

The Onslaught of Academic Capitalism in the Neoliberal Knowledge Economy: From a Philosophical Discussion to a Philosophical Exploration for South African Universities

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Abstract. This paper critically examines the entrenchment of academic capitalism in South African universities within the broader neoliberal knowledge economy. Using case studies of three South African universities, it explores how market-driven imperatives have reshaped knowledge production, governance, and academic labor. By engaging with neoliberal and academic capitalism discourse, the paper interrogates the tensions between knowledge as a public good and its commodification. In a post-apartheid South Africa where fair access to education is still a major concern, the commodification of knowledge undercuts the long-standing function of universities as repositories of public knowledge and democratic engagement. The demands of global ranking and the need for financial viability, alongside the obligation to promote the general welfare, draw attention to the ways that commodification worsens inequality by giving marketable research and elite collaborations precedence over studies that focus on the community. This research highlights the inconsistencies in neoliberal higher education reforms and advocates for rethinking alternatives that put social justice and epistemic diversity first by elevating the voices of scholars, students, and politicians. Through an analysis of government policies and university-specific funding structures, this paper highlights the erosion of academic freedom, the rise of managerialism, and the marginalization of African epistemologies. It argues that while neoliberal restructuring has improved efficiency and global competitiveness, it has also deepened inequalities, restricted critical scholarship, and prioritized commercially viable research over socially transformative knowledge production. The paper concludes by proposing alternative governance models, funding approaches, and curriculum strategies that resist the full marketization of South African universities.

Keywords: academic capitalism, neoliberalism, knowledge economy, governance, epistemic justice, marketisation, African epistemologies, public good.

Introduction

South African universities are undergoing a profound transformation under the influence of the neoliberal knowledge economy, where funding cuts, privatization, and performance-based governance are reshaping academic institutions (Ramezani, 2024). The transition towards academic capitalism—where universities operate as corporate entities competing for external revenue—has raised concerns about epistemic justice, the commodification of knowledge, and the erosion of public higher education (Ndlovu & Woldegiorgis, 2024). Neoliberalism, which is characterized by market-driven policies, privatization, and reduced state funding, has reshaped the governance, curriculum, and

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epistemological foundations of African universities (Mamdani, 2007; Mbembe, 2016). To put this more poignantly,

In an African context, the realities of indigenous African knowledge have not been widely recognised or fully considered in the development of [open educational resources] OER to accommodate the decolonisation of learning content. Africanisation involves incorporating, adapting, and integrating other cultures into and through African visions to provide the dynamism, evolution, and flexibility [that is] so essential in the global village (Mncube, 2024:420)

If South African universities continue to embrace neoliberal academic capitalism, they risk becoming mere knowledge factories that serve corporate interests. However, by implementing alternative models rooted in decolonial and social just frameworks, universities can reclaim their role as critical intellectual spaces that foster social transformation and inclusive development (Le Grange, 2023). The shift to neoliberal academic capitalism has led to the commodification of knowledge, where universities prioritize partnerships with corporations, patentable research, and revenue generation over their traditional role as the producers and repositories of public knowledge (Jansen, 2017a; Motala & Vally, 2020). For instance, the rise of private funding and industry collaborations, which are more visibly seen at institutions such as the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University, has raised concerns about the erosion of academic autonomy and the marginalization of disciplines that do not align with market demands (Le Grange, 2020). Critics argue that this trend risks transforming universities into "knowledge factories" that serve corporate interests rather than institutions that address pressing social inequalities and the developmental challenges of South Africa (Badat, 2021). This neoliberal trajectory exacerbates existing inequities, as historically disadvantaged institutions struggle to compete for resources, further entrenching the legacy of apartheid-era disparities (Bozalek & Boughey, 2021).

The purpose of this research is to argue that alternative models rooted in decolonial and socially just frameworks offer a pathway for South African universities to reclaim their transformative potential. Decolonial approaches emphasize the need to dismantle and decenter Eurocentric epistemologies and center Indigenous Knowledge systems to foster curricula and research agendas that reflect the lived realities of marginalized communities (Heleta, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). For example, the University of the Free State's initiatives to integrate African philosophies and languages into its academic programs demonstrate how decolonial practices can challenge neoliberal hegemony (Jansen, 2017b). Similarly, socially just frameworks advocate for participatory governance, equitable resource distribution, and community-engaged scholarship, ensuring that universities contribute to inclusive development rather than profit-driven agendas (Vally & Motala, 2021). By embracing these alternatives, South African universities can resist the pressures of academic capitalism and reassert their role as critical intellectual spaces that drive social transformation and address the structural inequalities perpetuated by colonialism and apartheid (Badat, 2021; Bozalek & Boughey, 2021).

This paper addresses these concerns by examining three key research questions:

1. How have neoliberal policies reshaped South African higher education governance and its funding structures?
2. What are the effects of market-driven research priorities and managerialism on academic labor and knowledge production?
3. What alternative models can be used to reclaim universities as spaces of critical intellectual engagement and social transformation?

By critically analyzing these questions, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on higher education reform in South Africa, by advocating for strategies that resist

the full-scale marketization of universities while fostering epistemic diversity and social justice.

Objectives of the research:

- To critically examine the tension between knowledge as a public good and its practical commodification.
- To analyze the resulting contradictions this tension creates within the neoliberal framework of South African higher education.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in three interrelated critical theories: academic capitalism, neoliberalism, and epistemic justice. Slaughter and Leslie (1997) conceptualize academic capitalism as the process through which universities engage in entrepreneurial activities, corporate partnerships, and commercialized research production. At its core, academic capitalism reflects the market-driven transformation of higher education institutions, where knowledge production and dissemination are increasingly shaped by economic imperatives (Zavale & Schneiderberg, 2024). This framework highlights the marketisation of knowledge, where universities prioritize research and academic programs with commercial value over those that serve the public good. Consequently, universities function as entrepreneurial institutions that adopt corporate structures, engage in profit-driven industry collaborations, and emphasize performance metrics, competition, and financial sustainability. Academic capitalism also manifests through the commodification of education, with academic programs designed to attract fee-paying students because faculties are incentivized to secure external funding. Additionally, the rise of contract-based, adjunct, and part-time academic employment marks a shift away from traditional tenured positions, reflecting a broader trend towards precarious labor in academia (Hlatshwayo, 2022).

Neoliberalism, as a political and economic doctrine, underscores the primacy of free markets, deregulation, privatization, and minimal state intervention in economic affairs (Slobodian, 2018). Rooted in classical liberal thought, neoliberalism gained dominance in the late 20th century through the policies of leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. A key tenet of neoliberalism is market fundamentalism—the belief that free markets (including the area of knowledge production), yield the most efficient allocation of resources (Olssen & Peters, 2005). This is closely linked to the privatization and deregulation of public services, including higher education, where funding models increasingly shift toward private sources. Furthermore, neoliberalism promotes managerialism, the application of corporate management principles to public institutions, further leading to performance-based funding mechanisms and increased bureaucratic control. Higher education institutions under neoliberal governance are compelled to operate within a global knowledge economy, which prioritizes research and teaching that aligns with market demands rather than local development needs (Williamson et al., 2020). Consequently, universities that undergo corporatization treat knowledge as a commodity, with academic institutions becoming enterprises competing for global rankings and financial resources.

This can be summed as,

The argument critiques the Eurocentric notion of the universality of knowledge systems and sources. The concept of a universal and monolithic source of knowledge poses a challenge to epistemic freedom as it fails to recognise knowledge generated within and from a particular locality, especially from the Global South (Ndlovu & Woldegiorgis, 2024:3).

Epistemic justice as introduced by Miranda Fricker (2007), critiques the systemic marginalization and exclusion of certain knowledge systems, reinforcing dominant epistemic

hierarchies. Fricker (2007) distinguishes between testimonial injustice—where certain voices are discredited due to prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice—where marginalized groups lack the conceptual tools to articulate their experiences. Testimonial injustice manifests when the knowledge produced by indigenous, feminist, and other marginalized communities is sidelined, reinforcing epistemic exclusion (Pitasse Fragoso, 2022). Hermeneutical injustice, on the other hand, results in the invisibility of knowledge systems when marginalized groups lack the necessary interpretative resources. Additionally, coloniality of knowledge persists, whereby epistemic structures established during colonialism continue to privilege Western epistemologies while subjugating and excluding African epistemologies and Indigenous Knowledge traditions. Universities often perpetuate these exclusions through curriculum design, research priorities, and funding allocations, thereby institutionalizing epistemic injustice.

Academic capitalism describes the market-oriented transformation of universities through commercialization, privatization, and competitive funding models (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). It is intrinsically linked to neoliberalism, which promotes reduced state funding, increased corporate involvement, and performance-based evaluation (Harvey, 2005), ultimately leading to epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). These dynamics are further reinforced by New Public Management (NPM), which integrates corporate managerialism into university governance and consequently diminishes academic autonomy (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Similarly, global university rankings incentivize institutions to prioritize research aligned with Western epistemic standards (Marginson, 2022). Using this theoretical framework, the paper examines the impact of these neoliberal forces on South African universities through selected case studies, which are supplemented by comparative perspectives from the broader Sub-Saharan region. However, to fully grasp these dynamics, it is essential to first explore the historical context of higher education in South Africa.

Method

The method for this conceptual study is framed against the backdrop of reviewing existing texts on knowledge creation, university policies, scholarly publications in journals, and public university reports as primary data sets. The study uses a qualitative, theoretical research approach based on documentary analysis (Pietersen et al., 2025). Instead of testing preconceived notions, documents are chosen and analyzed to foster comprehension of the topic in this research. Using an inductive method similar to grounded theory, the study focuses on the abundance of literature on academic capitalism knowledge production that is founded in neoliberal knowledge economy formations and frameworks, thereby allowing themes to arise and unfold from the literature review's data. This method is also flexible enough to capture unanticipated findings and recommendations.

Literature Review

Historical Context of the South African Higher Education System

The neoliberalisation of South African universities must be understood within the broader historical evolution of the country's higher education sector, which has been shaped by colonialism, apartheid, and post-apartheid reforms (Cloete, 2014). Each of these phases has left enduring structural legacies, influencing contemporary challenges related to access, equity, and knowledge production. These historical developments have defined institutional policies, curricular structures, and epistemological orientations, with each phase entrenching racial exclusion, epistemic dependency, and economic stratification.

According to Mukaddam (2024), between 1652 and 1948, South Africa's higher education institutions were established within a colonial framework that primarily served European settlers while systematically excluding indigenous African populations. Early institutions such as the South African College (later the University of Cape Town, founded in 1829) and Victoria College (later Stellenbosch University, founded in 1866) were designed to educate white settlers, with Black students largely denied access. These universities modeled themselves after British and Dutch institutions, reinforcing Eurocentric knowledge systems while marginalizing African intellectual traditions. Although missionary institutions such as the Lovedale College (founded in 1841) provided limited education to Black students, their focus remained on religious instruction and vocational training rather than higher academic pursuits.

Under apartheid (1948–1994), the South African government formalized racial segregation in higher education through discriminatory legislation that entrenched systemic inequality. The state established racially categorized universities that included the University of the North (Turfloop) for Black students, the University of Zululand for Zulu speaking Black students, the University of the Western Cape for Coloured students, and the University of Durban-Westville for Indian students. These institutions were structurally inferior, underfunded, and designed to limit access to critical academic disciplines for non-white students.

The transition to democracy in 1994 initiated significant higher education reforms aimed at redressing racial inequalities, restructuring institutions, and introducing market-oriented policies (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019). The Higher Education Act of 1997 (Republic of South Africa, 1997) sought to unify the fragmented higher education sector into a single, non-racial system. This era also witnessed large-scale institutional mergers in the 2000s, as the government consolidated historically white and black universities. However, alongside these transformations, neoliberal policies began to take place, driven by growing financial constraints and the global shift towards market-driven education. Universities increasingly adopted cost-sharing mechanisms (i.e., tuition fees, private funding), market-driven curricula that prioritized STEM and business disciplines, and corporate governance models, all of which signaled a shift toward neoliberal restructuring (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). The following section examines case studies that illustrate the impact of neoliberalism on South African higher education.

The Neoliberal Restructuring of South African Universities: Case Studies

Since the late 20th century, neoliberalism has fundamentally reshaped higher education systems worldwide, including in South Africa. The increasing marketization, privatization, and corporatization of universities has transformed them from institutions of critical inquiry and public good into entities governed by financial imperatives, managerial control, and performance metrics. In South Africa, these shifts are particularly complex due to the country's historical inequalities and the post-apartheid mandate to democratize education while simultaneously aligning the sector with global economic demands (Cele et al., 2025). Neoliberal restructuring in South African universities is evident in multiple ways: the transition from state-funded education to cost-sharing models, the commercialization of research, the rise of managerialism, and the growing precarity of both students and academic labor. These trends have not only altered governance structures and financial models but have also shaped epistemic priorities, often favoring market-driven disciplines over critical humanities and social sciences. Moreover, the increasing reliance on tuition fees and external funding has deepened social inequalities (Pietersen & Plaatjies, 2024), as this restricts access for historically disadvantaged communities and reinforces exclusionary academic structures. In other words,

Despite the official abolition of apartheid, South Africa's educational system still functions as a catalyst for prejudices we still see in higher education spaces. These sentiments suggest that even with the formal end of Apartheid in South Africa, socioeconomic inequality and the “haves” and “have-nots” are still maintained and perpetuated in many ways through the education system (Cele, Pietersen, & Gaillard, 2025:245).

At the University of Cape Town (UCT), global ranking systems such as QS and THE significantly influence institutional priorities, thereby pushing research agendas towards those that are commercially viable and have international competitiveness. The university's Research Incentive Program disproportionately allocates funding to STEM fields and high-impact publications, often at the expense of African studies and critical humanities. For instance, while UCT's African Centre for Cities (ACC) engages in global urban policy collaborations, it marginalizes indigenous urban planning knowledge.

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) has similarly embraced a mixed funding model, leading to increased privatization and financial barriers for students. Tuition hikes have exacerbated student exclusion, particularly among working-class populations. While Wits actively partners with the private sector, especially in mining and finance, for funding under the guise of minimizing the financial burden of students, the #FeesMustFall protests (2015–2017) exposed contradictions in the university's stance, as it publicly positions itself as being progressive while maintaining exclusionary financial policies.

Meanwhile, the University of South Africa (UNISA), which is a comprehensive open-distance and e-learning institution, has undergone extensive corporatization, resulting in the casualization of academic labor. The growing reliance on contract-based lecturers who have minimal benefits reflects a broader trend of precarious employment. Moreover, UNISA's performance-based funding model prioritizes publication output over pedagogical engagement, shifting the focus from student-centered learning to administrative efficiency.

State funding for South African universities has plummeted from 70% in 1994 to 38% in 2024, accelerating the commercialization of research and tuition fee hikes. The increasing influence of private-sector interests in university governance further reinforces corporate-aligned knowledge production and the deepening neoliberal entrenchment in the sector.

Across the Global South, various case studies illustrate the pervasive influence of neoliberalism in higher education. For example, Makerere University in Uganda has become increasingly dependent on foreign donor funding, which has resulted in externally driven research agendas that often overlook national development priorities (Kaguhangire-Barifaijo et al., 2019). In the same vein, Mamdani (2007) provides a critical analysis of Makerere University's neoliberal reforms, highlighting the tensions between academic freedom and commercialized education. The push for cost-sharing mechanisms and privatized programs has resulted in disparities in access to higher education. This shift has reinforced the marketisation of research, privileging fields aligned with global health and development funding while marginalizing the social sciences and Indigenous Knowledge production.

However, not all institutions have fully succumbed to neoliberal imperatives. The University of Ghana, for instance, has actively resisted academic capitalism by establishing state-supported open-access publishing platforms, thereby mitigating the exclusionary effects of Western journal paywalls (Aryeh-Adjei et al., 2022). Furthermore, government-backed initiatives ensure sustained funding for African Studies and Indigenous Knowledge research despite prevailing market-driven pressures. Neoliberalism in higher education is rooted in policies that prioritize the efficiency, competition, and commodification of knowledge (Zezeza, 2016). However, Connell (2007) argues that this paradigm shift marginalizes alternative epistemologies, particularly those from the Global South. The transformation of

African universities under neoliberalism has led to the erosion of public funding, a growing reliance on external donors, and the marketization of knowledge production (Tikly, 2004)

In South America, Brazil's public university model has similarly resisted full-scale privatization by maintaining state-funded, tuition-free higher education (Schwartzman, 2020). The Brazilian model highlights how progressive taxation can serve as a viable alternative to excessive dependence on private investment, ensuring broader access to education while safeguarding academic independence.

South African universities: Where to from now?

The future trajectory of South African universities remains uncertain as they navigate the tensions between neoliberal imperatives and the need for socially responsive higher education (Heleta & Dilraj, 2024). While market-driven policies have enhanced global competitiveness and financial sustainability, they have also exacerbated inequalities, undermined academic freedom, and marginalized Indigenous Knowledge systems (Woldegiorgis, 2024). This raises critical questions about the role of universities in fostering inclusive development, epistemic justice, and transformative scholarship. As South African universities stand at this crossroad, there is an urgent need to explore alternative governance, funding models, and curricula that resist the unchecked commercialization of knowledge while ensuring equitable access and intellectual autonomy. Mbembe (2016) discusses how South African universities have struggled with neoliberal policies that have exacerbated inequalities, leading to student protests such as #FeesMustFall. The corporatization of higher education institutions has placed financial burdens on students and staff alike. The following sections explore possible pathways for reform and resistance within the South African higher education landscape.

The first step to addressing these challenges is through resistance and the adoption of alternative models. To safeguard knowledge as a public good, South African university must actively oppose full-scale privatization (Cole & Heinecke, 2020). This can be achieved by expanding publicly funded research grants and introducing progressive funding mechanisms, such as imposing wealth taxes on corporations to finance higher education. Additionally, reversing the decline in public investment is critical, with state funding needing to increase from the current 38% to at least 60% of university income. This could take the form of a "Knowledge as a Public Good" tax, which is a progressive corporate levy requiring companies that benefit from university research to contribute to public education. Moreover, direct state subsidies for research and teaching in socially relevant fields, including African Studies, Philosophy, and Indigenous Knowledge should be expanded. Ensuring equitable access to higher education is also imperative, necessitating the expansion of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to cover more low-income students thereby preventing tuition-based exclusion (Mokgotho et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the higher education sector should embrace a decolonial approach to knowledge production by incorporating African epistemologies and indigenous research methodologies. Establishing African-led academic journals would serve to counteract Eurocentric publication biases and promote local scholarship (Knaus & Rogers-Ard, 2023). This idea can be summarized as follows,

...decolonisation as a process to conduct research with Indigenous communities in which Indigenous voices and epistemologies are the centre in the research process. Thus, we argue for a global need to transform doctoral education, with African centrism leading the way towards a blended local and global approach to knowledge construction. We recognise that varied attempts to transform and decolonise have met with limited successes in part because institutions often engage in what Ahmed (2006) refers to as speech acts, wherein decoloniality is

proclaimed without any sustained efforts at systems change (Gumbo et al., 2024: 1612).

Universities should also strengthen democratic governance by restructuring decision-making processes to include academics (Langeveldt et al., 2023), students, and community representatives. For instance, the University of the Western Cape (UWC) has implemented community-based research funding models as a means of reducing reliance on corporate sponsorship. Collectively, these strategies contribute to resisting market-driven imperatives while fostering inclusive and socially responsive higher education institutions (Pietersen, 2023).

It is also recommended that alternative funding models that look beyond neoliberal markets be identified and implemented. These may include state-supported open access publishing through the establishment of government-funded open access journals for African scholarship, and a government mandate that publicly funded research be freely accessible to challenge Western academic paywalls. South African universities are encouraged to be part of African-led research consortia by developing regional university partnerships such as the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), to pool resources and reduce reliance on foreign grants and expand funding for decolonial knowledge production. Put differently,

Part of a commitment to rethinking curriculum design demands progressively and decolonially repoliticising the space of academic freedom to be a site of critical, epistemic and productive conversations and dialogues between the academics and students, in thinking in dialectical terms on the kind of curricula that is required outside and beyond the needs of the neoliberal university (Hlatshwayo, 2022:10).

Another step towards a more liberated South African university sector lies in research priorities, particularly through resisting epistemic marketization. One proposal is to center African epistemologies in research funding by allocating at least 40% of national research grants to African and decolonial knowledge production (Cross & Govender, 2021). This could be achieved through the establishment of Indigenous Knowledge Research Chairs at every major South African university and requiring that all publicly funded institutions integrate African languages into their research dissemination. For instance, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) has launched a multilingual research initiative that integrates isiZulu into academic work, thereby expanding epistemic access beyond English-dominated publications.

Furthermore, it is recommended that the governance and academic freedom of post-apartheid South African universities be democratized (Phatlane, 2021). This requires a shift from corporate managerialism to democratic decision-making, including granting Faculty Senates voting power over budget allocations. Ensuring student representation on university councils would also help to align policies with social justice goals. Similarly, the inclusion of Community Advisory Boards comprising of grassroots intellectuals and indigenous scholars in university management would help shape research priorities. The University of the Western Cape (UWC), for example, has resisted neoliberal restructuring by prioritizing community-based education and maintaining relatively lower tuition fees as compared to UCT and Wits. Additionally, its Community Engagement Policy ensures that its research serves marginalized communities rather than merely catering to elite global rankings (Vally, 2023).

Recommendation

To address the entrenchment of academic capitalism in South African universities, this paper recommends a multi-faceted approach that prioritizes decoloniality, social justice, and the reclamation of higher education as a public good (Pietersen et al., 2023). Firstly, universities should adopt alternative governance models that emphasize participatory decision-making and reduce the influence of managerialism to ensure that academic staff and

students have a meaningful voice in institutional policies. Secondly, funding structures must be reimagined to reduce reliance on corporate partnerships and market-driven research and must include increased government investment in public higher education to support socially transformative knowledge production. Lastly, curricula should be redesigned to center African epistemologies and Indigenous Knowledge systems, thereby challenging the dominance of Eurocentric paradigms and fostering critical scholarship that addresses local and continental challenges. Additionally, policies should be implemented to protect academic freedom and resist the commodification of knowledge, ensuring that research prioritizes public interest over commercial viability.

South African universities should collaborate with civil society, community organizations, and other African institutions to develop inclusive, contextually relevant strategies that resist neoliberal pressures and advance the role of higher education in fostering social transformation and equitable development. Collectively, these recommendations aim to create a more just and equitable academic environment that serves the needs of South African society while resisting the pervasive influence of academic capitalism.

Conclusions

South African universities must consciously resist full neoliberalization by embracing public funding, democratic governance, and epistemic justice. The proposed policy shifts - expanding state support, re-centering Indigenous Knowledge, democratizing governance, and protecting academic labor; provide a roadmap for reclaiming higher education as a site of social transformation rather than one of corporate marketization. If South African universities continue down the neoliberal path, they risk becoming mere knowledge factories serving market forces. However, by implementing these alternative models, universities can reclaim their role as critical intellectual spaces that advance decolonial and socially just futures. South African universities are undergoing a profound transformation under the influence of the neoliberal knowledge economy, where funding cuts, privatization, and performance-based governance are reshaping academic institutions. However, alternative models rooted in decolonial and socially just frameworks offer a pathway for universities to reclaim their transformative potential. This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on higher education reform in South Africa through advocating for strategies that resist the full-scale marketization of universities while fostering epistemic diversity and social justice.

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