schein, E.H. (1992) as the most pivotal reference, with a PageRank of 0.038 and betweenness centrality of 208.150. Braun, V. (2006) and Lincoln, Y.S. (1985) are also highly co-cited. Other foundational works, such as Tinto (1993) on student persistence and Geertz (1973) on cultural interpretation, reinforce the theoretical traditions that inform current research.

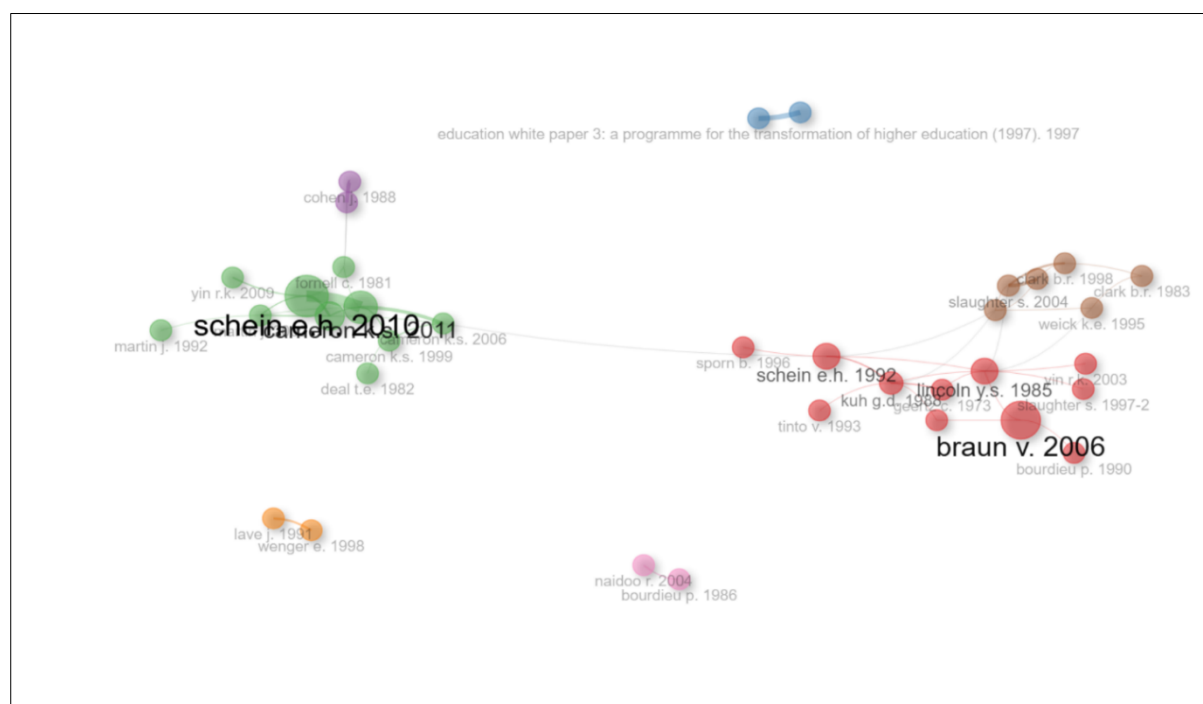


Figure 9: Co-citation Network

5. Discussion

This study mapped the global evolution of research on institutional culture and transformation in higher education from 1990 to 2024, with the aim of identifying prevailing trends, major scholarly contributions, and the dominant thematic and intellectual frameworks in the field. The analysis of 1,474 Scopus-indexed publications reveals a steady and significant expansion of the field, particularly after 2006, with an average annual growth rate of 13.33%. These findings suggest that institutional culture has become an increasingly prominent analytical lens through which higher education transformation is studied and understood globally. The following discussion contextualises these findings by comparing them with existing bibliometric studies, deepening their implications for the South African higher education context, and identifying the gaps that future research must address.

Research Trends and Publication Patterns

The post-2006 growth trajectory is consistent with Alzahmi et al.'s (2025) finding of a marked increase in organisational change research after 2015, which they attribute to intensifying global governance reform agendas. The post-2020 spike mirrors Altynbassov et al.'s (2024) observation of a surge in leadership development research following the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of conventional academic management structures. What distinguishes the present study is the field's diversification across disciplinary outlets spanning nursing education, sustainability, and equity studies compared with the concentrated journal distribution found by Aypay and Ertem (2022). This suggests institutional culture and transformation have evolved into a cross-disciplinary priority with implications for how the field is theorised and funded. South Africa's absence from the five most productive countries, despite being a central focus of national transformation policy, is consistent with van Wyk (2005) and Du Preez et al. (2016) and reflects the broader Global South underrepresentation identified by Altynbassov et al. (2024). It reinforces the need for investment in locally driven research capacity.

Influential Authors, Institutions, and the Global Research Agenda

The dominance of Deem, Kezar, Mabokela, Liu, and Thomas reflects the field's reliance on frameworks of new managerialism, equity-centred change, and student experience. The co-citation network confirms that Schein (1992), Tinto (1993), and Geertz (1973) remain the primary theoretical foundation. This intellectual stability is both a sign of intellectual coherence and a potential limitation, as these frameworks were largely developed outside Global South contexts. From a South African perspective, Mabokela's work on racially embedded institutional culture is particularly relevant, and future research would benefit from deeper engagement with postcolonial and decolonial frameworks that are better suited to the South African institutional environment.

Thematic Clusters and Intellectual Structures

The co-occurrence and thematic map analyses reveal three dominant intellectual clusters in the field: organisational culture and effectiveness; leadership, governance, and decision-making; and student experience. Three dominant clusters emerge: organisational culture and effectiveness; leadership, governance, and decision-making; and student experience. These align broadly with Alzahmi et al.'s (2025) thematic mapping of organisational change research. For South African HEIs, the prominence of the leadership and governance cluster is particularly

significant, as governance disputes and leadership transitions have frequently disrupted transformation processes. Critically, decolonisation, artificial intelligence, and digitalisation are absent as prominent nodes in the co-occurrence network, confirming that themes central to the current South African transformation agenda remain at the frontier of the field rather than at its established core. This absence presents both a research opportunity and a policy imperative.

6. Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study carry significant implications for researchers, South African policymakers, and higher education leaders and practitioners. These are presented separately below in recognition of the distinct roles and responsibilities each group holds in relation to institutional culture and transformation.

Research Implications

The geographic concentration of institutional culture research in the USA, UK, China, Australia, and Canada, combined with the relative absence of South African scholarship in the global dataset, points to a significant gap in the empirical base for understanding how institutional culture shapes transformation in the South African context. Researchers must therefore prioritise the Global South and South African contexts by designing studies that explicitly engage with how historical legacies, policy frameworks, and socio-political dynamics shape institutional culture and transformation in ways that may differ fundamentally from Global North experiences.

The dominance of cross-sectional and case-based research designs in the existing literature also calls for a methodological shift. Researchers in South Africa and comparable contexts should adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods research approaches, moving beyond one-off surveys or single-institution case studies to track institutional culture and transformation over time, particularly in relation to major societal events such as the #FeesMustFall movement and post-COVID governance transitions. Furthermore, given the underrepresentation of themes such as digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and decolonisation in the co-occurrence network, future studies should deliberately foreground these areas to ensure that the global research agenda reflects the full complexity of contemporary transformation challenges.

Policy Implications

South African policymakers should use the findings of this study as a basis for strengthening national and regional research infrastructures. The absence of South Africa from the top five contributing countries is not simply a reflection of research capacity, it is also a function of the limited availability of longitudinal, multi-institutional data on institutional culture that would enable comparative analysis over time. Policymakers should therefore consider funding dedicated research programmes on institutional culture and transformation, establishing data-sharing platforms and repositories that allow for consistent and comparable data collection across institutions, and creating incentive structures that reward locally relevant, empirically grounded research.

The study's findings also have direct implications for the design and evaluation of transformation policies. The persistence of research gaps in areas such as decolonisation,

digitalisation, and equity-centred leadership suggests that current policy frameworks may not be sufficiently responsive to emerging transformation challenges. Policymakers should therefore ensure that Integrated Transformation Plans and related policy instruments are informed by an up-to-date and evidence-based understanding of the global research landscape, while remaining sensitive to the unique historical and structural conditions of South African higher education.

Institutional Leadership Implications

For higher education leaders and practitioners, the most significant implication of this study is the need to reframe institutional culture as a strategic domain rather than a symbolic or aspirational concern. The findings reveal that institutional culture, as conceptualised through the frameworks of Deem, Kezar, Schein, and others, is not merely the backdrop to transformation but one of its primary drivers and potential barriers. Leaders must therefore integrate culture-related activities into institutional strategies, transformation plans, and performance indicators in a deliberate and measurable way.

Specifically, the dominance of the leadership and governance cluster in the co-occurrence network underscores the pivotal role of institutional leaders in creating the conditions for cultural change. Leaders who operate primarily from within dominant cultural norms without critically reflecting on how those norms were formed or whose interests they serve are unlikely to achieve the kind of deep, sustained transformation that South African higher education requires. The study, therefore, urges leaders to engage with the theoretical frameworks highlighted in this analysis, to invest in leadership development programmes that foreground cultural competence and equity literacy, and to measure their institutions' progress on cultural transformation using both quantitative indicators and qualitative, community-informed assessments.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to map the global evolution of research on institutional culture and transformation in higher education from 1990 to 2024, using bibliometric analysis of 1,474 Scopus-indexed publications. The findings confirm that the field has grown substantially and diversified across disciplinary boundaries, with leadership, governance, organisational culture, and student experience emerging as the dominant intellectual clusters. The geographic concentration of research output in the Global North, particularly the USA, UK, China, Australia, and Canada, and the corresponding underrepresentation of South African scholarship, constitute a significant empirical finding, one that reinforces the need for locally driven research that engages directly with the postcolonial and decolonial dimensions of institutional culture.

The study's interpretive focus on South Africa reveals a persistent tension between ambitious national transformation policy and the limited empirical evidence base available to support it. The theoretical frameworks most influential in the global literature, including those advanced by Deem, Kezar, and Schein, provide valuable but partial guidance for institutions navigating transformation in contexts shaped by apartheid history, governance instability, and resource inequality. Future research should develop frameworks that are more explicitly responsive to these conditions, and should adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods designs capable of capturing how institutional culture changes or resists change over time.

Limitations

As a bibliometric study, this research is inherently limited by the scope of the Scopus database and its coverage of English-language, peer-reviewed publications. It does not capture grey literature, policy documents, or scholarship published in languages other than English, which may be particularly relevant to the South African context. These limitations notwithstanding, the study provides the first comprehensive bibliometric mapping of the field and offers researchers, policymakers, and institutional leaders an evidence-based foundation from which to pursue more targeted, contextually responsive, and equity-driven transformation strategies in higher education.

References

- Adewale, S., & Potokri, O. C. (2023). Integrating African women academics in leadership: A systematic review. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, 4(3), 53–73. <https://doi.org/10.61186/johepal.4.3.53>
- Adonis, C. K., & Silinda, F. (2021). Institutional culture and transformation in higher education in post-1994 South Africa: A critical race theory analysis. *Critical African Studies*, 13(1), 73–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2021.1911448>
- Akala, B. M. (2018). Challenging gender equality in South African transformation policies: A case of the White Paper: A programme for the transformation of higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32(3), 226–248. <https://doi.org/10.20853/32-3-1521>
- Akpa, V. O., Asikhia, O. U., & Nneji, N. E. (2021). Organizational culture and organizational performance: A review of literature. *International Journal of Advances in Engineering and Management*, 3(1), 361–372.
- Alenezi, M. (2021). Deep dive into digital transformation in higher education institutions. *Education Sciences*, 11(12), Article 770. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11120770>
- Altbach, P. G. (2016). *Global perspectives on higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Altynbassov, B., Bayanbayeva, A., Tolegen, M., & Zhamankarin, M. (2024). A comprehensive bibliometric analysis of trends in higher education leadership in the Global South, 2013–2023: Contemporary perspectives and developments. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 127, Article 102421. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102421>
- Alzahmi, R. A., Syed, R. T., Singh, D., Arshi, T. A., & Kutty, S. V. (2025). Organizational change in higher education institutions: Thematic mapping of the literature and future research agenda. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05650-w>
- Aypay, A., & Ertem, H. Y. (2022). A bibliometric review of research on student outcomes in higher education, 1960–2020. *Tuning Journal for Higher Education*, 10(1), 27–63. <https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe.2189>
- Barnes, N., Du Plessis, M., & Frantz, J. (2021). Institutional culture and academic career progression: Perceptions and experiences of academic staff. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 47(1), Article a1857. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v47i0.1878>
- Bolden, R., Gosling, J., O'Brien, A., Peters, K., Ryan, M., & Haslam, S. A. (2015). Academic leadership: Changing conceptions, identities and experiences in UK higher education. *Leadership*, 11(1), 90–109. <https://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.1957.6009>
- Bopape, M. (2022). Institutional culture change: A social inclusion approach. *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies*, 4(2), 31–46. <https://doi.org/10.13169/intecritdivestud.4.2.0031>

- Bryman, A. (2007). Effective leadership in higher education: A literature review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(6), 693–710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701685114>
- Cameron, K. S., & Quinn, R. E. (1999). *Diagnosing and changing organizational culture: Based on the competing values framework*. Addison-Wesley.
- Chen, H., Tsang, Y. P., & Wu, C. H. (2023). When text mining meets science mapping in the bibliometric analysis: A review and future opportunities. *SAGE Open*, 13(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/18479790231222349>
- Council on Higher Education. (2025). *Education White Paper 3: A programme for higher education transformation*. <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/legislation/education-white-paper-3-programme-transformation-higher-education>
- Davids, D., & Fataar, A. (2022). A morphogenesis account of student leaders' development of their agency in their undergraduate residences at Stellenbosch University. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 10(1), 77–91. <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v10i1.3526>
- Dee, J. R., Nakajima, H., & Korbek-Erdogmus, E. (2023). Organizational culture and the transformation of higher education institutions. In *Research handbook on the transformation of higher education* (pp. 333–350). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800378216.00032>
- Department of Higher Education and Training. (2001). *National plan for higher education*. https://www.dhet.gov.za/hed_policies/national_plan_on_higher_education.pdf [2025, February 12].
- Donthu, N., Kumar, S., Mukherjee, D., Pandey, N., & Lim, W. M. (2021). How to conduct a bibliometric analysis: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 133, 285–296. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.04.070>
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1935). Does the Negro need separate schools? *Journal of Negro Education*, 4(3), 328–335. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2291871>
- Du Preez, P., Verhoef, A. H., & Simmonds, S. (2016). Rethinking and researching transformation in higher education: A meta-study of South African trends. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 1(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v1i1.2>
- Dube, K. (2024). Challenges and opportunities facing higher education in South Africa. In *Redefining education and development: Innovative approaches in the era of the sustainable development goals* (pp. 11–27). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-69954-2_2
- Ehrhart, M. G., Schneider, B., & Macey, W. H. (2025). *Organizational climate and culture: An introduction to theory, research, and practice*. Routledge.
- Fauzi, M. A., Tan, C. N. L., Muhamad Tamyez, P. F., Abd Aziz, N. A., & Wider, W. (2024). Women leadership in higher education: Past, present and future trends. *Asian Education and Development Studies*, 13(2), 117–133. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-11-2023-0168>

Gamsakhurdia, V. L. (2020). The origins and perspectives of 'culture' — Is it relevant anymore? *Human Arenas*, 3(4), 475–491 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-020-00107-9>

Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for your 'house'. *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research*, 4(2), 12–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393392>

Hofstede, G., Neuijen, B., Ohayv, D. D., & Sanders, G. (1990). Measuring organizational cultures: A qualitative and quantitative study across twenty cases. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 35(2), 286–316. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393392>

Human-Hendricks, N., & Meier, C. (2024). Three key drivers in devising a responsive curriculum in South African higher education institutions. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 38(6), 79–95. <https://doi.org/10.20853/38-6-5082>

Islam, M. N., Ahmad, S., Aqil, M., Hu, G., Ashiq, M., Abusharhah, M. M., & Saky, S. A. T. M. (2025). Application of artificial intelligence in academic libraries: A bibliometric analysis and knowledge mapping. *Discover Artificial Intelligence*, 5(1), Article 59. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44163-025-00295-9>

Jandrić, P., Knox, J., Besley, T., Ryberg, T., Suoranta, J., & Hayes, S. (2018). *Postdigital science and education*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1454000>

Jankelová, N. (2024). Organizational culture at Slovak universities: A mediation analysis of the associated factors. *Entrepreneurship Education*, 1(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41959-024-00119-4>

Johnson, B. J. (2024). Disturbed: Doing deep transformative work — Reflections on social justice work in South African higher education. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 12(1), 129–144. <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v12i1.5262>

Keet, A., & Swartz, D. (2015). A transformation barometer for South African higher education: Draft discussion document. *Introduction—the “system” “II. Systemic Transformation Challenges*.

Kezar, A.J. (2002). *Understanding and facilitating organizational change in the 21st century: Recent research and conceptualizations*. (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, Vol. 28, No. 4). Jossey-Bass.

Köse, M. F., & Korkmaz, M. (2019). Why are some universities better? An evaluation in terms of organizational culture and academic performance. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(6), 1213–1226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1634679>

Kuh, G. D., & Whitt, E. J. (1988). *The invisible tapestry: Culture in American colleges and universities* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 1). Association for the Study of Higher Education.

Kuh, G. D. (2009). What student affairs professionals need to know about student engagement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), 683–706. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0099>

- Kumalo, S. H. (2021). Justice through higher education: Revisiting White Paper 3 of 1997. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 75(1), 175–188. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12253>
- Kumar, R. (2025). Bibliometric analysis: Comprehensive insights into tools, techniques, applications, and solutions for research excellence. *Spectrum of Engineering and Management Sciences*, 3(1), 45–62. <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1536-8081>
- Lange, L. (2014). Rethinking transformation and its knowledge(s): The case of South African higher education. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriSTaL)*, 2(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.14426/cristal.v2i1.1791>
- Ledesma, M. C. (2016). Complicating the Binary: Towards a discussion of Campus Climate Health. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity (JCSCORE)*, 2(1), 6–35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48645302>
- Leland, S. M. (2020). *Organizational culture: Understanding theoretical and practical applications*. UNESCO-EOLSS.
- Limwichtir, S., Broady-Preston, J., & Ellis, D. (2015). A discussion of problems in implementing organisational cultural change: Developing a learning organisation in university libraries. *Library Review*, 64(6/7), 480–488. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LR-10-2014-0116>
- Massucci, F. A., & Docampo, D. (2019). Measuring the academic reputation through citation networks via PageRank. *Journal of Informetrics*, 13(1), 185–201. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2018.12.001>
- Mlambo, V. H., & Mpanza, S. (2024). Current challenges in South Africa's in Higher education sector: A literature review. *Alustath Journal for Human and Social Sciences*, 63(3). <https://doi.org/10.36473/ujhss.v62i4.2261>
- Motala, S., Sayed, Y., & De Kock, T. (2023). Epistemic decolonisation in reconstituting higher education pedagogy in South Africa: The student perspective. In *Possibilities and complexities of decolonising higher education* (pp. 116–132). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1947225>
- Mzangwa, S. T. (2019). Transformation as part of evolving organisational culture in South African higher education institutions. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2019.1638635>
- Ngubane, N. I., & Makua, M. (2021). Intersection of Ubuntu pedagogy and social justice: Transforming South African higher education. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 6, Article 113. <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v6i0.113>
- Nkomo, S., & Pillay, R. (2017). The transformation of South African higher education: The challenges of change. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 57, 132–145.
- Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The knowledge-creating company: How Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation*. Oxford University Press.

- Önday, O. (2016). Organization culture theory: From organizational culture of Schein to appreciative inquiry of Cooperrider and Whitney. *Elixir Organizational Behaviour*, 92, 39002–39008.
- Passas, I. (2024). Bibliometric analysis: The main steps. *Encyclopedia*, 4(2), Article 29. <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia4020065>
- Sahar, R., & Munawaroh, M. (2025). Artificial intelligence in higher education with bibliometric and content analysis for future research agenda. *Discover Sustainability*, 6(1), Article 401. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-025-01086-z>
- Salmi, J., & D'Addio, A. (2021). Policies for achieving inclusion in higher education. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 5(1), 47–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020.1835529>
- Sousa, M., Raposo, M. J., Mendonça, J., & Corchuelo, B. (2022). Exploring organisational culture in higher educational institutions: A comparative study. *International Journal of Management in Education*, 16(1), 62–82. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJMIE.2022.119683>
- Tierney, W.G. (2008). *The impact of culture on organisational decision-making: Theory and practice in higher education*. Stylus Publishing.
- Tinto, V. (2017). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- University of the Free State. (2024). *UFS-Vision 130: Renew and Imagine for 2034*. https://www.ufs.ac.za/docs/default-source/ufs-strategic-2023/ufs-vision-130-final-.pdf?sfvrsn=6d495320_3
- Vaal University of Technology. (2025). *VUT integrated transformation plan*. <https://vut.ac.za/social-justice-and-transformation/>
- van Wyk, B. (2005). Performativity in higher education transformation in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 19(1), 5-19.
- Vesga-Rodriguez, J. J., Garcia-Rubiano, M., & Forero-Aponte, C. (2020). Relationship between the type of organizational culture and presenteeism in employees. *International Journal of Psychological Research*, 13(2), 42–53.
- Weisgrau, M., Rosman, A., & Rubel, P. G. (2023). *The tapestry of culture: An introduction to cultural anthropology*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Weller, M. (2020). *25 years of ed tech*. Athabasca University Press. <https://doi.org/10.15215/aupress/9781771993050.01>
- Zhang, F. L. (2011). Culture and identity in higher education research: Disciplinary culture and institutional culture. *Advanced Materials Research*, 171, 795–798. <https://doi.org/10.4028/www.scientific.net/AMR.171-172.795>