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Review

Apartheid Diplomacy's Legacy in South African Higher Education: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Although apartheid ended in 1994, its legacy continues to shape South Africa's higher education system, reinforcing disparities in access, funding, and representation. This study aims to critically examine how apartheid diplomacy has influenced higher education and asks: how do its strategies continue to shape academic practices, institutional relationships, and systemic inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa? It conceptualises apartheid diplomacy as the use of education to entrench racial hierarchies, reproduce class domination, and suppress indigenous knowledge. Grounded in Marxist and Weberian class theories and Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, the analysis traces how apartheid-era policies institutionalised systemic inequalities and how these legacies persist within institutions. A scoping review was conducted using five databases (EMBASE, APA PsycINFO, Cochrane Library, CINAHL, and Scopus) between January 2007 and April 2025, guided by PRISMA ScR and Arksey and O'Malley's six-stage framework. Of 75 articles retrieved, 15 met the inclusion criteria. Findings reveal that apartheid diplomacy shaped academic governance, resource distribution, and knowledge production, leaving enduring inequities despite ongoing reforms. Transformation efforts, including financial aid schemes, equity policies, and curriculum debates, have achieved progress but remain constrained by structural, cultural, and intersectional barriers. The study underscores that achieving lasting equity requires continuous policy interventions, inclusive leadership, and curriculum decolonisation, alongside advocacy and interdisciplinary research. It reframes higher education as a diplomatic arena where equity and epistemic justice are negotiated, offering an original lens for understanding and dismantling apartheid's enduring influence on South African academia.

Keywords: apartheid diplomacy; higher education; class theory; intersectionality; equity; inclusion; South Africa

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1. Introduction

Strict racial segregation and inequality were enforced during apartheid in South Africa, with laws and policies designed to keep power in the hands of a privileged minority (Langa et al. 2021; Nanthambwe 2025; Marutlulle 2022). Higher education was deliberately used to entrench this system: the Bantu Education Act forced Black South Africans into poor-quality schooling that prepared them for menial work rather than advancement (Donohue and

Bornman 2014). Although apartheid officially ended in 1994, its legacy endures in persistent disparities in resource allocation, institutional representation, and campus cultures (Volker et al. 2022; Muyambi and Ahiaku 2025). This study introduces apartheid diplomacy as its central analytical anchor. By apartheid diplomacy, I refer to the strategies through which the apartheid state sought to secure international legitimacy, defend racial segregation, and maintain global academic and political ties despite widespread condemnation (de Kiewiet 1974; Masters and Landsberg 2024; C. Saunders 2011). These strategies included cultural and educational exchanges, selective international partnerships, and diplomatic movements aimed at sustaining white minority rule (Nawa et al. 2017; Heleta and Dilraj 2024). Unlike colonial diplomacy, which often pursued expansion and resource extraction, apartheid diplomacy was defensive, designed to preserve segregation while projecting legitimacy abroad (Misra 2025). It also differs from broader structural racism, which describes systemic inequality in general, by specifically capturing the diplomatic practices through which the apartheid state sought to normalise segregation internationally. In other words, apartheid diplomacy explains how South Africa's regime actively used international relations to sustain racial hierarchy abroad, something neither colonial diplomacy nor structural racism alone can fully account for. This clarification highlights the originality of the concept and its explanatory power. Operationalising apartheid diplomacy allows us to trace how diplomatic practices shaped higher education structures, influencing access, institutional hierarchies, and South Africa's positioning in the global academic community (Muraina et al. 2024; Mutongoza 2025).

To analyse this legacy, the study draws on class theory (Karl Marx and Max Weber) (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968; Daoxin 2020; Manna 2024) alongside Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework (Crenshaw 1989) (Figure 1). Class theory provides a lens to examine how apartheid diplomacy is embedded in economic and institutional hierarchies, privileging certain universities and social groups while marginalising others (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968; Daoxin 2020; Manna 2024). Intersectionality highlights how race, class, and gender intersect to compound disadvantage, demonstrating that apartheid diplomacy reinforced multiple, overlapping forms of inequality (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). These frameworks enable a deeper understanding of how historical diplomatic strategies continue to shape access, institutional hierarchies, and power dynamics in contemporary South African higher education. The enduring legacy of apartheid diplomacy is evident in persistent racial and economic inequality, with wealth and land still disproportionately concentrated in the hands of a white minority (Shain 2013; Bunting 2018).

Education and healthcare systems remain deeply uneven, as historically disadvantaged communities continue to face under-resourced institutions and limited access to quality services (Walker and Archung 2003; NASEM et al. 2023). Spatial segregation also persists: many Black South Africans live in townships far removed from economic hubs, a direct consequence of apartheid-era urban planning (Muyambi and Ahiaku 2025; Cooper 2019). Social cohesion is further strained by lingering mistrust and collective trauma, as the nation grapples with the psychological scars of systemic oppression. While South Africa is the central focus, the study situates apartheid diplomacy within a global comparative frame. Evidence from India, Brazil, Malaysia, and the United States shows that equity-oriented reforms such as affirmative action and quotas have expanded access but remain contested, fragile, and context-dependent (Nandi and Pathak 2024; Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto 2024; Heringer 2024; Lee 2024; Warikoo and Allen 2019; Mokgotho et al. 2023).

These cases demonstrate that apartheid diplomacy offers insights into how states defend or normalise racialised hierarchies in higher education worldwide, while also clarifying South Africa's distinctiveness given its uniquely entrenched racial order.

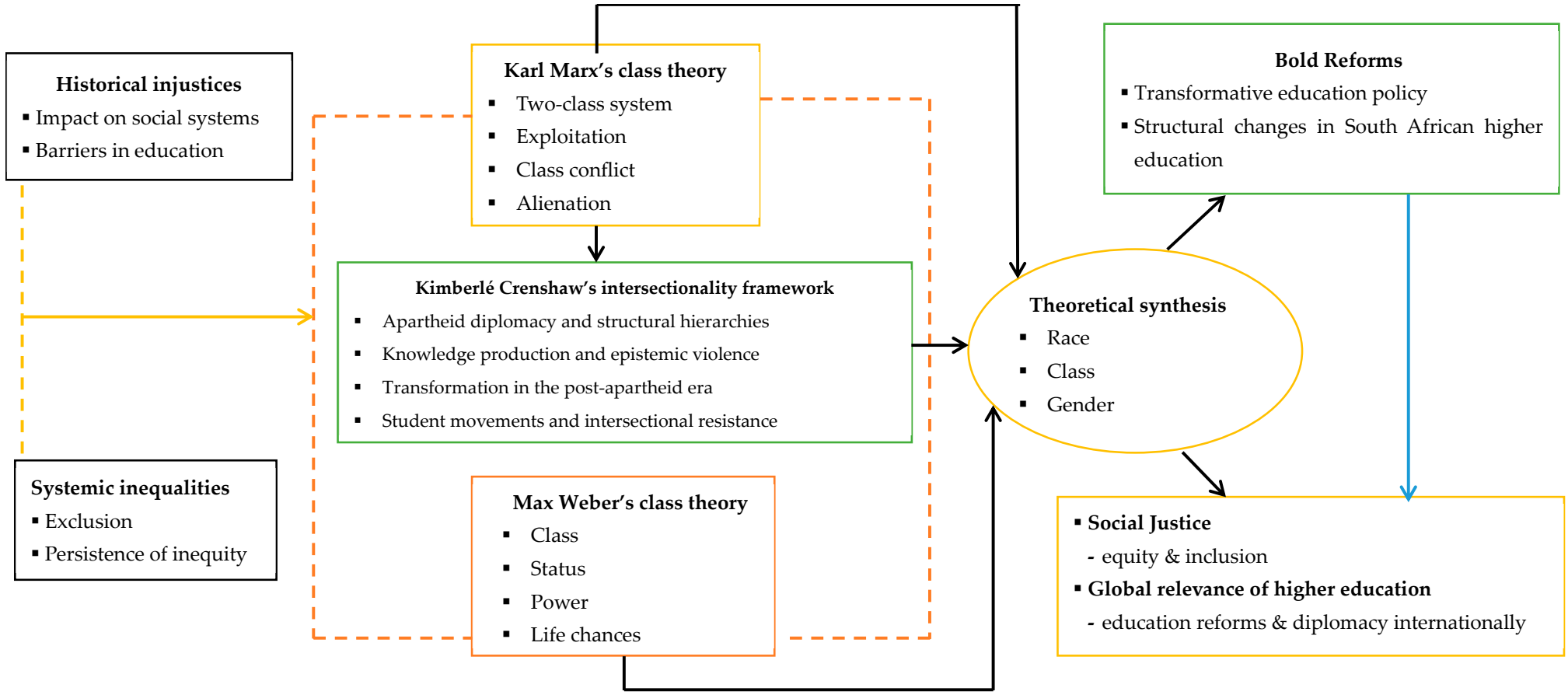


Figure 1. Conceptual framework integrating Karl Marx and Max Weber's class theories with Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality to explain transformative reforms in higher education, addressing systemic inequalities and advancing social justice.

This review therefore aims to critically examine the legacy of apartheid diplomacy in shaping South African higher education. It is guided by the central research question: How have the diplomatic strategies of apartheid continued to influence academic practices, institutional relationships, and systemic inequalities in post-apartheid higher education? The specific objectives are to: (1) define and apply apartheid diplomacy as an analytical framework; (2) assess its enduring impact on academic practices and institutional ties; (3) analyse the intersections of class, race, and gender in perpetuating inequality; and (4) identify strategies for dismantling systemic barriers within higher education. As higher education remains pivotal to social transformation and development, addressing these systemic issues is vital not only for South Africa but also for global efforts to create fair and accessible academic environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Apartheid-Era Policies and Methods of Inequality

Apartheid policies were systematically anchored in racial and class hierarchies, with education strategically employed as a tool of inequality (Roueff 2024; Mubanga 2012). The Bantu Education Act of 1953 institutionalised inferior schooling for Black South Africans, preparing them for menial labour rather than advancement (P. Saunders 2001; Mabokela and Mlambo 2017). This deliberate design of education as a mechanism of social control ensured that Black South Africans were denied access to quality schooling, thereby restricting upward mobility and reinforcing systemic inequality. Education was not neutral; it was weaponised to reproduce apartheid's political and economic order. From a Marxist perspective, this policy exemplifies how ruling elites used education to reproduce economic dominance, confining Black learners to low-wage labour and ensuring the continuation of white economic supremacy (P. Saunders 2001; Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Seekings 2003; Badat 2009). Through a Weberian lens, apartheid education also functioned as a system of status closure. The monopoly over credentials, language, and institutional prestige by white institutions reinforced social stratification and curtailed opportunities for leadership (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968; Daoxin 2020). Weber's perspective underscores that apartheid exclusion was both material and symbolic, stabilising privilege through entrenched cultural and institutional hierarchies. Intersectionality further illuminates how race, class, and gender converged to compound disadvantage (Crenshaw 1989; Vohra-Gupta et al. 2022). Black women, for instance, faced both racial exclusion and gendered marginalisation, leaving them particularly disadvantaged in accessing education and leadership opportunities. While Marxist analyses emphasise economic reproduction (Roueff 2024; Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Seekings 2003), Weberian approaches stress symbolic closure (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968; Daoxin 2020). This tension reveals that apartheid education was not only material but also cultural. Few studies integrate these perspectives, which leaves gaps in holistic accounts of inequality. Intersectional approaches (Crenshaw 1989; Vohra-Gupta et al. 2022) add further nuance, but gender remains comparatively underexplored, highlighting a contradiction between policy rhetoric and lived realities. Methodologically, archival analyses of apartheid policy (P. Saunders 2001; Chisholm 2012) foreground structural continuities, while qualitative accounts (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019) emphasise lived experiences, producing divergent emphases that require synthesis. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that apartheid education institutionalised inequality through both structural and cultural hierarchies. These hierarchies became deeply embedded in higher education. They continue to shape access and representation in contemporary academic institutions.

2.2. Legacy in Current Academic Practices

Despite apartheid's formal end, its legacy persists in funding disparities and institutional cultures (Crenshaw 1991; Treiman 2007). Historically disadvantaged universities remain under-resourced, while privileged institutions continue to dominate research output and global rankings (Holman et al. 2021; Evans-Winters 2021). Beyond material inequalities, change requires dismantling symbolic hierarchies (Chisholm 2012; Treiman 2007). The tenacity of the 'hidden curriculum' embedded in academic culture sustains systemic inequities by legitimising Eurocentric knowledge systems and privileging elite cultural capital (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Holman et al. 2021). From a Marxist perspective, the hidden curriculum functions as an ideological tool of class domination. Intersectional analyses highlight that exclusions are compounded for Black women. They face multiple barriers to leadership, research, and visibility (Crenshaw 1989; Vohra-Gupta et al. 2022; Dsouza and Verma 2026). Apartheid 's legacy also endures in subtle practices and interactions that shape academia. Everyday dynamics such as "polite racism" reproduce inequality in ways that appear civil but reinforce racial hierarchies. Coen-Sanchez (2025) describes polite racism as normalised, indirect exclusion, while Wiltgren (2023) shows how classroom interactions perpetuate racial hierarchies under the guise of equality. These concepts bridge structural analysis and live experience, demonstrating how institutional cultures sustain inequality through routine interactions. Global evidence reinforces that these legacies are not unique to South Africa. In India, British colonial policies institutionalised class and linguistic hierarchies (Dsouza and Verma 2026); in Brazil, post-colonial higher education continues to reproduce racial exclusion (Denise 2010); comparative work on South Africa and Brazil highlights how colonial legacies shape internationalisation and racial justice (Majee and Ress 2018); and in the United States, racialised capitalism and decolonial critiques reveal enduring colour lines in academia (Tegama 2023). These cases show both parallels and divergences: while global systems grapple with colonial and racial hierarchies, South Africa's apartheid diplomacy uniquely institutionalised exclusion through both structural and epistemic hierarchies. This comparative lens clarifies that reforms must be intersectional and globally informed, but also adapted to South Africa's distinct historical context (Crenshaw 1991, 2025). Here, tensions emerge between structural accounts that emphasise resource disparities (Treiman 2007; Holman et al. 2021; Evans-Winters 2021) and cultural analyses that foreground hidden curricula (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Holman et al., 2021). Intersectional studies (Crenshaw 1989; Dsouza and Verma 2026) complicate this further, but gender remains underexplored relative to race and class. Methodological differences also shape findings: comparative studies (Denise 2010; Majee and Ress 2018; Tegama 2023) highlight global parallels, while qualitative accounts (Denise 2010; Majee and Ress 2018) reveal micro-level exclusions. A synthesis of these approaches demonstrates that apartheid diplomacy embedded both structural and cultural hierarchies into academic life. Global cases mirror aspects of this legacy, but South Africa's experience remains distinctive in the depth of its institutionalisation, underscoring the need for reforms that are both intersectional and context-specific.

2.3. Intersection of Class, Race, and Gender

The convergence of class, race, and gender compounds inequality in higher education. Black women, for instance, face systemic barriers to leadership and academic opportunities (Mabokela and Mlambo 2017; Harris and Leonardo 2018). These barriers are not isolated but layered, reflecting how apartheid diplomacy embedded multiple axes of disadvantage into the structures of higher education. The persistence of these compounded inequalities demonstrates that inequality cannot be fully understood through a single lens of race or class alone. Crenshaw's intersectionality framework illuminates how racism,

sexism, and classism intersect to produce unique forms of oppression (Harris and Leonardo 2018). This perspective moves beyond description, showing that apartheid's legacy is not only class-based but also deeply gendered and racialised. Intersectionality clarifies that the lived experiences of Black women in academia are shaped by overlapping systems of discrimination, which magnify exclusion and limit opportunities for advancement (Walker and Archung 2003; Mabokela and Mlambo 2017). From a Marxist perspective, these compounded inequalities reflect the reproduction of privilege through resource concentration, where historically advantaged institutions continue to monopolise funding, infrastructure, and academic capital (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Seekings 2003). Weber's framework adds that status closure operates through credentialing, language hierarchies, and institutional prestige, reinforcing barriers to leadership and recognition (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968; Daoxin 2020). Together, Marx and Weber highlight how structural and symbolic mechanisms stabilise privilege, while intersectionality reveals how these mechanisms converge to intensify marginalisation. Comparative evidence from the United States and the United Kingdom demonstrates that intersectional inequalities are a global phenomenon (Evans-Winters 2021). This suggests that South Africa's challenges are part of a broader pattern in higher education systems worldwide, where race, class, and gender intersect to reproduce inequality. However, the South African case is uniquely shaped by apartheid diplomacy. This system institutionalised disadvantages that became deeply entrenched in academic culture. These disadvantages also remain embedded in governance structures today. Thus, the intersection of class, race, and gender underscores the need for integrative, intersectional policy interventions (Cooper 2019; Mubanga 2012). Addressing one axis of inequality in isolation risks reproducing exclusion for groups who experience multiple, overlapping disadvantages. Transformation therefore requires reforms that simultaneously confront economic, racial, and gender disparities, embedding accountability into leadership, curricula, and institutional practices. While Marxist and Weberian frameworks highlight structural and symbolic mechanisms of privilege (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968; Daoxin 2020; Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Seekings 2003), they sometimes underplay the overlapping oppressions captured by intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Harris and Leonardo 2018). This tension reveals that no single framework fully explains the persistence of inequality. Intersectionality fills this gap, but gender remains comparatively underexplored in South African scholarship (Mabokela and Mlambo 2017; Evans-Winters 2021). Methodological differences also shape findings: archival analyses (P. Saunders 2001; Chisholm 2012) emphasise structural continuities, while qualitative accounts (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Holman et al. 2021) highlight lived experiences. Comparative studies (Evans-Winters 2021) extend the analysis globally, but they risk overlooking apartheid's unique diplomatic embedding of inequality. Synthesising across these approaches shows that apartheid diplomacy institutionalised disadvantages in ways global cases only partially capture.

2.4. Addressing Systemic Barriers

Strategies to dismantle systemic barriers include equity-focused policies, financial support for disadvantaged institutions, and inclusive leadership practices (Strydom 2024). Teacher training and frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI) are critical for advancing inclusive pedagogies (Volker et al. 2022). These approaches emphasise that inclusivity is not simply about access but about transforming the structures, cultures, and practices of higher education to accommodate diverse learners and dismantle inherited inequalities. From a class theory perspective, these reforms aim to redistribute educational capital, challenging the resource concentration that historically advantaged white institutions (Crenshaw 1989; Shain 2013). By directing

funding and infrastructural support to disadvantaged universities, reforms disrupt the economic base of inequality and create opportunities for broader participation in knowledge production. Through a Weberian lens, systemic barriers are understood as forms of status closure, where credentialing systems, language hierarchies, and leadership pathways stabilise privilege (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968; Daoxin 2020). Inclusive leadership practices and diversified governance structures weaken these hierarchies, opening access to prestige and authority that was historically monopolised by elite institutions (Vohra-Gupta et al. 2022; Chisholm 2012). Crenshaw's intersectionality framework highlights the need to address overlapping forms of disadvantage. Race, class, gender, and disability often converge to compound inequality, meaning that reforms must embed intersectional accountability (Crenshaw 1989). Policies that focus narrowly on one axis risk reproducing exclusion for groups who experience multiple, intersecting barriers. International examples from Canada and Finland show that collaborative stakeholder engagement and flexible curriculum design can foster inclusivity (Strydom 2024). However, these global cases differ significantly in historical context: Canada's reforms emerged from multicultural policy frameworks, while Finland's inclusivity is shaped by welfare-state traditions. By contrast, South Africa's higher education system is uniquely marked by apartheid diplomacy, which institutionalised marginalisation through both structural and epistemic hierarchies. This tension underscores that while global models provide useful lessons, they cannot be transplanted wholesale. Instead, they highlight the importance of adapting comparative experiences to South Africa's distinct legacy. A synthesis of these cases demonstrates that apartheid diplomacy provides a framework for analysing how states defend or normalise racialised hierarchies in higher education globally. It also clarifies the limits of universal reform strategies. These cases illustrate that transformation requires not only national policy reform but also global learning and adaptation, where South Africa can draw on comparative experiences to strengthen its own higher education system (Marutlulle 2022; Donohue and Bornman 2014). Only by integrating these dimensions can South Africa move toward a higher education system that advances equity, diversity, and social justice. However, tensions remain between reforms that emphasise redistribution of resources (Crenshaw 1989; Shain 2013) and those that prioritise epistemic transformation (Strydom 2024). This divergence underscores that inclusivity cannot be reduced to material change alone. Methodological differences also shape these debates: policy analyses (Mubanga 2012; Mabokela and Mlambo 2017) highlight structural reforms, while qualitative accounts (Holman et al. 2021) emphasise lived experiences of exclusion. Comparative studies from Canada and Finland (Strydom 2024) provide useful models, but their contexts differ significantly from South Africa's apartheid legacy, highlighting a gap in adapting global lessons to local realities. A synthesis of these approaches demonstrates that apartheid diplomacy embedded systemic barriers. Addressing them requires both structural and epistemic dismantling.

2.5. Enduring Legacy of Apartheid

The end of apartheid did not erase inequality; instead, it left enduring disparities in wealth, land, and access to resources (Donohue and Bornman 2014; Walker and Archung 2003). Poverty, unemployment, and under-resourced schools remain daily realities for many Black South Africans (Volker et al. 2022; Muyambi and Ahiaku 2025), while housing patterns and urban segregation continue to reflect apartheid-era planning (Bindhani and Gopinath 2024). These persistent inequalities demonstrate that apartheid diplomacy was not simply a political system but a structural project that embedded disadvantage into the economic, social, and spatial fabric of South Africa (Donohue and Bornman 2014; Volker et al. 2022). From a Marxist lens, these outcomes illustrate the persistence of class

exploitation, where economic capital and land ownership remain concentrated in the hands of a minority (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968). The reproduction of inequality through education, employment, and housing demonstrates how apartheid's economic base continues to shape opportunities and restrict upward mobility. Through Weber's framework, the legacy is visible in status hierarchies that privilege historically advantaged groups (Daoxin 2020). Credentialing systems, institutional prestige, and access to professional networks reinforce exclusion, ensuring that social closure remains a defining feature of South African society. Crenshaw's intersectionality framework further clarifies that these disadvantages are not experienced uniformly (Crenshaw 1989). Race and gender intensify inequality, with Black women and other marginalised groups facing compounded barriers in education, employment, and leadership. Intersectionality reveals that apartheid's legacy cannot be dismantled by addressing race or class alone; reforms must confront overlapping systems of oppression that sustain inequality (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968; Daoxin 2020). Civil society movements continue to press for transformation, underscoring the unfinished project of social cohesion (Treiman 2007; Harris and Leonardo 2018). Campaigns for land reform, equitable education, and decolonisation highlight that apartheid's legacy is not a historical memory but a lived reality, requiring structural, cultural, and epistemic change to achieve genuine transformation. Yet, scholars diverge on whether these legacies are primarily economic (Marxist analyses (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968; Seekings 2003) or symbolic (Weberian analyses) (Daoxin 2020). This tension reveals that apartheid's reproduction of inequality cannot be reduced to one dimension. Intersectional approaches (Crenshaw 1989; Harris and Leonardo 2018) complicate the picture further, but gender remains comparatively under-explored in South African scholarship. Methodological differences also shape findings: archival studies (P. Saunders 2001; Chisholm 2012) emphasise structural continuities, while qualitative accounts (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Holman et al. 2021) highlight lived experiences of exclusion. Civil society analyses (Treiman 2007; Harris and Leonardo 2018) add another layer, showing contradictions between reform rhetoric and persistent inequality. A synthesis of these approaches demonstrates that apartheid diplomacy uniquely institutionalised overlapping disadvantages. These disadvantages became embedded in governance and everyday life in ways that global cases only partially capture.

2.6. Higher Education Today

Apartheid's structural imprints remain visible in South Africa's universities. Historically white institutions benefited from superior funding and infrastructure, while Black universities were deliberately underdeveloped (Klein et al. 2018). Curricula remain Eurocentric, sidelining African knowledge systems and sparking student-led movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, which demand decolonisation and equitable access. Rising tuition costs and language barriers further restrict entry for disadvantaged groups (Majee and Ress 2018). Staff demographics reflect slow transformation, with leadership positions still dominated by white scholars, underscoring the persistence of institutional hierarchies. From a Marxist perspective, the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities reflects the reproduction of class domination, where ruling elites ensured that historically advantaged institutions retained economic and academic capital (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968). Weber's framework highlights how status closure continues to operate through credentialing, language regimes, and institutional prestige, stabilising privilege and restricting access to leadership and high-status roles (Daoxin 2020). Crenshaw's intersectionality lens clarifies that inequality is not experienced along a single axis: race, class, and gender intersect to compound disadvantage, particularly for Black women and other marginalised groups who face multiple barriers to participation and recognition (Crenshaw 1989). Unlike Section 2.2, which emphasises legacy practices such as hidden

curricula and polite racism, Section 2.6 foregrounds contemporary activism and reform. Student-led movements reveal contradictions between formal policy commitments and lived realities. They underscore the unfinished project of decolonisation. These campaigns demonstrate that transformation requires not only material redistribution but also cultural and epistemic reform, including decolonising curricula, diversifying leadership, and embedding intersectional accountability in governance and pedagogy. Tensions remain between structural accounts that emphasise redistribution of resources (Kozyr-kowalski and Sven 1968; Klein et al. 2018) and cultural analyses that foreground epistemic hierarchies (Strydom 2024; Majee and Ress 2018). Intersectional studies (Crenshaw 1989; Evans-Winters 2021; Boadu 2021) complicate this further, but gender remains under-explored relative to race and class. Methodological differences also shape findings: comparative studies (Dsouza and Verma 2026; Denise 2010; Majee and Ress 2018) highlight global parallels, while qualitative accounts (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Holman et al. 2021) reveal micro-level exclusions. The enduring influence of apartheid diplomacy is evident in today's universities, where overlapping disadvantages persist. Curricula, governance, and leadership structures still reflect entrenched hierarchies. Global reform models provide useful lessons, but they only partially capture the depth of South Africa's institutional challenges.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Protocol Design for the Scoping Review

This scoping review followed Arksey and O'Malley's framework (Arksey and O'Malley 2005), refined by Levac et al. (2010), and aligned with the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) manual (JBI n.d.). Reporting adhered to PRISMA-ScR stands for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA ScR) guidelines (Tricco et al. 2018). The PRISMA ScR checklist is provided in the Supplementary Materials (Supplementary Table S1). No prior reviews addressed this topic. The review followed five stages: identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, study selection and data extraction, data synthesis, and reporting results. The protocol was tailored to operationalise apartheid diplomacy as the analytical anchor. Search terms, inclusion criteria, and synthesis were designed to capture how apartheid-era practices shaped higher education structures, resource distribution, and institutional hierarchies. The theoretical framework guided the protocol. Marx's class theory focused on resource concentration, Weber's status closure on institutional hierarchies, and Crenshaw's intersectionality on overlapping exclusions. The protocol was registered a priori with the Open Science Framework (DOI: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/TYFS9).

3.2. Data Sources and Search Strategy

Comprehensive searches were conducted across EMBASE, APA PsycINFO, Cochrane Library, CINAHL, and Scopus (2007–2025). Supplementary searches included Google Scholar, ProQuest Dissertations, and citation mining. Search strings (Table 1) were designed to capture literature explicitly linking apartheid diplomacy to higher education. Terms combined *diplomacy, segregation, institutional autonomy, knowledge production, and transformation*.

Grey literature (policy documents, institutional reports, advocacy materials) was included to reflect intersectional dimensions of apartheid's impact. Search validation followed Daudt et al. (2013), with structured procedures for defining terms, selecting databases, applying inclusion/exclusion criteria, and cross-verifying findings (Table 2). By embedding Marx's focus on resource concentration, Weber's emphasis on status closure, and Crenshaw's intersectionality, the search strategy ensured that retrieved literature could be analysed through a theoretical lens rather than remaining descriptive. Both quantitative

and qualitative studies were included, with selection guided by the Population–Concept–Context (PCC) framework and informed by the three theoretical models.

Table 1. Initial search terms, Query strings and Boolean Search Strings used to cover the literature.

S/N	Search Terms	Query and Boolean Search Strings
1	Apartheid diplomacy and higher education in South Africa	"Apartheid diplomacy" AND "higher education" AND "South Africa"
2	Legacy of apartheid in South African universities	"Legacy of apartheid" AND "South African universities"
3	Impact of apartheid-era diplomacy on education policy	"Apartheid-era diplomacy" AND "education policy"
4	Decolonisation and higher education in post-apartheid South Africa	"Decolonisation" AND "higher education" AND "post-apartheid South Africa"
5	Race, diplomacy, and knowledge production in South African universities	"Race AND diplomacy" AND "knowledge production" AND "South African universities"
6	Institutional autonomy and apartheid legacy in higher education	"Institutional autonomy" AND "apartheid legacy" AND "higher education"
7	Transformation of South African universities post-apartheid	"Transformation" AND "South African universities" AND "post-apartheid"
8	Historical influences on higher education governance in South Africa	"Historical influences" AND "higher education governance" AND "South Africa"
9	Apartheid-era policies and their effects on academic institutions	"Apartheid-era policies" AND "effects" AND "academic institutions"
10	Political history and education reform in South Africa	"Political history" AND "education reform" AND "South Africa"
11	Apartheid diplomacy and academic freedom in South Africa	"Apartheid diplomacy" AND "academic freedom" AND "South Africa"
12	Higher education funding models and apartheid legacy	"Higher education funding models" AND "apartheid legacy"
13	Colonial education structures and their persistence in South Africa	"Colonial education structures" OR "persistence" AND "South Africa"
14	Post-apartheid university policies and racial equity	"Post-apartheid university policies" AND "racial equity"
15	Knowledge production and epistemic justice in South African academia	"Knowledge production" AND "epistemic justice" AND "South African academia"
16	Apartheid-era international relations and their impact on education	"Apartheid-era international relations" AND "impact on education"
17	Race and academic representation in South African universities	"Race" AND "academic representation" AND "South African universities"
18	Decolonial approaches to higher education governance in South Africa	"Decolonial approaches" AND "higher education governance" AND "South Africa"
19	Apartheid's influence on curriculum development in South African universities	"Apartheid influence" AND "curriculum development" AND "South African universities"
20	Global perspectives on apartheid diplomacy and education	"Global perspectives" AND "apartheid diplomacy" AND "education"
21	Higher education transformation and policy shifts post-apartheid	"Higher education transformation" AND "policy shifts" AND "post-apartheid"
22	Academic exclusion and inclusion in South African universities	"Academic exclusion" OR "inclusion" AND "South African universities"
23	Apartheid-era segregation and its effects on university access	"Apartheid-era segregation" AND "effects" AND "university access"
24	Political interference in South African higher education institutions	"Political interference" AND "higher education institutions" AND "South Africa"

Table 1. *Cont.*

S/N	Search Terms	Query and Boolean Search Strings
25	Post-apartheid challenges in university leadership and governance	"Post-apartheid challenges" AND "university leadership" AND "governance"
26	Race, class, and institutional power in South African academia	"Race" AND "class" AND "institutional power" AND "South African academia"
27	Apartheid diplomacy and its role in shaping university structures	"Apartheid diplomacy" AND "shaping university structures"
28	International academic collaborations and apartheid's legacy	"International academic collaborations" AND "apartheid legacy"
29	Higher education and social justice movements in South Africa	"Higher education" AND "social justice movements" AND "South Africa"
30	Reparative policies for apartheid-era educational inequalities	"Reparative policies" AND "apartheid-era educational inequalities"

Source: Authors' compilation.

Table 2. Scope of Search Validation Procedure.

S/N	Sources	Search Validation Procedure
1	Defining Search Terms and Scope	■ Establish a set of structured query strings (e.g., apartheid diplomacy, higher education transformation, policy implications, decolonial frameworks). ■ Identify the time frame for sources (e.g., scholarly articles published between 2018 and 2024 for contemporary relevance).
2	Selecting Databases and Sources	■ Use peer-reviewed databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar to ensure academic rigour. ■ Include institutional reports and policy documents from South African universities, government bodies, and think tanks.
3	Screening and Filtering Results	■ Apply inclusion criteria (e.g., sources discussing apartheid-era diplomacy's effect on university policies). ■ Apply exclusion criteria (e.g., non-academic sources lacking empirical analysis). ■ Conduct quality assessment (ensuring sources have credible authors, affiliations, and citations).
4	Cross-Verifying Key Findings	■ Compare findings across multiple sources to identify consistent themes and discrepancies. ■ Validate interpretations through expert reviews or discussion with scholars specializing in South African higher education.
5	Maintaining a Transparent Documentation Process	■ Keep a search log detailing databases, search strings, filters applied, and reasoning for inclusion/exclusion. ■ Ensure reproducibility by outlining the search validation approach in the materials and methods.

Source: Authors' compilation.

3.3. Inclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria focused on sources directly addressing apartheid diplomacy's impact on higher education. Eligible studies included peer-reviewed articles, government/policy documents, and historical analyses linking diplomatic strategies to institutional structures and knowledge production. This targeted scope operationalised the theoretical framework: Marx's class theory guided inclusion of studies on resource distribution, Weber's status closure informed selection of works on institutional hierarchies, and intersectionality ensured sources captured overlapping exclusions across race, class, and gender (Table 3).

Table 3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

S/No	Inclusion	Exclusion
Participants	Male or Female Authors who have worked the studies or perspectives of the scoping review of this study.	Any studies on children or outside this group mentioned in the inclusion criteria.
Context	South Africa	Other countries outside South Africa.
Concepts	• Peer-reviewed academic studies that analyze the impact of apartheid-era diplomacy on higher education policy and institutional structures in South Africa. • Government and policy documents outlining higher education reforms influenced by apartheid-era governance and international relations. • Historical analyses discussing the role of race, colonial influence, and diplomatic decisions in shaping South African universities. • Empirical studies and expert interviews focusing on the legacy of apartheid-era education policies and their effects on knowledge production in post-apartheid institutions.	• General discussions on apartheid that do not specifically address its impact on higher education and diplomacy. • Studies unrelated to South Africa, including broader African or global contexts without direct relevance to apartheid's academic legacy. • Opinion pieces and unverified sources that lack empirical evidence or scholarly analysis. • Works focusing solely on primary and secondary education without examining higher education structures.
Sources of evidence	Literature studies Narrative studies Conference reports Reports from studies conducted by administration and non-administrative institutions or organisations. Full text Any methods	Commentaries Opinion pieces Inaccessible full text Perspectives
Language	English Language	Other language outside English language
Time frame	The last 10 years (January 2015–May 2025)	Dates earlier than 2015

Source: Authors' compilation.

3.4. Selection, Screening, Data Extraction

Citations were exported to Zotero (2023) and duplicates removed. Remaining records were uploaded to Rayyan (Ouzzani et al. 2016) for blinded title and abstract screening. Three reviewers (M.E.A., G.N.O, and R.A.O.) independently screened all records, with a calibration exercise on 10% to ensure consistency. Full texts were assessed independently, and disagreements resolved by consensus through team discussions. Data abstraction focused on article characteristics (author, year, design, aims, methodology, findings) (Table 4), and was organised into standardised tables adapted from the JBI Scoping Review Template (Harris and Leonardo 2018). Importantly, coding categories were aligned with the theoretical framework: Marx (resource concentration and institutional capital), Weber (credentialing, language regimes, and elite associations), and Crenshaw (intersectional exclusions in leadership, curriculum, and student access). This ensured that extracted data could be systematically interpreted through theory, addressing the reviewers' concern about weak integration. The process is summarised in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 2), showing records identified, screened, assessed, and included.

Narrative synthesis was conducted in two stages: charting and thematic synthesis (Arksey and O'Malley 2005). Charting captured breadth and recurring patterns, while synthesis grouped findings into themes using the PAGER framework (Pattern, Advances, Gaps, Evidence for Practice, Research Recommendations) (Bradbury-Jones et al. 2021). Findings were interpreted through the theoretical framework: Marx (apartheid diplomacy concentrated resources in historically white universities), Weber (status closure operated through credentialing and institutional prestige), and Crenshaw (race, class, and gender in-

tersected to compound exclusion). This integration transformed synthesis from descriptive reporting into analytical argumentation.

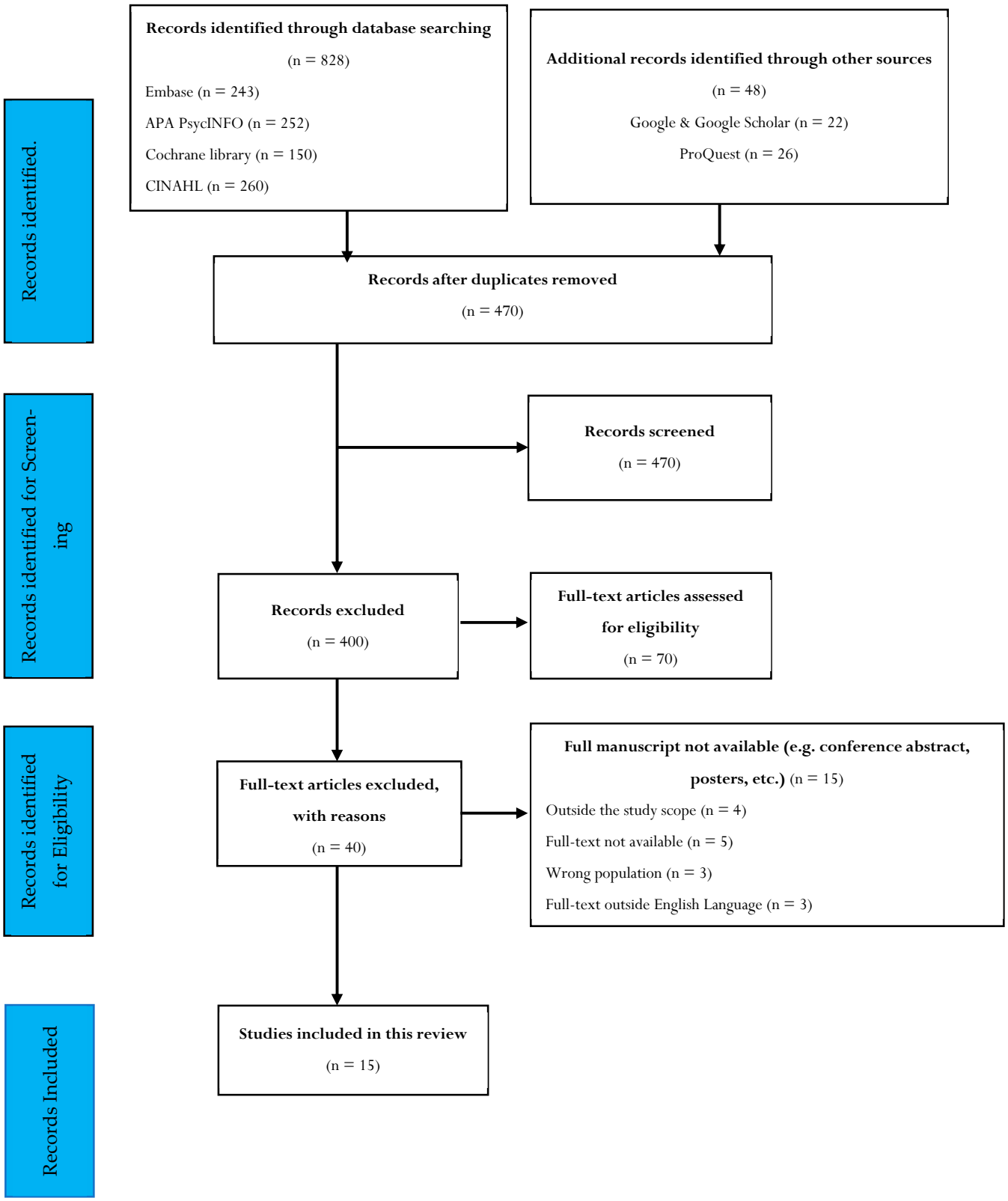


Figure 2. PRISMA flow diagram of information through the different phases of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) extension for scoping reviews (Klein et al. 2018).

Table 4. Selected characteristics of the 15 articles, published between 2015 and 2025, included in the scoping review assessing the enduring legacy of apartheid-era diplomacy in shaping South Africa's higher education system.

S/N	Article & Country	Title	Objectives	Methodology	Data Sources	Findings	Limitations
1	Tjønneland (2017), South Africa	Crisis at South Africa's universities—what are the implications for future cooperation with Norway?	What does this imply for the future of South Africa's higher education system?	The study reviewed literature from peer-reviewed journals.	Review	South African higher education faces challenges tied to broader national issues, including economic stagnation, youth unemployment, and political instability. Student protests and lack of leadership and strategy have become symptoms of systemic failures rather than agents of change. While the government has resources for reform, weak leadership and limited capacity hinder implementation.	There are certain biases in academic disciplines involved. Most cooperation projects are within the social sciences and the humanities, and to some extent health.
2	Patel et al. (2024), South Africa	Ubuntu in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Educational, Cultural and Philosophical Considerations	This paper explores these definitions as conceptual tools for understanding the cultural, educational, and philosophical landscape of post-apartheid South Africa.	The study reviewed literature from peer-reviewed journals.	Review	More than two decades after apartheid's end, South Africa's school system remains dysfunctional and under-resourced, leaving many learners unprepared for tertiary education—through no fault of their own.	A key limitation is the superficial use of Ubuntu in addressing educational disparities, highlighting challenges in aligning tradition with modern socio-economic realities.
3	Majee and Ress (2018) South Africa	Colonial legacies in internationalisation of higher education: racial justice and geopolitical redress in South Africa and Brazil	This article highlights the tensions that arise when universities must respond simultaneously to trans-national pressures for internationalisation and local demands for racial justice.	The study reviewed literature from peer-reviewed journals.	Review	This article highlights the tensions that arise when universities must respond simultaneously to transnational pressures for internationalisation and local demands for racial justice.	Competing higher education policy imperatives challenge nationally regulated universities, highlighting the need to explore de-nationalised models for sustainable governance.
4	Soudien (2007) South Africa	The "A" factor: Coming to terms with the question of legacy in South African education	This paper attempts to offer an alternative framework for assessing education delivery in South Africa.	The study reviewed literature from peer-reviewed journals.	Review	The broad approach that is taken is to suggest that dominant approaches for understanding this lack of performance underplay the specificity of the country's context and specifically its apartheid legacy.	A key limitation is reliance on inherited policy structures, requiring a comprehensive approach beyond past frameworks to address state challenges.
5	Beckmann (2016), South Africa	Exclusion and Education in South Africa: An Education Law Perspective of Emerging Alternative Understandings of Exclusion	This paper explores post-1994 policies and legislation, highlighting emerging interpretations of social exclusion. It argues that these newer forms of exclusion are complex and challenging to define or confront—potentially presenting greater difficulties than those experienced under apartheid.	The study reviewed literature from peer-reviewed journals.	Review	Emerging understandings of exclusion remain ill-defined and may prove more challenging to address than apartheid-era discrimination. Meaningful resolution will likely require demonstrable parity of performance across all educational institutions.	This paper is limited by the lack of research data, allowing only for personal observations and tentative conclusions.

Table 4. *Cont.*

S/N	Article & Country	Title	Objectives	Methodology	Data Sources	Findings	Limitations
6	Soudien (2008), South Africa	The intersection of race and class in the South African university: Student experiences	The purpose of this article is to make a contribution to the discussion on the sociological features of higher education and the significant ways in which it comes to produce a particular version of the racial experience	The study reviewed literature from peer-reviewed journals.	Review	Government concerns over the lack of transformation in higher education are valid, as racism persists in many South African institutions. However, viewing the issue symptomatically offers only a partial understanding. Higher education remains a complex sociological space, shaped by intersecting historical, political, and institutional forces.	A key limitation is the superficial resemblance between racial issues in higher education and everyday experiences, which oversimplifies engagement with the field and restricts deeper analysis of its complexities.
7	Walton and Engelbrecht (2024), South Africa	Inclusive education in South Africa: path dependencies and emergences	This paper explore three path dependencies from colonial/apartheid times that lock the country into historical patterns of categorisation and segregated schooling.	This paper uses a qualitative deductive content analysis.	Review of South African laws, policies, reports and scholarly literature.	Findings revealed that new and inclusive practices are emerging at both system-wide and local levels, supported by contributions to the policy ecology. However, South Africa's educational landscape remains complex and contradictory, defying expectations of a linear progression toward inclusivity.	A key limitation is that inclusive education requires navigating a complex system, shaped by multiple actors, history, and socio-economic forces, rather than overcoming isolated obstacles.
8	Batisai et al. (2022), South Africa	Rethinking inclusion in higher education: lessons for the South African academic space.	This paper explores and illuminates various factors that contribute to the exclusion or loneliness students feel in higher education.	This paper uses a content analysis.	Research studies and reports	Findings revealed that as the article reexamines inclusion in higher education, it critically explores the role of academic mentoring programmes for historically excluded students, particularly amid the rapid shift to virtual learning driven by the pandemic.	A key limitation is that adaptive education must equip students to engage critically with society, develop democratic skills, and shape their futures and communities.
9	Engelbrecht (2020), South Africa	Inclusive education: Developments and challenges in South Africa.	This paper identifies both challenges and successes in implementing inclusive education in South Africa.	This paper uses a three-step linear process, and systematic review.	Studies and reports on South Africa education policy enactment	Findings showed that while teachers support inclusive education, inadequate resources hinder implementation, fuelling doubts about its educational and economic viability in some communities.	Limitations showed that policy-practice gaps persist, with resource shortages and funding challenges obstructing sustainable inclusive education.
10	Mzangwa (2019), South Africa	The effects of higher education policy on transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.	This research study aims to provide an overview of the conditions resulting from the policy on transformation in the context of higher education.	Literature review	Policy on higher education in South Africa, focusing on national level HEI implementation	Findings showed that higher education access could improve through equal, standardised programmes in all universities. Additionally, adopting English as the sole medium of instruction may be more effective than Afrikaans or other official languages.	A key limitation is that normalising performance may boost access and participation, but teaching quality remains the key measure of academic standards.

Table 4. *Cont.*

S/N	Article & Country	Title	Objectives	Methodology	Data Sources	Findings	Limitations
11	Scott and Ivala (2019), South Africa	Transformation of Higher Education Institutions in Post-Apartheid South Africa	The study examines the progress and challenges of transformation within the South African higher education system.	Through case studies authored by South African higher education scholars and scholars affiliated with South African institutions.	Published studies as secondary data sources.	Findings highlight the importance of supporting quality research that reflects the demographic composition of South African academics and students, offering insights that can inform higher education transformation in similarly multicultural societies.	Relying on case studies authored by South African higher education scholars, affiliated with South African institutions, may limit broader applicability beyond this specific academic and geographical context.
12	Ogunnubi and Shawa (2017), South Africa	Analysing South Africa's Soft Power in Africa through the Knowledge Diplomacy of Higher Education	To analyze how South Africa's higher education system functions as a form of soft power in promoting national interests and enhancing the country's regional and global influence, particularly through its appeal to African academics and students.	This study applies soft power theory to examine Pretoria's higher education sector and its role in South Africa's international reputation and strategic positioning for economic and geopolitical benefits.	The study draws on academic publications and institutional reports as its primary data sources.	Findings indicate that South Africa's higher education sector serves as a soft power tool, enabling Pretoria to establish itself as a regional leader in Africa.	Limitations remain at the continental level, where challenges in equitable engagement and broader influence persist.
13	Wheeler and Wiese (2025), South Africa	Reforming higher education in South Africa by addressing gender inequalities.	To explore the gender equality experiences of female staff across all employment categories at a South African University of Technology, in order to understand institutional challenges and opportunities for promoting gender equity in alignment with the SDGs.	Facilitating questions guided the conversations, while thematic analysis of transcribed focus group discussions identified and explored emerging themes.	Focus group discussions	Findings revealed that prioritising gender equality is vital for the growth of higher education institutions and their contribution to the SDGs. Additionally, the cultural burdens faced by South African women must be considered when reimagining gender equality.	Limitations include potential participant bias and its qualitative nature. Conducted within a South African University, its findings are constrained to specific context.
14	Knowles et al. (2023), South Africa	Problematising the South African Higher Education inequalities exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic: Students' perspectives.	The study examined inequalities in higher education, perspectives on care and lived experiences, and its writing reflects a collaborative praxis grounded in African feminist principles within a knowledge-making process.	Using a decolonial theoretical lens	Project discussing educational inequalities, drawing from university experiences as primary data sources.	Findings highlight the need to reclaim the university as a public good, countering neoliberal forces that sustain inequality. This requires reconnecting with students and collaborating on strategies to address crises like COVID-19.	A key limitation is that the study, based on pandemic-era data from former ES students at UCKAR, highlights how the university reinforces inequalities through its reliance on Eurocentric curricula and neoliberal frameworks.

Table 4. *Cont.*

S/N	Article & Country	Title	Objectives	Methodology	Data Sources	Findings	Limitations
15	Du Plessis (2021), South Africa	Decolonisation of education in South Africa: Challenges to decolonise the university curriculum.	Using narratives to explore challenges faced by five heads of department in South African universities, providing deeper insight into leadership practices, challenges, and theorising within a post-colonial context.	Utilising a decolonised education and a social justice leadership discourse framework, narratives and qualitative study were employed.	Data from qualitative methods	Findings support a decolonised approach to education, yet practical tensions remain in how social issues manifest in universities. There is also a pressing need for leadership development rooted in South African knowledge and experiences.	A key limitation is that despite support for decolonised education, tensions persist in social issue manifestations, while leadership development rooted in South African knowledge remains challenging.

Sources: Authors' compilation.

3.5. Ethical Considerations and Dissemination

As this review relied exclusively on publicly available sources, ethical approval was not required. Transparency was maintained through protocol registration and systematic documentation of inclusion/exclusion decisions. Findings were disseminated at the South African Sociological Association (SASA) 2025 Annual Congress (University of Mpumalanga, 23–26 June 2025), emphasising how the conceptual framework of apartheid diplomacy, class theory, and intersectionality can inform ongoing debates about transformation, equity, and social justice in higher education.

4. Results

4.1. Search Results

The search yielded 470 studies, of which 70 were assessed in full text. After applying inclusion/exclusion criteria, 15 studies were retained (Figure 2; Table 4). As Table 4 shows, the included studies collectively demonstrate how apartheid diplomacy entrenched systemic inequities in higher education.

4.2. Study Characteristics

The fifteen included studies (Tjønneland 2017; Patel et al. 2024; Majee and Ress 2018; Soudien 2007; Beckmann 2016; Soudien 2008; Walton and Engelbrecht 2024; Batisai et al. 2022; Engelbrecht 2020; Mzangwa 2019; Scott and Ivala 2019; Ogunnubi and Shawa 2017; Wheeler and Wiese 2025; Knowles et al. 2023; Du Plessis 2021), ranging from 2017 to 2025 (Supplementary Table S2), were all conducted in South Africa, reflecting the country specific focus on apartheid diplomacy's legacy in higher education. The included studies focused on four areas: exclusionary policies and apartheid-era methods (n = 5) (Tjønneland 2017; Patel et al. 2024; Majee and Ress 2018; Soudien 2007; Beckmann 2016), legacy effects on current practices (n = 4) (Soudien 2008; Walton and Engelbrecht 2024; Batisai et al. 2022; Engelbrecht 2020), intersection of class, race, and gender (n = 3) (Mzangwa 2019; Scott and Ivala 2019; Ogunnubi and Shawa 2017), and strategies to dismantle systemic barriers (n = 3) (Wheeler and Wiese 2025; Knowles et al. 2023; Du Plessis 2021).

4.3. Impact of Apartheid-Era Policies and Methods of Exclusion

Five studies (Tjønneland 2017; Patel et al. 2024; Majee and Ress 2018; Soudien 2007; Beckmann 2016) show that apartheid policies systematically excluded marginalised groups, with the Bantu Education Act enforcing inferior education for Black South Africans. This restriction of access to quality education reflects apartheid diplomacy as a mechanism of class domination, aligning with Marx's view that elites reproduce inequality through institutional control. Structural barriers confined Black South Africans to subordinate economic roles and sustained class exploitation (Tjønneland 2017; Patel et al. 2024). From a Weberian perspective, exclusion also operated through credentialing and institutional closure, privileging white institutions and reinforcing status hierarchies that limited life chances (Patel et al. 2024; Majee and Ress 2018). Apartheid-era universities acted as gatekeepers of prestige through language policies, selective admissions, and professional networks, restricting access to high status roles. These systems persisted beyond formal legal change, reproducing inequality through entrenched institutional practices (Patel et al. 2024; Majee and Ress 2018; Soudien 2007). Crenshaw's intersectionality framework shows that exclusion operated across race, class, and gender. Black women, for instance, faced both racial and gendered marginalisation, limiting their access to leadership and knowledge production (Soudien 2007; Beckmann 2016). This highlights that apartheid's legacy cannot be addressed through single axis reforms but requires attention to overlapping systems of oppression in higher education.

4.4. Effects of Apartheid Legacy on Current Practices and Relationships

Four studies (Soudien 2008; Walton and Engelbrecht 2024; Batisai et al. 2022; Engelbrecht 2020) show that apartheid's legacy continues to shape academic practices through unequal funding, infrastructure, and leadership representation. Institutional cultures maintain exclusionary norms and power imbalances, indicating that formal change did not dismantle entrenched inequalities. These patterns persist in both material and cultural forms. From a Weberian perspective, this reflects status closure, where historically advantaged institutions retain prestige and authority (Soudien 2008; Walton and Engelbrecht 2024). Certification systems, language hierarchies, and elite networks continue to select groups and limit access for marginalised communities. A Marxist lens highlights unequal resource distribution, with historically white universities maintaining advantages while others remain under-resourced, reinforcing class inequality (Walton and Engelbrecht 2024; Batisai et al. 2022). Crenshaw's intersectionality framework shows that exclusion disproportionately affects Black women and other marginalised groups (Soudien 2008; Batisai et al. 2022). Their experiences reflect the combined effects of race, class, and gender, shaping everyday academic opportunities and relationships. Addressing these inequalities requires breaking down status-based barriers, ensuring fair resource distribution, and integrating intersectional accountability into academic systems.

4.5. Empirical Evidence on Intersectional Inequalities in Higher Education

Three studies (Mzangwa 2019; Scott and Ivala 2019; Ogunnubi and Shawa 2017) highlighted how intersecting inequalities exacerbate exclusion in South African higher education. Black women, in particular, face compounded barriers to leadership and academic recognition, reflecting how apartheid diplomacy's legacy continues to shape access and opportunity. These findings demonstrate that exclusion is not experienced along a single axis but emerges from the convergence of multiple structural disadvantages, requiring theoretical interpretation to fully grasp their depth. From Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, the evidence reveals how race, class, and gender interact to produce unique forms of oppression that single-axis analyses fail to capture (Mzangwa 2019). The compounded nature of these disadvantages explains why Black women encounter heightened challenges in academic progression and recognition, as their experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of discrimination. Through Marx's lens, these intersecting exclusions are embedded in broader structures of resource distribution, where historically advantaged institutions continue to monopolise funding and academic capital, leaving marginalised groups with limited opportunities for advancement (Scott and Ivala 2019). From a Weberian perspective, the persistence of credentialing barriers, language hierarchies, and elite professional associations illustrates how status closure reinforces exclusion (Ogunnubi and Shawa 2017). Thus, these mechanisms ensure that access to high-prestige roles remains restricted, thereby stabilising institutional hierarchies that disadvantage women and racial minorities simultaneously. Hence, these findings underscore the necessity of integrative policy interventions that simultaneously address economic, racial, and gender disparities.

4.6. Addressing Systemic Barriers to Create More Inclusive Institutions

Three studies (Wheeler and Wiese 2025; Knowles et al. 2023; Du Plessis 2021) identified strategies to reduce systemic barriers: equity oriented policies, targeted resource allocation, teacher training, inclusive pedagogies, and governance reform. These approaches address structural inequalities rooted in apartheid diplomacy and emphasise the need for changes in material, cultural, and epistemic foundations of higher education (Wheeler and Wiese 2025). From a Marxist perspective, these reforms focus on redistributing resources to historically disadvantaged institutions, reducing inequality in funding and infrastructure

and improving participation in knowledge production (Wheeler and Wiese 2025). Without such redistribution, reforms risk remaining symbolic as material inequalities persist. A Weberian lens highlights the need to reduce status closure by diversifying leadership and reforming certification systems, governance, and language practices (Knowles et al. 2023). These changes expand access to institutional power and challenge entrenched hierarchies that privilege select groups. Crenshaw's intersectionality framework emphasises that reforms must address overlapping inequalities across race, class, gender, and disability (Du Plessis 2021). Policies focused on a single dimension risk overlooking compounded disadvantage. Embedding intersectional accountability in governance, curricula, and teaching is essential. These findings show that transformation requires structural, cultural, and epistemic change. Addressing apartheid diplomacy's legacy depends on fair resource distribution, reducing status-based barriers, and integrating intersectional accountability across higher education.

4.7. Discussion

The findings of the scoping review are synthesised and situated within broader theoretical and comparative frameworks. The analysis critically examines how apartheid diplomacy continues to influence higher education in South Africa. Apartheid diplomacy is understood as the use of education to entrench racial hierarchy, reproduce class domination, and suppress indigenous knowledge. Operationalising apartheid diplomacy as both a structural and epistemic system reveals its historical foundations, enduring effects, and potential pathways for transformation. The analysis is organised into sub-themes that integrate Marxist, Weberian, and intersectional perspectives to explain how inequities are reproduced and how reforms can dismantle them. The legacy of apartheid diplomacy remains a defining feature of South Africa's educational landscape, shaping institutional policies, interpersonal dynamics, and societal equity (Vally 2020; Cassim 2005; Pant and Sharma 2024). In this study, apartheid diplomacy is operationalised as the deliberate use of education as a diplomatic instrument to entrench racial hierarchies, reproduce class domination, and suppress indigenous knowledge. This framing goes beyond description by conceptualising apartheid diplomacy as both a structural and epistemic system. It explains how higher education was used to reproduce privilege and marginalisation, and how these effects persist in contemporary institutions.

During apartheid, diplomacy actively reinforced segregation and exclusion in the education sector (Majee and Ress 2018; Walton and Engelbrecht 2024). Policies such as the Bantu Education Act were intentionally designed to privilege the elite while marginalising Black South Africans and other under-represented communities. This Act institutionalised unequal schooling by preparing Black learners for low-skilled labour rather than professional advancement, embedding inequality into the education system. Higher education institutions became critical tools in maintaining class and racial hierarchies, serving as gatekeepers of privilege and reproducing systemic exclusion. Limited access to universities entrenched socioeconomic disparities, ensuring education functioned as an instrument of apartheid's broader societal control (Nanthambwe 2025; Wheeler and Wiese 2025). From a Marxist perspective, these policies exemplify how ruling elites used education to reproduce economic dominance, restricting upward mobility for the majority and consolidating class exploitation (Daudt et al. 2013; Tjønneland 2017). Weber's lens further clarifies that apartheid education operated as a system of status closure, monopolising credentialing and institutional prestige to stabilise privilege (Levac et al. 2010; Tricco et al. 2018). Crenshaw's intersectionality framework shows that exclusion was uneven, with Black women experiencing compounded barriers of race, class, and gender that limited access to higher education (Majee and Ress 2018; Beckmann 2016).

This historical context is crucial for understanding the structural inequities that persist within institutions today. Apartheid diplomacy embedded exclusion into South African higher education, shaping curricula, governance, and institutional cultures that continue to reproduce inequality (Daudt et al. 2013; Tjønneland 2017). These disparities reflect deliberate historical policies that entrenched privilege and marginalisation rather than accidental outcomes. Despite significant reforms, systemic inequities persist in higher education (Scott and Ivala 2019; Ogunnubi and Shawa 2017). Resource allocation remains unequal, with disadvantaged universities lacking the funding and infrastructure to compete with historically privileged institutions. This reproduces apartheid-era hierarchies, enabling elite institutions to dominate research output, rankings, and international collaborations. These disparities reduce educational quality and opportunities for marginalised communities, reinforcing cycles of exclusion. Enrollment patterns and staff demographics still reflect racial and class dynamics (Mzangwa 2019; Du Plessis 2021). Although student access has increased, leadership and senior academic roles remain disproportionately occupied by white scholars. This imbalance demonstrates that apartheid diplomacy's legacy persists in both material inequalities and symbolic hierarchies of authority and recognition (Tjønneland 2017; Patel et al. 2024). Persistent exclusionary institutional cultures show that reforms have not fully dismantled gatekeeping, epistemic dominance, and marginalisation.

From a Marxist perspective, economic and institutional privilege remains concentrated, reproducing class domination across generations (Majee and Ress 2018; Beckmann 2016). Weber's status closure explains how credentialing, language, and institutional prestige sustain privilege and restrict access for disadvantaged groups (Walton and Engelbrecht 2024; Batisai et al. 2022). Crenshaw's intersectionality shows that Black women and other marginalised groups face compounded exclusion through race, class, and gender (Engelbrecht 2020; Mzangwa 2019). These perspectives demonstrate that apartheid diplomacy's legacy is not only historical but continues to shape the present. Persistent inequities in funding, representation, and culture highlight the need for deeper reforms based on redistribution, cultural change, and intersectional accountability. Marx and Weber's class theory provides a critical foundation for analysing social stratification and its impact on higher education. Marx's concept of class struggle highlights how economic disparities continue to shape access to quality education, with the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat underscoring persistent inequities (Daoxin 2020; Manna 2024). Weber's notion of life chances reveals how systemic stratification perpetuates cycles of inequality, limiting opportunities for disadvantaged groups and constraining their access to institutional resources (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019). These perspectives show how socioeconomic status and privilege shape academic experiences, decisions, and opportunities in higher education. Yet, diplomacy toward equity has yielded mixed results (Rammbuda 2023; Roueff 2024). Collaborative governance often faces resistance and power imbalances, while academic interactions mirror apartheid-era gatekeeping and exclusion (Beckmann 2016; Mzangwa 2019).

Crenshaw's intersectionality framework adds further nuance by showing how compounded inequities across race, gender, class, language, disability, and migration interact (Vohra-Gupta et al. 2022). These dynamics silence African and feminist epistemologies and perpetuate epistemic violence (Roueff 2024; P. Saunders 2001; de Clercq 2020). Intersectionality reframes student mobilisations and curriculum reform as transformative practices that resist exclusion and seek structural change. It emphasises equity in race, gender, and knowledge production within South Africa's postcolonial context. South Africa's experience reflects broader post-colonial struggles to address historical injustice and promote inclusion in higher education (Batisai et al. 2022). Comparative evidence shows that many systems have adopted equity-oriented reforms to expand access and

representation. India's affirmative action for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes increases access to elite institutions and challenges caste hierarchies (Nandi and Pathak 2024; Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto 2024). Brazil's quotas for Afro-Brazilians and Indigenous students improve representation in public universities, while the University for All Program (ProUni) extends access for low-income students in private institutions (Heringer 2024; Lee 2024). Malaysia's Bumiputera policies and institutions such as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) prioritise access for historically disadvantaged groups (Warikoo and Allen 2019). In the United States, affirmative action and financial aid programmes such as Pell Grants aim to improve access for underrepresented and low-income students (Mokgotho et al. 2023). Australia's Indigenous education initiatives, including targeted scholarships and support services, seek to expand participation and retention among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Nakata et al. 2017; Thackrah et al. 2021), while New Zealand's policies emphasise Māori and Pasifika inclusion through culturally responsive curricula and dedicated funding streams (Krzyzosiak and Stewart 2019; Salahshour 2020; Everatt et al. 2025). These global cases reveal both parallels and divergences with South Africa's trajectory.

India's caste-based affirmative action and Brazil's racial quotas institutionalise inclusion through targeted policies, yet both face debates about meritocracy and legitimacy, echoing South Africa's own contestations over equity and excellence (Nandi and Pathak 2024; Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto 2024; Heringer 2024; Lee 2024). Malaysia's Bumiputera policies highlight how affirmative action can entrench ethnic privilege if not carefully balanced, offering a cautionary contrast to South Africa's equity agenda (Warikoo and Allen 2019). In the United States, affirmative action has been repeatedly challenged in courts, underscoring the fragility of reforms when political will and institutional accountability waver (Mokgotho et al. 2023). Australia's experience illustrates the importance of sustained institutional support to ensure Indigenous student success (Thackrah et al. 2021; Durmush et al. 2024), while New Zealand demonstrates how embedding Indigenous knowledge systems into curricula can advance epistemic justice (Salahshour 2020; Everatt et al. 2025). A synthesis of these examples indicates that while education can serve as a tool of inclusion, reforms are always contested, context-dependent, and vulnerable to reversal. Analysis of apartheid diplomacy within this global context shows that South Africa's experience is part of a wider international transformation agenda, but also uniquely shaped by apartheid's institutionalisation of exclusion. This comparative lens clarifies both opportunities and limits: global models provide inspiration, yet South Africa's distinct legacy requires reforms that balance equity with institutional credibility, ensuring inclusion strengthens rather than weakens the system. Higher education thus becomes a space for negotiating justice, equity, and global competitiveness.

South Africa has made progress in reducing inequalities since the end of apartheid. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has expanded access for low-income students (Mokgotho et al. 2023). The Higher Education Act of 1997 provided a legal framework for inclusion and redress (Pant and Sharma 2024). University mergers were introduced to reduce apartheid-era divisions and promote collaboration across institutions (Walton and Engelbrecht 2024; Batisai et al. 2022). Leadership programmes such as the Women in Leadership and Mentoring Programme have improved representation and begun addressing gender gaps, particularly for Black women (Rampersad 2024). Despite these reforms, significant gaps remain. Financial exclusion persists as rising costs outpace available support (Mokgotho et al. 2023). Infrastructure inequalities continue, with historically advantaged universities retaining better facilities and resources (Cooper 2019; Nandi and Pathak 2024). This limits the competitiveness of under-resourced institutions and reinforces hierarchies of prestige and research output. High dropout rates among marginalised stu-

dents further reflect limited academic support, language barriers, and weak institutional integration. From a Weberian perspective, these patterns reflect status closure, where institutional cultures and credentialing systems privilege some groups while excluding others. Gender inequalities also persist, particularly in leadership, where women, especially Black women, remain underrepresented (Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto 2024; Warikoo and Allen 2019). Crenshaw's intersectionality framework shows how race, class, and gender combine to deepen disadvantage (Roueff 2024; P. Saunders 2001). These challenges indicate that apartheid diplomacy's legacy continues in new forms of exclusion, requiring structural, intersectional, and epistemic interventions (Wheeler and Wiese 2025). Marxist analysis highlights unequal resource distribution, while Weberian and intersectional perspectives explain how privilege is reproduced. Reducing entrenched inequities and strengthening South Africa's global competitiveness requires reforms that build a more inclusive higher education system.

Addressing systemic disparities requires recognising historical injustice and committing to transformation. Apartheid diplomacy, defined as embedding exclusionary structures and epistemic hierarchies in higher education, must be reframed as equity oriented diplomacy (Cooper 2019; Ainscow 2020). This requires reforms that dismantle privilege and embed inclusion in governance, curricula, and leadership. Equity focused hiring, gender parity programmes, and curriculum decolonisation are key pathways (Mokgotho et al. 2023; Albertus 2019). Student movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall have advanced debates on decolonisation and equity, positioning higher education as a site of resistance and transformation (Muyambi and Ahiaku 2025; Ainscow 2020). These movements show how activism challenges institutional inertia and demands accountability. From a Marxist perspective, reform requires redistribution of educational resources to support historically disadvantaged universities. Weber's status closure highlights the need to dismantle credentialing hierarchies and institutional barriers. Crenshaw's intersectionality framework shows that reforms must address overlapping exclusions across race, class, gender, language, and disability (P. Saunders 2001; Mabokela and Mlambo 2017). These perspectives show that equity requires structural redistribution, cultural change, and epistemic justice (Majee and Ress 2018; Engelbrecht 2020). Comparative evidence from India, Brazil, Malaysia, and the United States shows that equity-oriented reforms expand access but face challenges of legitimacy and sustainability (Nandi and Pathak 2024; Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto 2024; Heringer 2024; Lee 2024; Warikoo and Allen 2019; Mokgotho et al. 2023). In India, affirmative action policies have broadened access but continue to provoke debates about meritocracy and caste privilege (Nandi and Pathak 2024; Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto 2024). Brazil's racial quotas and ProUni programme have improved representation, yet critics question their long-term sustainability and impact on institutional standards (Heringer 2024; Lee 2024). Malaysia's Bumiputera policies illustrate how affirmative action can entrench ethnic privilege if not carefully balanced (Warikoo and Allen 2019), offering a cautionary contrast to South Africa's equity agenda.

In the United States, affirmative action and financial aid programmes such as Pell Grants have expanded opportunities, but repeated legal challenges underscore the fragility of reforms when political will and institutional accountability waver (Mokgotho et al. 2023). A synthesis of these cases indicates that while education can serve as a tool of inclusion, reforms are always contested, context-dependent, and vulnerable to reversal. In South Africa, balancing inclusion with institutional credibility requires embedding equity as a core principle. This tension between equity and legitimacy is not unique to South Africa but is sharpened by apartheid diplomacy's legacy, which institutionalised exclusion more deeply than in many other contexts. Global comparisons highlight both opportunities and limits: they provide inspiration for reform but also caution against assuming universal solutions.

5. Strengths

A key strength of this study is its clear operationalisation of apartheid diplomacy as a structural and epistemic framework. It defines apartheid diplomacy as the use of education to entrench racial hierarchy, reproduce class domination, and suppress indigenous knowledge. This operationalisation provides a strong conceptual anchor for analysing higher education inequities in South Africa. The analysis also offers historical depth by tracing how apartheid-era diplomatic strategies shaped governance, resource allocation, and knowledge systems. An interdisciplinary approach strengthens the discussion by integrating sociology, political history, and education. The consistent use of Marxist, Weberian, and intersectional lenses ensures theory is directly applied to interpret findings, enhancing analytical coherence and depth.

6. Limitations

The South Africa focus limits generalisability. Reliance on local case studies reduces comparative insight. Although global examples are included, the analysis remains largely centered on South Africa, which restricts international applicability. As a scoping review, the work synthesises existing literature rather than generating new empirical data, thereby limiting evidentiary depth.

7. Implications of Study Findings

This research has important implications for understanding and transforming higher education in South Africa. By defining apartheid diplomacy as the use of education to entrench racial hierarchy, reproduce class domination, and suppress indigenous knowledge, the framework provides a conceptual anchor that moves beyond description. It demonstrates that inequities in access, representation, and resources are outcomes of deliberate policy design rather than chance. The analysis highlights the value of integrating Marxist, Weberian, and intersectional perspectives to explain persistent structural and epistemic inequalities. It underscores the need for substantive reforms such as equity focused hiring, curriculum decolonisation, and targeted funding to dismantle entrenched privilege. Higher education is positioned as a diplomatic arena where equity, inclusion, and epistemic justice must be negotiated. This reinforces that transformation is necessary both to address historical injustices and to strengthen South Africa's global competitiveness.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis demonstrates that apartheid-era policies continue to shape South African higher education, reinforcing inequalities in access, representation, and resources. These inequities are not incidental but stem from enduring structural systems that persist in new forms. Grounded in class theory and informed by Marxist, Weberian, and intersectional perspectives, the findings highlight how historical hierarchies continue to influence contemporary institutions. Transforming higher education requires equity-driven reforms that address these legacies. Policy reform should prioritise inclusive access, sustainable funding, and leadership development that advances gender and racial parity. Advocacy and awareness initiatives are needed to challenge institutional cultures, alongside interdisciplinary research to support evidence-based change.

9. Global Context and SDG Alignment

By aligning with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), South Africa's higher education reforms can be positioned as part of a global movement toward equity and inclusion. This connection enhances the international context and policy relevance of the analysis, demonstrating that dismantling apartheid-era hierarchies contributes

not only to national transformation but also to global development priorities. Linking reforms to the SDGs underscores the responsibility of multiple stakeholders to advance inclusive education and reduce inequality in ways that resonate beyond South Africa.

Practical recommendations by stakeholder group include:

- Government: Expand funding for historically disadvantaged universities; strengthen accountability mechanisms for equity targets; support land and housing policies that reduce spatial segregation.
- Universities: Decolonise curricula by embedding African knowledge systems; diversify leadership structures; adopt transparent recruitment and promotion practices.
- Faculty: Implement inclusive pedagogies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI); mentor under-represented students and junior scholars; challenge everyday practices of exclusion in academic culture.
- Students: Continue to drive transformation through activism (#RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall); participate in governance structures; advocate for equitable access and representation.
- Civil society: Monitor progress on transformation goals; build partnerships with universities to support community engagement; amplify voices of marginalised groups.
- Global partners: Share comparative lessons from equity-oriented reforms in contexts such as Canada, Brazil, and Finland; support collaborative research and exchange programs that strengthen South Africa's global academic positioning.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci15060361/s1, Table S1: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) Checklist; Table S2: Fifteen (15) included studies were published between 2017 and 2025.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

DI	Differentiated Instruction
JBI	Joanna Briggs Institute
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
PAGER	Pattern, Advances, Gaps, Evidence for Practice, Research Recommendations
PCC	Population–Concept–Context
PRISMA	ScR Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews
ProUni	University for All Program
SASA	South African Sociological Association
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UiTM	Universiti Teknologi MARA

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