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EMPOWERING RURAL STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA: INTEGRATING SOCIAL JUSTICE, ENTREPRENEURSHIP, AND 21ST CENTURY SKILLS INTO TRANSFORMATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULA

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Abstract

The study investigates the integration of social justice, entrepreneurship, and 21st-century skills into higher education curricula to empower rural students in South Africa. The study reviews the systematic literature for peer-reviewed published papers between 2000 and 2024 on how curriculum transformation could address socio-economic inequality problems while including a learning skills approach. An analysis of 78 relevant sources was undertaken, filtered through PRISMA guidelines, whereby thematic analysis was used to deduce the trends with regards to curricular design, pedagogical approaches, and policy frameworks. It was found that socially responsive curricula imparting entrepreneurial education and digital competencies provide enhanced student agency, employability, and community engagement. However, the situation continues to be hampered by old barriers like the digital divide, outdated teaching methodologies, and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge. The study argues that a transformative curriculum that is contextually aware, technology-oriented, and equity-based is vital for supporting rural learners. This review thus provides a conceptual underpinning for any future curriculum reform process while also adding to the scholarly conversation around decolonization of education and the pursuit of educational equity in post-apartheid South Africa.

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Introduction

Education of high quality at the higher education level remains one of the most critical determinants regarding socio-economic mobility. However, even today after the post-apartheid, some rural communities continue to experience systemic disparities that marginalise their educational and professional opportunities. Such inequalities are not limited to connectivity and geographical constraints but are extended within the curriculum which often does not engage with the lived realities of rural communities. A transformative curriculum, social justice, entrepreneurship, and 21st-century skills, can be a strong foundation for addressing these inequalities and enabling rural learners to affect how their futures unfold (Ajani, 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

Education in South Africa for centuries now has been burdened with the scars of colonial legacy in which indigenous epistemologies have been suppressed and marginal populations need exclusion (Brock-Utne, 2002; Abdi, 2013). Even with the political turn, nothing much has changed in the curriculum content and pedagogical approaches in most institutions, making these elitist and urban-centric worldviews stronger (Nyamnjoh, 2012; Joseph-Mbembe, 2016). Therefore, when it comes to rural students whose experiences and cultural identities are rarely on the classroom floor, this hardly creates much dissonance in engagement and performance as well. This is going to be addressed through not only content reformation but also through a fundamental rethinking of whose knowledge matters in academic spaces (Wa Thiong'o, 1986; Smith, 2021).

Evident now is the growing inclination toward entrepreneurship education across most parts of Africa as a strategy for socio-economic development. Scholars argue that even tailor-made entrepreneurial skills within local contexts can help spark innovation, employment opportunities, and self-reliance in under-resourced communities (Ahmed & Nwankwo, 2013; Adusei, 2016; Olutuase et al., 2023). The answer to the crisis heading up in South Africa today is to become self-reliant and develop an entrepreneurial spirit, which is a thin possibility here because of formal job opportunities outside the reach of these communities. Entrepreneurship education has to be seriously incorporated into the curriculum and not just offered as

an add-on, as it is said by Ajani, Khumatake, and Gamede (2023) above.

Social justice in education implies more than accessing; it means recognizing historical injustices, affirming cultures, and redistributing opportunities (Gatsheni-Ndlovu, 2013; Higgs, 2012). Justice for rural learners involves solving structural constraints that target digital exclusion, language alienation, and epistemic marginalization. When social justice is applied in the curriculum, this leads to the design of learning experiences that reflect diverse identities, foster critical reflection, and nurture civic responsibility (Shizha, 2013; Mutongoza et al., 2023).

With the coming of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the urgency for students to acquire 21st-century skills—that is, critical thinking, collaborative approach, digital pedagogy, and adaptability—is growing even higher (Ajani, 2024; Ajani, 2023). While urban students may enjoy greater access to the technological infrastructures and pedagogical innovations fostering such skills, rural institutions remain in stark contrast. This deepening digital divide only serves to further entrench inequalities. Thus, a desperate necessity arises to integrate 21st-century competencies for students in rural curriculum designs; otherwise, they will simply not be ready for an increasingly dynamic world of work (Ajani, 2024; Weaver et al., 2019). Such transformations of curricula imply an appraisal of the existing best practices. Most often, the best traditional practices involving lectures do not stimulate learner agency or relate to the contexts of relevance to rural students confronted with a vast array of socio-economic concerns (Asuga et al., 2016; Du Toit, 2023). A curricular framework that focuses the learners through project-based entrepreneurial learning will promote the development of the aforementioned skills while allowing for responsiveness to the communities (Blenker et al., 2012; Mehta et al., 2011).

Thus, a decolonial perspective will be fundamental for achieving this transformation. Decolonising the curriculum implies working against the Eurocentric bias and foregrounding the African knowledge systems (Mignolo, 2012; Grosfoguel, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). A rural student, mostly grounded in indigenous traditions, brings to the table many vantage points that need to be taken advantage of rather than thrown into obscurity. The infusion of indigenous languages, local histories, and place-based learning in higher education will ensure cultural and epistemic relevance (Adegoju, 2008; Assie-Lumumba, 2012). Equally important, institutional support for such curriculum shifts is critical. Policy frameworks must

encourage inclusive curriculum design and resource allocation prioritizing rural development. This will include investment in digital infrastructure, teacher capacity-building, and collaboration across sectors (Ajani, 2024; Cloete, 2012). In the absence of such systemic commitment, the transformative intentions will remain purely rhetorical.

This study systematically reviews 78 peer-reviewed articles from the year 2000 to 2024 following the PRISMA protocols so as to illuminate trends and gaps in curriculum transformation that focus on rural empowerment. The authors applied thematic analysis to look at the intersections of social justice, entrepreneurship, and rural empowerment.

Literature Review

Transformative higher education curricula in South Africa must respond to long-standing structural inequalities inherited from the colonial and apartheid legacies. Scholars like Abdi (2013) and Brock-Utne (2002) underline the continued dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems marginalizing African epistemologies. Such frameworks typically alienate rural students with lived experiences, language, and cultural capital that formal learning environments ignore (Wa Thiong'o, 1986; Adegaju, 2008). The call for decolonising curricula has thus become core to any meaningful transformation intended for empowering marginalised learners. It has been contended by many scholars that social justice in education can be multifaceted because it involves recognition, representation, and redistribution (Fraser, 2009, cited in Shizha, 2013). Such adjustments in social justice would go a long way in correcting the legacy of rural communities being historically locked outside quality education provision and economic participation in the South African context (Gatsheni-Ndlovu, 2013; Ajani, 2024). In other words, 'a just curriculum should be challenging structural oppression and creating inclusive responsive pedagogy meeting diverse needs of rural learners' (Higgs, 2012; Mutongoza et al., 2023).

Language policy is very important and could probably make a very good agenda for social justice, but it has not received much attention before. In addition to this, since both Brock-Utne (2002) and Adegaju (2008) mention, the predominance of English and Afrikaans in higher education marginalises indigenous languages, thus alienating rural students from the realities of their education. Thereby, the use of home languages improves cognitive capabilities in addition to affirming one's cultural identity and a sense of belonging and

participation. The curriculum reforms would thus need to integrate linguistic diversity as infrastructure for equitable learning (Nyamnjoh, 2012). As a policy response to high unemployment and underdevelopment, youth and graduate unemployment, entrepreneurship education has manifested itself in South Africa (Adusei, 2016; Ajani et al., 2023). For rural students, who have limited access to formal employment, developing entrepreneurial skills tends to provide viable alternative routes to socio-economic agency (Ahmed & Nwankwo, 2013). However, entrepreneurship education must be contextually relevant to local realities through incorporating indigenous knowledge systems and tackling challenges within respective contexts. (Mehta et al., 2011; Bawuah et al., 2006). The literature suggests that while entrepreneurship education is widely promoted, it often lacks depth and contextualisation within university curricula (Olutuase et al., 2023; Agada & Pius, 2014). Ajani (2024) critiques the fragmented nature of entrepreneurship training in South African higher education, arguing for a more holistic integration that aligns with national development goals and local socio-economic dynamics. Moreover, scholars such as Du Toit (2023) and Blenker et al. (2012) advocate for entrepreneurial learning that is experiential, reflective, and grounded in real-world problem-solving—qualities often absent from traditional curricula. The imperative for 21st-century skills in higher education is closely tied to South Africa's participation in the global knowledge economy. Digital literacy, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking are increasingly seen as essential competencies (Ajani, 2024; Weaver et al., 2019). Yet, rural students often face a digital divide that limits their ability to acquire and apply such skills (Ajani, 2024; Mutongoza et al., 2023). Infrastructure deficits, teacher readiness, and socio-economic constraints compound these barriers, reinforcing existing inequalities (Ajani, 2024).

Educational technology has potential to bridge these gaps, but only when deployed in a pedagogically sound and context-sensitive manner. Ajani (2024) emphasises the importance of technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) in equipping educators to design meaningful digital learning experiences for rural students. However, without institutional support and ongoing professional development, such innovations risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative (Kiggundu, 2002; Cloete, 2012). Decolonising education is a recurring theme in the literature, underscoring the need to rethink curriculum content, design, and delivery through African lenses (Grosfoguel, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Scholars

argue for a curriculum that foregrounds African history, indigenous knowledge, and community engagement as legitimate and valuable forms of learning (Smith, 2021; Mignolo, 2012). In rural contexts, this decolonial approach can foster cultural pride, self-reliance, and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Assie-Lumumba, 2012; Mbembe, 2015).

Curriculum transformation is also a function of policy frameworks. Higher education policies in South Africa advocate increasingly for transformation and equity, but implementation has been uneven (Asuga et al., 2016; Gcelu & Marongwe, 2023). Institutional inertia, limited funding, and bureaucratic constraints made uptake more difficult, and Ajani (2024) would argue that policy and pedagogy alignment within institution leadership, particularly in resource-constrained rural environments, advocate for sustainable transformation.

A third strand of criticism is the top-down structure of curriculum design, which as a characteristic often excludes student and community voices (Kerr, 2014; George et al., 2016). Participatory curriculum development models can help ensure that rural students are not only passive recipients of knowledge, but also co-creators of that knowledge. This participatory ethos is also aligned to broader social justice principles that emphasise empowerment, relevance, and mutual respect (Du Toit, 2023; Sekerbayeva et al., 2023). Finally, the interconnectedness of entrepreneurship, social justice, and 21st-century skills is stressed by scholars in building a transformative curriculum. When such interconnectedness is established in a coherent manner, graduates produced will be economically productive while they are socially conscious and culturally grounded (Ajani, 2024; Devine & Kiggundu, 2019). However, sustaining that ideal would entail a persistent commitment, systemic reform, and rethinking of higher education within the South African context (Mamdani, 2007; Woods et al., 2022).

This literature review shows that transformative curricula are really more than interesting new ways of teaching, they are justice. It is beyond access; it calls for fundamental reconceptualization of educational values, practices, and priorities to empower rural students. The scholarship reviewed here presents a conceptual structure for understanding this complex process and advocates timely action. Transformative curriculum is not an innovation in pedagogy; it is justice as liberation. Empowering rural students, then, is more than access; it involves a complete reconceptualization of the values, practices, and priorities around education. It captures the

emotional intensity in which scholarship concerning the above hope embraces such an urgent call to action.

Transformative curriculum, it asserts, is not just a novelty in pedagogy, but it is justice. To make rural students empowered is more than access; it requires a complete reconceptualization of educational values, practices, and priorities. The reviewed scholarship provides a conceptual scaffold for understanding the complicated process without missing the urgency of action between the rural and urban education divide. This literature review shows that transformative curricula are more than pedagogical innovations; they are acts of justice. Empowering rural students means more than access: it requires fundamentally reconceptualizing the values, practices, and priorities around education. Reviewed scholarship provides a conceptual framing around understanding this complicated process and advocates action-now-in bridging the rural-urban divide in education.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) method for establishing how integrating social justice, entrepreneurship, and 21st-century skills in transformative higher-higher education curricula can empower rural students in South Africa. A systematic method was preferred because of its rigour and transparency and for its ability to synthesise and draw conclusions from a broad range of evidence across diverse contexts (Jaakkola 2020; MacInnis 2011). The study employs this methodology to formulate a generally accepted conceptual framework deeply rooted in contemporary scholarly discourse.

The review followed Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 to attain methodological transparency and replicability. PRISMA is a structured framework for the identification of literature, screening, assessment of eligibility and inclusion, thereby enhancing credibility of the given evidence (Page et al., 2021). A PRISMA flow diagram was prepared to illustrate the selection process, representing in a diagrammatic way the systematic filtering of sources. Sources were gathered through a comprehensive search in all prominent academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. The search terms were carefully selected and combined using Boolean operators. Core terms included "transformative curriculum", "rural education", "entrepreneurship education", "social justice in education", "21st-century skills", and

"higher education South Africa". The search has been limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reputable conference proceedings published from January 2000 to March 2024.

Eligible studies must (1) focus on the context of higher education in South Africa and the continent as a whole; (2) involve rural or marginalised student populations; (3) discuss at least one main theme of the study: social justice, entrepreneurship education, or 21st-century skills; and (4) be published in English. Ineligible studies included those pertaining only to primary or secondary education, theoretical papers not related to rural empowerment, and opinion pieces that did not undergo peer review. The databases were searched initially for 324 sources, after which 82 duplicates were excluded, leaving 242 studies for title and abstract screening. In this screening, 132 studies were excluded since they did not fit the inclusion criteria, with 110 articles remaining for full-text review. After full-text assessment, 32 further articles were excluded due mostly to insufficient relevance to the research questions or empirical grounding. Analysed in depth were 78 studies which form the final corpus (Figure 3.1: below).

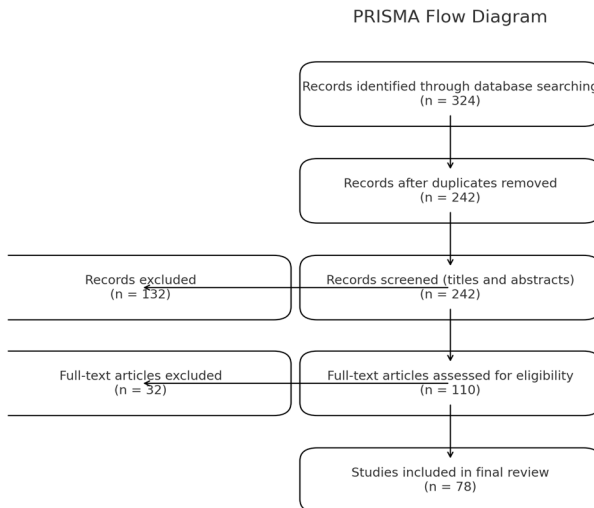


Fig. 3.1: *PRISMA Flow Diagram for the review process* (Page et al., 2021).

The process above is further illustrated in the table below (Table 3.1). Here, the accessed publications are detailed, based on the search criteria:

Stage	Number of Records
Records identified through database searching	324
Records after duplicates removed	242
Records screened (titles and abstracts)	242
Records excluded (title/abstract screening)	132
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	110
Full-text articles excluded (not relevant)	32
Studies included in final review	78

Table 3.1: *Accessed Literature (Authors, 2026)*

The thematic findings from the different studies were synthesised together using thematic synthesis. Coding and identification of major themes were guided by one of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approaches to thematic analysis, which involved familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. NVivo 12 was used in view of the randomness of the coding process, systematic management of qualitative data, and identification of patterns across sources. Two independent coders ensured the reliability of the thematic synthesis. Disputes on coding were discussed until a common understanding was reached. Themes were additionally validated against relevant existing frameworks on curriculum transformation and rural empowerment (Ajani, 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Mignolo, 2012) through an ongoing iterative comparison. This further fortified the trustworthiness of the analysis' outcomes.

Ethics was observed throughout the research. The systematic review will most probably not involve human subjects but will ensure that academic integrity, transparency, and credibility of authorship of the work will be paramount (Smith, 2021). All studies that were reviewed were duly acknowledged, and all interpretations were made with regard to the original contexts and findings. In conclusion, this systematic literature review adopted a combination of PRISMA protocols with thematic synthesis to yield a very broad, coherent, and contextually grounded understanding of how higher education curricula can be reimagined for the empowerment of rural students. The materials and methods employed demonstrate a commitment to academic integrity, critical engagement, and contribution to South

African higher educational social transformation.

Analysis and Results

The 78 peer-reviewed studies' thematic analysis demonstrated that three main themes were found to overlap across the literature: (1) social justice and educational equity; (2) entrepreneurship and employability; and (3) 21st-century skills and digital transformation. These themes were not mutually exclusive but rather interlinked with each other, proving a multidimensional approach to curriculum transformation in empowering rural students. The themes are further presented in this table:

Theme	Key Findings	Methods Used	Representative Studies/Authors
Social Justice & Equity	Curricula must reflect rural realities, affirm indigenous identities, and dismantle epistemic hierarchies.	Thematic Analysis; Systematic Literature Review	Abdi (2013); Ajani (2024); Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015); Smith (2021)
Entrepreneurship & Employability	Contextualised, community-based entrepreneurial learning fosters socio-economic agency in rural areas.	Thematic Analysis; Empirical and Conceptual Review	Ahmed & Nwankwo (2013); Adusei (2016); Du Toit (2023); Mehta et al. (2011)
21st-Century Skills & Digital Divide	Digital skill gaps persist; rural learners are disadvantaged by poor infrastructure and pedagogy.	Thematic Analysis; Infrastructure & Pedagogical Studies	Ajani (2024); Weaver et al. (2019); Mutongoza et al. (2023)
Decolonisation of Curriculum	Empowerment depends on inclusion of African epistemologies	Critical Discourse Analysis; Decolonial Frameworks	Mignolo (2012); Grosfoguel (2007); Wa Thiong'o (1986)

	and knowledge systems in curriculum.		
Policy & Participatory Governance	Top-down approaches hinder change; participatory models enhance sustainability and ownership.	Policy Analysis; Case Studies; Participatory Research	Kerr (2014); Du Toit (2023); Gcelu & Marongwe (2023)

Table 4.1: *Summary of Findings and Themes (Authors, 2026).*

In the table above, the table shows summary of the key themes, findings, methods, and representative studies from your research on empowering rural students in South Africa through transformative curricula.

First, these findings confirm the persistence of the social justice gap in higher education curricula. Several sources underlined that there remained a yawning chasm between the mainstream university education and the lives of rural learners, where cultural dissonance, language barriers, and historical exclusion continue to obstruct meaningful participation (Brock-Utne, 2002; Abdi, 2013; Ajani, 2024). The African knowledge systems and indigenous languages should yet be incorporated into curricula in a manner that promotes transformation of identity and agency (Wa Thiong'o, 1986; Adegaju, 2008).

Second, entrepreneurial education emerged one of the strongest pathways to empowerment, especially onwards and away from rural areas where high levels of unemployment and unavailability of formal jobs prevail. On the other hand, the positive effect of entrepreneurship education in creating economic self-reliance has been supported by the studies of Adusei (2016), Ahmed & Nwankwo (2013), and Ajani et al. (2023). Unfortunately, most entrepreneurship education programs are marginal and lack community involvement or relevance (Olotuase et al., 2023). Locally relevant experiential and problem-based entrepreneurial learning models seem to be much more effective in preparing students for community-centered entrepreneurship (Mehta et al., 2011; Du Toit, 2023). Such methodologies are immensely potent when articulating social justice objectives, which guarantees that entrepreneurship is for the benefit

of not only individuals but also of broad socio-economic transformation (Devine & Kiggundu, 2019).

Underutilized integration of 21st-century skills was observed for rural institutions. Digital literacy, critical thinking, and resilience were marked as vital skills but are constrained by inadequate infrastructure, poor teacher capacity, and lack of digital policy coherence (Ajani, 2024; Weaver et al., 2019). Such digital divide was emphasized in more than half of the studies reviewed, presenting a recurrent obstacle to transformation. Nevertheless, strategies considered innovative have been documented. These included mobile learning platforms, blended-learning modalities, and low-bandwidth educational tools for rural access (Ajani, 2024; Mutongoza et al., 2023). That being said, these tools only achieve impact if convened by pedagogic frameworks such as the TPACK model and are aligned with student needs (Ajani, 2024).

A fourth thematic trend has to do with decolonization functioning as either the goal or the processes the transformation of the curriculum undergoes. Drawing on Grosfoguel (2007), Mignolo (2012), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), a number of authors have suggested that without epistemic justice, there is no true empowerment. Hence, rural curriculum development requires giving place to local knowledge, oral traditions, and a community co-creation of content (Smith, 2021; Assie-Lumumba, 2012). The analysis revealed that policies aimed at promoting equity and inclusion are poorly implemented. Although national frameworks promote transformation, resistance by institutions, limited capability, and lack of consultation with rural interests incapacitate practical uptake (Cloete, 2012; Asuga et al., 2016). Almost one-third of studies reported gaps between policy and practice.

It also noted the role of governance in determining the effectiveness of an intervention. Top-down curricular reforms exclude the very voices of the individuals affected most. Participatory curriculum models engaging students, educators, and rural communities were presented as more likely to achieve success and sustain change (Kerr, 2014; Du Toit, 2023). An important insight is that synergies could be created among entrepreneurship, social justice, and 21st-century skills. When held in a holistic setting, these around employability, instilling social consciousness, and attempting to bridge the rural-urban educational chasm (Ajani, 2024; Devine & Kiggundu, 2019). But then, the design and delivery remain one huge area of blockage.

The review further expressed emotional and psychological facets of empowerment. Such studies as Higgs (2012), Nyamnjoh (2012), and Mbembe's (2015) outlined that a transformative curriculum needs to be to realize dignity, cultural pride, and learner confidence. This is particularly important to students who historically come from disadvantaged, rural backgrounds. At last, it has been an underused cross-sector collaboration. Local industries, NGO and government participation in curriculum planning are increasingly relevant and sustainable (Ajani, 2024; Gcelu & Marongwe, 2023). Only a whole-system alignment could help transformative outcomes at scale.

Thus, it is evident from the analysis that empowering rural learners through curriculum reform is possible but not with isolated initiatives. It will require coherent, inclusive, and justice-driven designs orientated around the real experiences of rural learners and against entrenched educational hierarchies. It is this argument that offers great impetus to rethinking the role of higher education in a post-apartheid South Africa.

Discussion

Findings from this study confirm the urgent need to rethink South African higher education curricula from a rural-centred perspective. From an insight extracted from the literature, empowerment is not merely about inclusion but about transformation—of syllabus, pedagogy, policy, and practice. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) and Ajani (2024) argue, rural students need more than simply urban-centric curricula; they need educational experiences relevant to their contexts, cultures, and aspirations.

One of the prominent debates flagged in this review concerns the epistemic imbalance in higher education. Eurocentric paradigms therefore continue to prevent African ways of knowing from being fully represented (Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo, 2012). In rural settings, where indigenous knowledge systems may still find resonance, the exclusion not only estranges students but also undermines valuable epistemologies that could contribute to academic debate and local innovation (Assie-Lumumba, 2012; Wa Thiong'o, 1986). This begs the question of what constitutes knowledge that is acceptable, and who determines this. Inherent to a transformative curriculum is contesting these hierarchies and relocating African epistemologies at the centre through participatory co-creation. According to Smith (2021), this involves acknowledging community members, elders, and bearers of traditional knowledge as legitimate contributors to the curriculum process. This may serve to promote further engagement and affirmation of identity in rural contexts.

The analysis reiterates the role of entrepreneurship education as an entryway into the rural economic life. What Implementation it indicates is thus still very much disconnected, rather highly theoretical in nature, and not sufficiently situated within localities (Ajani et al., 2023; Oluase et al., 2023). Lack of community-based learning opportunities and support systems may also lead to a situation where students may not have the confidence, legitimate networks, or resources to take action on entrepreneurial ideas. Experiential and project-based entrepreneurship education holds promise, as expressed by Du Toit (2023) and Mehta et al. (2011). Here, students are able to address real-world challenges while promoting their problem-solving, collaborative, and resiliency skills. Moreover, entrepreneurship is tied to social justice, leading students to come up with enterprises that meet the demands of the community and not just replicate extractive economic models (Devine & Kiggundu, 2019).

Digital divide remains the most complex structural barriers for rural students. While it is generally agreed that skills for the 21st century are indispensable, most rural institutions do not have the necessary infrastructure, teacher capabilities, or resources for meaningfully implementing digital learning (Ajani, 2024; Weaver et al., 2019). This further aggravates inequality, particularly where digital tools are developed for understanding urban bandwidths and pedagogies. Fortunately, some documents in literature provide models of innovativeness to meet those challenges. Some rural learners are accessing high-quality digital education through low-bandwidth platforms, mobile learning solutions and hybrid delivery models (Ajani, 2024; Mutongoza et al., 2023). But again, innovation must be matched with systemic support, policy coherence and culturally relevant content to yield equitable outcomes.

The need for bottom-up curriculum governance is a recurrent theme among the reviewed studies. Most reforms fail on account of their being formulated without consultation, while local realities are not factored into the processes (Kerr, 2014; Gcelu & Marongwe, 2023). Participatory models involving rural students, educators, parents, and community leaders are often observed to produce sustainable and context-sensitive reforms (Du Toit, 2023). The inquiry speaks to emotional and psychological aspects of learning. Transformative curricula are more than just places for knowledge transfer; they are spaces for identity creation, self-belief, and healing (Higgs, 2012; Mbembe, 2015). For many rural students, educational environments

have historically been spaces of exclusion. So, curriculum reform should re-establish dignity and create belonging.

A holistic vision of education integrates social justice, entrepreneurship, and 21st-century competencies—a vision lofty in anticipation but closer to the earth in local concern. Yet the evidence provided indicates that there is no clarity and coherence across these domains. Too often, institutions pursue these objectives in isolation, resulting in a hodgepodge of interventions that never realize sustained impact (Ajani, 2024). To change this scenario, cross-sectoral collaboration is required. Partnerships with local industry, NGOs, government institutions, and communities would enhance curricular relevance; provide experiential learning, and mobilize resources (Cloete, 2012; Gcelu & Marongwe, 2023). This form of collaborative governance would promote shared responsibility in the transformation of rural areas.

In short, the findings suggest that not merely as an academic task but as a societal imperative, curriculum transformation for rural empowerment must be conceived. Considerations of social justice, entrepreneurship, and 21st-century skills provide the scaffolding for education that is inclusive, context-responsive, and future-oriented. To manifest transformation, such must supposed rural learners' voices, identities, and aspirations and meaningfully commit to systemic change across every stratum of the education landscape.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study underlines the pressing need for an overhaul of the South African higher education curriculum if rural students are to be empowered. On the basis of a systematic review of 78 scholarly sources published from 2000 to 2024, the evidence confirms that integrating issues of social justice, entrepreneurship education, and 21st-century skills is not an addition but a prerequisite for achieving educational equity and sustainable development. In particular, the findings affirm that rural students continue to face systemic and epistemic barriers originating out of historical injustices. Accordingly, their lived realities are often excluded from the curriculum content, and colonial knowledge systems still take precedence. In addition, the existence of digital divides, the prevalence of archaic pedagogies, and poor enforcement of policies continue to sustain educational inequalities. To mitigate these problems, higher education will have to be redefined in a radical way rather than by putting in incremental reforms concerning its purpose, content, and delivery.

A socially just curriculum anchored in indigenous languages and histories and worldviews can return dignity and legitimacy to the educational experiences of rural learners. The entrepreneurship education must be situated within local realities, oriented towards experiential and problem-based learning that builds agency, creativity, and applies to socio-economic development in rural contexts. Following suit, 21st-century digital skills should be integrated with rural educational programs, supported by infrastructure investment and culturally relevant digital pedagogies. Current initiatives to transform university curricula have too frequently been fragmented and alienated from the needs of rural communities. Policy instruments designed to bring about this transformation are continually undermined by weak institutional commitment, bureaucratic inertia, and the exclusion of rural voices. Without participatory governance and systemic accountability, hopes for justice in education are empty promises.

This study urges universities to adopt participatory curriculum development models that foster more meaningful involvement of rural students, rural educators, and community leaders. The curriculum must give primacy to African epistemologies and act actively against the colonial hierarchies of knowledge creation in all its manifestations. Entrepreneurship training must focus on community-responsive, real-life projects to equip students with not only technical skills but also the ability to innovate and make meaningful contributions to local development.

Another burning issue at hand is bridging the rural-urban digital divide. From their part, institutions should invest in low-bandwidth technologies and mobile learning platforms applicable to the rural context, while also building educator capacity by training in the area of technological pedagogical content knowledge. This will go a long way toward making digital inclusion real rather than a promise. Policy alignment must improve to ensure that national transformation agendas are converted into concrete institutional policies that prioritise rural impact. In addition, there ought to be monitoring and evaluation systems established to keep the transformation track of rural students' outcomes. Holistic approaches to curriculum transformation should integrate emotional and psychological support structures that nurture a sense of identity, belongingness, and resilience among rural learners. Their universities should serve as spaces for cultural affirmation and individual empowerment and not centres of alienation.

There is a need to enhance collaboration between universities, government departments, industries, and communities to be able to mobilise resources and share expertise toward sustainable models of rural empowerment. From hereon, appraisals in further research, longitudinal studies, and comparative analyses will benefit understanding what works for the reform agenda. Empowerment of rural students is not simply an educational matter; it is an open societal challenge. Higher educational institutions must accept their functions in contributing to an inclusive future by creating spaces that transform so rural students can thrive, innovate, and lead. The study provides a conceptual scaffold for that journey that calls forward urgent, collective, and sustained action.

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