

**THE PERSPECTIVES OF EMPLOYMENT EQUITY PRACTITIONERS ON THE  
IMPLEMENTATION OF EMPLOYMENT EQUITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC  
UNIVERSITIES**

by

**NEO ONICCA BOKABA**

submitted in accordance with the requirements  
for the degree of

**MASTER OF COMMERCE**

in the subject

**BUSINESS MANAGEMENT**

at the

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**SUPERVISOR: PROF M COETZEE**

**APRIL 2026**

# DECLARATION

Name: Neo Onicca Bokaba  
Student number: 55165702  
Degree: MCOM Business management (98582)\_

*I declare that:*

## **The perspectives of Employment Equity practitioners on the implementation of Employment Equity in South African public universities.**

*I declare that the dissertation is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references, and that any use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been fully disclosed.*

*I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to the appropriate originality detection system which is endorsed by Unisa and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.*

*I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.*

*I further declare that AI-assisted tools (ChatGPT, OpenAI) were used to support language editing, clarity, and structural refinement of the text. Where Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools have been used, their use has been limited to ethically permissible support, has been fully disclosed, and does not replace my own original research, my independent critical thinking and analysis, or authorship responsibilities. The author retains full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and academic integrity of the dissertation.*

*I understand that failure to disclose AI use, plagiarism and/or lack of academic integrity may constitute academic misconduct under Unisa's policies.*

*(The dissertation will not be examined unless this statement has been included.)*



26 April 2026

---

SIGNATURE

DATE

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explored the perspectives of Employment Equity (EE) practitioners regarding the implementation of EE in South African public universities. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm and an exploratory research design, the study adopted a phenomenological approach to capture practitioners' lived experiences. The target population comprised all 26 EE practitioners employed across South Africa's public universities. Data were collected primarily through focus group interviews, supported by semi-structured interview guides, participant observation, and reflexive note-taking. Thematic analysis, grounded in phenomenological principles, revealed that EE implementation is largely perceived as compliance-driven rather than transformative. Key challenges included limited EE knowledge and capacity among line managers and staff, the absence of diversity and inclusion as core institutional values, and structural and governance mechanisms that constrain effective implementation. Based on these findings, the study proposed four clusters of guidelines: strengthening governance and accountability, developing sustainable talent pipelines, enhancing representativeness through deliberate EE practices, and transforming institutional culture to support inclusivity.

### **Keywords:**

Employment equity; EE implementation, transformation, EE governance, institutional culture, HE Institutions, EE strategies, EE practices,

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie kwalitatiewe studie het die perspektiewe van Diensbillikheidspraktisyns ondersoek met betrekking tot die implementering van diensbillikheid in Suid-Afrikaanse openbare universiteite. Gelei deur 'n interpretivistiese paradigma en 'n verkennende navorsingsontwerp, het die studie 'n fenomenologiese benadering gevolg om praktisyns se beleefde ervarings vas te vang. Die teikenpopulasie het bestaan uit 26 diensbillikheidspraktisyns, werksaam by Suid-Afrikaanse universiteite. Data is ingesamel deur middel van fokusgroep-onderhoude, semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude, deelnemerwaarneming en reflektiewe aantekeninge. Tematiese analise, gegrond in fenomenologiese beginsels, het getoon dat die implementering van diensbillikheid grootliks as nakomingsgedrewe eerder as transformierend ervaar word. Sleuteluitdagings sluit in beperkte diensbillikheid kennis en -kapasiteit onder lynbestuurders en personeel, die afwesigheid van diversiteit en inklusiwiteit as kritiese institusionele waardes, asook strukturele en bestuursmeganismes wat effektiewe implementering beperk. Op grond van hierdie bevindings het die studie vier groepe riglyne voorgestel: die versterking van bestuur en aanspreeklikheid teenoor diensbillikheid, die ontwikkeling van volhoubare talentpylyne, die bevordering van verteenwoordigendheid deur doelgerigte diensbillikheidspraktyke, en die transformasie van institusionele kultuur om inklusiwiteit te ondersteun.

### **Sleutelwoorde:**

Diensbillikheid; diensbillikheidsimplementering; transformasie; Diensbillikheidsbestuur; institusionele kultuur; hoëronderwysinstellings; Diensbillikheidsstrategieë; diensbillikheidspraktyke.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION  | 1  |
| 1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND                                    | 1  |
| 1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT  | 3  |
| 1.2.1 Strategic misalignment                                       | 4  |
| 1.2.2 Negative perceptions about EE implementation                 | 5  |
| 1.2.3 Accountability challenges                                    | 5  |
| 1.2.4 Poor EE policy implementation                                | 5  |
| 1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES  | 6  |
| 1.3.1 Primary Research Objective                                   | 6  |
| 1.3.2 Secondary Research Objectives                                | 6  |
| 1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS   | 6  |
| 1.4.1 Primary Research Question                                    | 6  |
| 1.4.2 Secondary Research Questions                                 | 6  |
| 1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY                                      | 6  |
| 1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW  | 7  |
| 1.7 LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK  | 9  |
| 1.7.1 Equality and Social Justice                                  | 9  |
| 1.7.2 Protecting the rights of employees and fair labour practices | 10 |
| 1.7.3 Establishing AA measures to end workplace discrimination     | 10 |
| 1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK  | 10 |
| 1.8.1 Agency Theory  | 11 |
| 1.8.2 Identity Negotiation Theory                                  | 11 |
| 1.8.3 Psychological Contract Theory                                | 12 |
| 1.9 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY                                | 12 |
| 1.9.1 Research Design  | 12 |
| 1.9.2 Research paradigm and philosophical assumptions              | 12 |
| 1.9.3 Methodology  | 13 |
| 1.9.4 Methods  | 13 |

|       |   |    |
|-------|---|----|
| 1.9.5 | Data analysis                                     | 13 |
| 1.10  | MEASURES TO ENSURE SCIENTIFIC RIGOUR OF THE STUDY | 14 |
| 1.11  | ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS                            | 14 |
| 1.12  | STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS                         | 15 |
| 1.13  | CHAPTER OUTLINE                                   | 16 |
| 1.14  | SUMMARY   | 17 |

## CHAPTER 2 – EMPLOYMENT EQUITY 18

|       |   |    |
|-------|---|----|
| 2.1   | INTRODUCTION  | 18 |
| 2.2   | CONTEXT OF EE PRACTICE IN SOUTH AFRICA                                | 19 |
| 2.2.1 | Race  | 19 |
| 2.2.2 | Gender  | 20 |
| 2.2.3 | Disability  | 21 |
| 2.3   | LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK   | 22 |
| 2.3.1 | Equity and Social Justice   | 22 |
| 2.3.2 | Protecting the Rights of Employees                                    | 23 |
| 2.3.3 | Establishing Affirmative Action Measures                              | 24 |
| 2.3.4 | Development and Implementation of EE Plans                            | 25 |
| 2.3.5 | EE in South African Public Universities                               | 25 |
| 2.4   | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK   | 28 |
| 2.4.1 | The Agency Theory   | 28 |
| 2.4.2 | Identity Negotiation Theory   | 29 |
| 2.4.3 | Psychological Contract Theory   | 30 |
| 2.5   | PREVIOUS RESEARCH CONDUCTED ON EE IMPLEMENTATION                      | 32 |
| 2.5.1 | Poor Management of Diversity and Lack of Organisational<br>Commitment | 32 |
| 2.5.2 | Negative Employee Perceptions   | 34 |
| 2.5.3 | A Lack of Structured Diversity Management                             | 35 |
| 2.5.4 | Guidelines identified in prior research to improve EE implementation  | 36 |
| 2.6   | SUMMARY   | 37 |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</b>                     | <b>39</b> |
| 3.1 INTRODUCTION  | 39        |
| 3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN   | 39        |
| 3.2.1 Research Paradigm and Philosophical Assumptions       | 41        |
| 3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY                                    | 44        |
| 3.3.1 Qualitative Research Methodology                      | 44        |
| 3.3.2 Research Approach                                     | 46        |
| 3.3.3 Research Setting                                      | 47        |
| 3.3.4 Research Methods                                      | 49        |
| 3.3.5 Ensuring the Scientific Rigour of the Study           | 57        |
| 3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS                                  | 60        |
| 3.4.1 Obtaining Informed Consent                            | 61        |
| 3.4.2 Ensuring No Harm to Participants                      | 61        |
| 3.4.3 Ensuring Confidentiality and Anonymity                | 61        |
| 3.4.4 Compensation  | 62        |
| 3.5 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS                               | 62        |
| 3.6 SUMMARY   | 63        |
| <br>  |           |
| <b>CHAPTER 4 – RESEARCH FINDINGS</b>                        | <b>65</b> |
| 4.1 INTRODUCTION  | 65        |
| 4.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY’S PARTICIPANTS             | 66        |
| 4.2.1 Gender  | 66        |
| 4.2.2 Work experience                                       | 67        |
| 4.2.3 Race  | 67        |
| 4.2.4 Age   | 68        |
| 4.2.5 Job Position  | 68        |
| 4.3 PRACTITIONERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON EE IMPLEMENTATION        | 69        |
| 4.3.1 EE as a compliance-driven process                     | 71        |
| 4.3.2 Limited EE knowledge and capacity among line managers | 72        |

|       |   |     |
|-------|---|-----|
| 4.3.3 | Diversity and Inclusivity as Core Drivers of EE                         | 72  |
| 4.3.4 | Institutional Mechanisms Supporting or Constraining EE                  | 73  |
| 4.3.5 | Transformation as a Long-Term, Multidimensional Process                 | 74  |
| 4.4   | PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EMPLOYMENT EQUITY                     | 77  |
| 4.5   | TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICA'S HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR                | 80  |
| 4.5.1 | Transformation as a Complex and Ongoing Process                         | 82  |
| 4.5.2 | Barriers to Institutional Transformation                                | 82  |
| 4.5.3 | Competition for Scarce Skills and the "Leaking Pipeline"                | 83  |
| 4.6   | CHALLENGES FACED IN ACHIEVING EMPLOYMENT EQUITY IN UNIVERSITIES         | 85  |
| 4.6.1 | Fragmentation and Structural Misalignment                               | 87  |
| 4.6.2 | Scarcity of Suitably Qualified Candidates                               | 88  |
| 4.6.3 | Institutional Culture and Resistance to Change                          | 88  |
| 4.6.4 | Competition for Scarce Skills and High Staff Turnover                   | 99  |
| 4.6.5 | Patriarchy, Gender Bias and the Glass Ceiling                           | 99  |
| 4.6.6 | Aging Professoriate and Limited Academic Pipeline                       | 90  |
| 4.6.7 | Leadership Gaps and Accountability Challenges                           | 90  |
| 4.6.8 | Policy Instability and Legislative Uncertainty                          | 91  |
| 4.7   | PRACTITIONERS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING EE IMPLEMENTATION          | 91  |
| 4.7.1 | Governance and Accountability   | 93  |
| 4.7.2 | Talent Management: Developing Internal Capacity                         | 94  |
| 4.7.3 | Enhancing Representation Through Deliberate EE Practices                | 95  |
| 4.7.4 | Transforming Institutional Culture                                      | 96  |
| 4.8   | FRAMEWORK FOR ADVANCING EMPLOYMENT EQUITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES | 96  |
| 4.8.1 | Domain 1: Governance and Accountability                                 | 98  |
| 4.8.2 | Domain 2: Talent Management   | 99  |
| 4.8.3 | Domain 3: Representation and EE Practices                               | 99  |
| 4.8.4 | Domain 4: Institutional Culture   | 100 |
| 4.9   | SUMMARY   | 100 |

## CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION 102

|       |   |     |
|-------|---|-----|
| 5.1   | INTRODUCTION  | 102 |
| 5.2   | SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS                             | 103 |
| 5.2.1 | Perceptions of Employment Equity and Transformation | 103 |
| 5.2.2 | Challenges Affecting EE Implementation              | 105 |
| 5.2.3 | Recommendations emerging from the findings          | 106 |
| 5.3   | RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH                | 107 |
| 5.4   | CONCLUSION  | 108 |
| 5.5   | SUMMARY   | 109 |
| 5.6   | CONCLUDING REMARKS ON STUDY                         | 109 |

## BIBLIOGRAPHY 111

### TABLES

|     |   |    |
|-----|---|----|
| 2.1 | Demographic profile of SA public universities | 27 |
| 4.1 | Age   | 68 |
| 4.2 | Job Position                                  | 68 |
| 4.3 | Perspectives on EE implementation             | 69 |
| 4.4 | EE challenges and corresponding strategies    | 91 |

### FIGURES

|     |   |    |
|-----|---|----|
| 4.1 | Gender  | 67 |
| 4.2 | Race  | 67 |
| 4.3 | Perceptions of EE   | 76 |
| 4.4 | Progress of EE implementation                                   | 79 |
| 4.5 | Measures to promote transformation and EE                       | 81 |
| 4.6 | Perceptions on EE, transformation and challenges                | 84 |
| 4.7 | Code document table supporting the Sankey diagram findings      | 85 |
| 4.8 | Challenges in implementing EE policies and achieving EE targets | 86 |

|     |   |    |
|-----|---|----|
| 4.9 | Framework on strategies for advancing EE in SA universities | 98 |
|-----|---|----|

## ANNEXURES

|                              |     |
|------------------------------|-----|
| Annexure A Interview guide   | 125 |
| Annexure B Observation guide | 128 |
| Ethics Approval certificate  | 129 |
| Certificate from editor      | 130 |

# CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Workplace equality and transformation remain central priorities within South Africa's post-apartheid legislative and organisational environments. The Employment Equity Act (EEA) 55 of 1998 was enacted to eradicate unfair discrimination and advance equitable representation across all levels of organisations. Equality as a constitutional principle encompasses both formal equality, which refers to eliminating discrimination through legal processes, and substantive equality, which concerns the outcomes achieved through such processes and the transformation of systems, structures, and opportunities. Although the EEA was intended to operationalise these principles, transformation in many South African workplaces has progressed at a slower rate than anticipated, with several studies noting uneven progress, implementation resistance, and persistent occupational stratification (Jain et al., 2012; Joubert, 2017; Omar, 2020; Oosthuizen et al., 2019).

Within the higher education sector, transformation has assumed particular significance because universities are expected not only to comply with labour legislation but also to model social justice, representativity, and inclusive institutional cultures. However, public universities continue to reflect disparities in senior management representation, academic progression, disability inclusion, and institutional culture, despite extensive policy reform since 1994 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2020; Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2022; Badat, 2018). These challenges make universities a strategically important setting for examining Employment Equity implementation.

In the public higher education sector, several reports reflect the persistent underrepresentation of Black people and persons with disabilities in senior occupational levels (DHET, 2020; CHE, 2022; Commission for Employment Equity, 2023). These patterns raise concerns about the adequacy of institutional strategies, implementation practices, and organisational commitment to transforming the workforce. While several studies have explored the broader challenges confronting

EE implementation, such as organisational resistance, workforce planning deficits, inadequate communication, and policy inconsistencies, very little attention has been given to the perspectives of those who are directly responsible for driving and coordinating EE within institutions: Employment Equity (EE) practitioners.

EE practitioners are employees assigned under the EEA to monitor, facilitate, and guide the planning and implementation of EE. They occupy a unique position at the intersection of compliance, organisational strategy, and employee experience. Yet, their insights, interpretations, and lived experiences have received minimal scholarly attention, despite their centrality in translating legislative prescriptions into meaningful institutional action. In practice, many universities develop workforce and transformation strategies without consulting these practitioners, resulting in misaligned priorities, inadequate resource allocation, and inconsistent implementation. In addition, competing values, institutional politics, and varying levels of leadership support further complicate their work.

This study positions EE practitioners as key institutional actors whose perspectives can deepen the understanding of why EE efforts succeed or falter within South African public universities. Their experiences are shaped by multiple factors: institutional culture, organisational structures, leadership commitment, perceptions of fairness, identity negotiation processes, and contradictory expectations between regulatory requirements and institutional autonomy. Exploring their perspectives offers an opportunity to uncover underlying issues that may not be visible through policy analysis alone.

The higher education context is especially relevant because universities are complex institutions characterised by shared governance, professional autonomy, competing stakeholder interests, and historically embedded inequalities. These features may complicate the implementation of centrally driven Employment Equity strategies and heighten the relevance of practitioner perspectives.

The present chapter introduces the study, provides background to the research problem, formulates the research objectives and questions, and outlines its academic

and practical significance. A brief overview of the theoretical framing and methodological approach is also offered, followed by a chapter outline.

## **1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Despite more than two decades of legislative intervention, the pace of workplace transformation in South African public universities remains slow and fragmented, particularly in relation to senior representation, inclusive culture, and sustainable institutional change (DHET, 2020; CHE, 2022; Commission for Employment Equity, 2023). Various reasons have been advanced in prior research, including limited institutional capacity, inconsistent commitment to transformation, negative perceptions toward equity initiatives, inadequate monitoring systems, and organisational resistance to change (April & Govender, 2022; Joubert, 2017; Oosthuizen et al., 2019; Wood & Bischoff, 2020). While these factors remain relevant, a key underlying issue persists: the voices and perspectives of EE practitioners are not adequately considered in the development or implementation of institutional transformation strategies.

Existing scholarship has focused predominantly on legislative compliance, demographic outcomes, employee perceptions, and managerial challenges. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the institutional actors tasked with translating Employment Equity policy into operational practice. This omission is important because practitioners often mediate between executive leadership, labour structures, line management, and employees, positioning them at the centre of implementation dynamics.

Several universities continue to centralise strategic planning processes in institutional planning offices or other administrative units while excluding EE practitioners. This exclusion undermines alignment between institutional strategies and EE imperatives, limiting practitioners' ability to provide meaningful advice on equity barriers, workforce demographics, and long-term planning. The result is a pattern of disjointed efforts, uneven policy implementation, negative perceptions of equity measures, and recurring compliance challenges.

Furthermore, when EE practitioners are marginalised in strategic decision-making, institutional transformation becomes largely symbolic or compliance-driven. This has consequences such as:

- fragmented integration of EE goals into strategic documents;
- inconsistent or ineffective implementation of transformational programmes;
- weak communication of EE intentions, contributing to workplace conflict;
- unclear accountability for EE outcomes; and
- resourcing and capacity constraints that impede progress.

Although prior studies have documented organisational resistance, role conflict, and diversity management challenges, few have prioritised the actual experiences of EE practitioners as a central unit of analysis. This creates a significant gap in understanding how transformation is enacted within universities, how practitioners negotiate their roles and identities, and how their insights can inform more effective implementation.

The central problem this study intends to address is the inadequate scholarly understanding of Employment Equity practitioners' perspectives on the implementation of Employment Equity in South African public universities, and the institutional consequences of overlooking these perspectives for meaningful transformation, accountability, and strategic alignment.

### **1.2.1 Strategic Misalignment**

A recurring problem in higher education is the misalignment between institutional transformation strategies and EE imperatives. Without practitioner involvement, workforce and succession planning processes become disconnected from transformation needs. Strategic misalignment leads to inconsistent implementation, inadequate resource allocation, and inequitable recruitment and promotion practices. These misalignments reinforce perceptions of unfairness and undermine progress toward substantive equality (April & Govender, 2022; Musakuro & de Klerk, 2021; Omar & Kiley, 2022).

### **1.2.2 Negative Perceptions About EE Implementation**

Negative organisational perceptions of EE continue to hamper transformation. Some employees view EE as reverse discrimination or tokenism, while others see it as ineffective because of the slow pace of progress. These perceptions are frequently linked to poor communication, policy ambiguity, and limited participatory processes (Joubert, 2017; Oosthuizen et al., 2019). Without the involvement of EE practitioners, institutions miss valuable insights into how these perceptions can be addressed and how equity initiatives can be communicated and implemented to foster trust and legitimacy.

### **1.2.3 Accountability Challenges**

Many universities struggle to define clear lines of accountability for EE implementation. Responsibility is often diffused among HR departments, line managers, executive leadership, and transformation offices, resulting in fragmented ownership and inconsistent follow-through. Prior studies have shown that when accountability is unclear, Employment Equity becomes procedural rather than strategic, with limited consequences for non-performance (Adonis & Silinda, 2021; Breetzke et al., 2019; Oosthuizen et al., 2019). In such contexts, practitioners may be expected to deliver outcomes without sufficient authority or institutional support.

### **1.2.4 Implementation Limitations**

Poor implementation of transformation undermines the achievement of EE targets and perpetuates demographic imbalances. Common barriers include inadequate monitoring systems, weak leadership commitment, poor data utilisation, and insufficient resourcing. By overlooking the practical experiences of EE practitioners, institutions lose opportunities to identify operational bottlenecks and improve transformation outcomes through evidence-based interventions (Motshabi, 2020; Wood & Bischoff, 2020).

The study, therefore, argues that listening to and understanding the perspectives of EE practitioners is essential to improving the implementation of EE in public universities.

## **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

This study is guided by a primary and secondary set of research objectives.

### **1.3.1 Primary Research Objective**

To explore the perspectives of Employment Equity practitioners regarding the implementation of EE in South African public universities.

### **1.3.2 Secondary Research Objectives**

- To identify key challenges that EE practitioners experience in the implementation of EE within South African public universities.
- To develop guidelines to support the improvement of EE implementation in the higher education sector.

## **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

### **1.4.1 Primary Research Question**

What are the perspectives of EE practitioners regarding the implementation of Employment Equity in South African public universities?

### **1.4.2 Secondary Research Questions**

- What challenges do EE practitioners experience in implementing EE to transform public universities?
- What guidelines can be developed to enhance EE implementation within South African public universities?

## **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

By examining the perspectives and lived experiences of Employment Equity (EE) practitioners, the study makes several important contributions. First, it provides rare, practice-based insights into how EE policies are interpreted, operationalised, and monitored within organisations—an area often overlooked in studies that rely primarily on legislative analysis or organisational reports. Understanding practitioners' day-to-

day challenges, strategic considerations, and contextual realities deepens insight into why EE implementation frequently diverges from policy intentions.

In addition, the study contributes theoretically by foregrounding practitioners as institutional agents whose experiences may refine understanding of how policy implementation occurs within complex organisations. This shifts the analytical focus from formal compliance outcomes to the lived processes through which transformation is enabled, resisted, negotiated, or delayed.

Second, the study surfaces nuanced, context-specific factors that either enable or hinder effective EE implementation, thereby offering empirical evidence to strengthen organisational strategies, training approaches, and compliance mechanisms.

The significance of the study lies in its potential to bridge the gap between policy design and practical implementation, inform more responsive EE frameworks, and contribute to the development of practitioner-centered guidelines that can enhance transformation outcomes across South African workplaces.

For the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Department of Labour (DoL), the study's outcomes may support sector-wide discussions on workforce transformation and help institutions better meet legislative expectations. For the academic community, the study contributes to the literature on transformation in higher education, diversity management, and the lived experiences of practitioners responsible for institutional change.

## **1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Employment Equity may be understood as a strategic and legislative process aimed at eliminating unfair discrimination while advancing equitable representation, inclusion, and fair access to opportunities. In South Africa, it carries both legal and socio-historical significance because it seeks to redress structural exclusion inherited from apartheid labour systems. The literature on Employment Equity, therefore, spans compliance, transformation management, diversity, organisational justice, and workforce planning perspectives.

Most studies conducted on the EE implementation attributed the slow progress achieved in implementing EE initiatives to several factors, including the following (Jain, Horwitz & Wilkin, 2012; Joubert, 2017; Kanjere & Lebea, 2019; Oosthuizen et al., 2019):

- Poor management of diversity and lack of organisational commitment (April & Govender, 2022; Joubert, 2017).
- Accountability issues reported in previous studies explain this challenge. These issues include a tendency by employers to devolve the EE responsibility to human resources or line managers, which slows progress on workplace transformation (Adonis & Silinda, 2021; Breetzke et al., 2019; Oosthuizen et al., 2019).
- Units responsible for EE were found derelict in performing their responsibilities (Kanjere & Lebea, 2019).
- A lack of monitoring and evaluation was identified as a cause of ineffective EE implementation (Wood & Bischoff, 2020).
- The lack of organisational commitment has led to the incremental implementation of EE, which was pursued primarily for compliance purposes (Motshabi, 2020).
- Employees' distrust and misunderstanding of the EE intent inhibit organisational competitiveness (Joubert, 2017). Such distrust and misunderstanding evoke negative perceptions among employees that EE is a form of reverse discrimination and tokenism (April & Govender, 2022; Oosthuizen et al., 2019).
- A lack of structured diversity management in organisations (Nadiv & Kuna, 2020). This was evident in institutional strategies that were misaligned with EE imperatives, with EE practitioners' input being disregarded. A case in point was the non-integration of workforce planning and succession planning processes into the organisational strategies (April & Govender, 2022; Musakuro & de Klerk, 2021; Nunoo, 2020; Oosthuizen et al., 2019; Theys and Schultz, 2020). The lack of integration of strategies led to poor resourcing of EE implementation, role conflict, and the failure to implement policies (Adonis &

Silinda, 2021; Maleka & Siziba, 2019; Nadiv & Kuna, 2020; Ng & Sears, 2020; Worthington et al., 2020). For inclusive and sustainable EE implementation, Omar and Kiley (2022) argued that employers should integrate EE into their organisational transformation strategies.

Persistent challenges in managing diversity, accountability, and organisational commitment highlight the need to draw directly on the insights of EE practitioners, who are central to interpreting and addressing these implementation gaps. Their perspectives are critical for understanding why responsibilities are frequently devolved, monitoring and evaluation remain weak, and EE units struggle to fulfil their mandates. Practitioner input can also clarify how strategic misalignment, insufficient resourcing, and the marginalisation of EE considerations contribute to role conflict, weak diversity management, and stalled transformation. Given the prevalence of employee distrust and compliance-driven approaches, EE practitioners' experiences are essential for developing more integrated, credible, and sustainable EE strategies.

## **1.7 LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK**

The transformation of South African workplaces is underpinned by a legislative framework designed to eradicate discrimination and advance equality (Omar, 2020; Wood & Bischoff, 2020). For EE practitioners, these laws establish both the mandate and constraints within which they must implement Employment Equity, shaping their daily responsibilities, organisational expectations, and the challenges they encounter. The relevance of each key legislative domain is outlined below.

### **1.7.1 Equality and Social Justice**

The Constitution and subsequent anti-discrimination legislation provide the foundational values that guide the work of EE practitioners. These laws not only prohibit unfair discrimination but also legitimise practitioners' efforts to challenge entrenched organisational practices and promote inclusive cultures. Understanding these principles helps explain practitioners' experiences of resistance, value tensions, and the moral imperatives embedded in their roles.

### **1.7.2 Protecting the Rights of Employees and Fair Labour Practices**

Legislation regulating fair labour practices shapes the environment in which practitioners must balance compliance, employee rights, and organisational interests. These laws directly shape the expectations placed on EE practitioners, particularly regarding procedural fairness, dispute management, and the creation of psychologically safe workplaces. Their lived experiences often reflect the tensions arising from navigating these statutory obligations under resource or leadership constraints.

### **1.7.3 Establishing Affirmative Action Measures**

The EE Act and related skills and higher education legislation define the operational requirements of affirmative action planning, consultation, and reporting. For practitioners, these laws translate into complex tasks such as developing EE plans, securing organisational buy-in, addressing capacity gaps, and ensuring reasonable accommodation. Their challenges, such as insufficient resourcing, strategic misalignment, or limited authority, are best understood within this legislative context that simultaneously empowers and burdens their roles.

## **1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The Agency Theory, Identity Negotiation Theory, and Psychological Contract Theory frameworks are relevant to this study because, together, they provide a comprehensive foundation for interpreting the complex experiences of EE practitioners during the implementation of Employment Equity. The Agency Theory addresses the structural and accountability tensions they face. The Identity Negotiation Theory highlights the relational and identity-based challenges in their interactions with leadership and employees, and the Psychological Contract Theory explains how perceived breaches of expectations shape their motivation and commitment. Although conceptually distinct, these theories intersect around the core research problem by clarifying how organisational conditions shape the lived experiences and effectiveness of EE practitioners, thereby justifying their combined use in this study.

These theories were selected because they directly correspond to the key implementation problems identified in this chapter. Strategic misalignment and weak accountability are illuminated by Agency Theory; practitioner marginalisation and contested legitimacy are clarified through Identity Negotiation Theory; while disengagement arising from poor organisational support is explained through Psychological Contract Theory.

These theories are introduced briefly here to justify their relevance; detailed conceptual discussions follow in Chapter 2.

### **1.8.1 Agency Theory**

The Agency Theory is relevant because EE practitioners function as agents mandated to implement Section 13 of the EEA, while vice-chancellors act as principals accountable to the Department of Labour for compliance. This principal–agent relationship often produces competing expectations, constrained authority, and accountability pressures that mirror the challenges highlighted in the research problem (Anthony & Govindarajan, 2005; Jensen & Meckling, 2019). Using this theory enables the study to interpret how misaligned priorities and organisational demands shape practitioners' daily implementation experiences.

### **1.8.2 Identity Negotiation Theory**

The Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) contributes by illuminating how EE practitioners continually negotiate their professional identities within organisational environments where transformation is contested, and relational dynamics are central. Skills such as adaptability, empathy, and cross-cultural communication (Srikandi & Rahmanto, 2021) are often required to navigate these interactions, which influence whether practitioners experience affirmation or marginalisation (Malik et al., 2022; Srikandi & Rahmanto, 2021). Because strained relationships, reduced agency, and identity conflict may undermine their effectiveness (Sung, 2022; Yuan et al., 2019), INT provides an essential lens for analysing how relational dynamics affect their capacity to implement EE.

### **1.8.3 Psychological Contract Theory**

The Psychological Contract Theory is pertinent because EE practitioners' motivation and commitment are shaped by their perceptions of organisational support, recognition, and reciprocity (Maia & Bastos, 2019; Schafft et al., 2020). As psychological contracts are based on individual perceptions, failures such as overlooking practitioners' input in strategy development or inadequate support may lead to disengagement (Bi, 2019; Probst et al., 2020). This theory, therefore, helps explain how unmet expectations and perceived organisational breaches influence practitioners' attitudes toward their institutions and the profession.

## **1.9 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This section provides a brief overview of the research design and methodological orientation adopted in the study. Detailed operational procedures, sampling processes, and analytical techniques are presented in Chapter Three.

### **1.9.1 Research Design**

An exploratory research design was adopted to investigate the comparatively underexamined phenomenon of EE practitioners' perspectives on the implementation of Employment Equity in South African public universities (Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2019; Miller, Porter & Barbagallo, 2023; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). This design was considered suitable for generating insights that may inform the development of guidelines to enhance the implementation of EE (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018).

### **1.9.2 Research Paradigm and Philosophical Assumptions**

The study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that the perspectives of EE practitioners are subjective, socially constructed, and best understood within their natural organisational contexts (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Ngulube & Ukwoma, 2019).

This paradigm acknowledges multiple interpretations of EE implementation (Carson et al., 2011; Singh, 2019; Sultana, 2020) and aligns with a relativist ontology, which holds that reality is shaped by context and lived experience (Cuthbertson, Robb &

Blair, 2020; Levers, 2013). A subjectivist epistemology underpinned the study, recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and participants (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Brown, 2017; Rahi, 2017).

### **1.9.3 Methodology**

Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative methodology to inductively explore the complexity of EE practitioners' perspectives (Meihami, 2020; Sultana, 2020). Qualitative inquiry was appropriate because it prioritises depth and context, and enhances interpretation, enabling a nuanced understanding of how practitioners experience and interpret EE implementation within their institutional settings (Ngulube & Ukwoma, 2019).

### **1.9.4 Methods**

In keeping with qualitative principles, methods were selected to facilitate rich engagement with participants' lived experiences (Kennedy, 2019). The study was conducted across different types of South African public universities, and the target population comprised EE practitioners who were members of the EE Community of Practice. A non-probability sampling approach, suitable for exploratory qualitative studies (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019), was employed to recruit practitioners who were accessible and willing to share their insights.

Data collection employed interactive, qualitative techniques that allowed for in-depth exploration of experiences and interpretations, including interviews and observations, guided by phenomenological principles (Aguilar-Solano, 2020; Frechette et al., 2020; Tomaszewski, Zaretsky, & Gonzalez, 2020). Full details of instrument development, access negotiations, and data collection procedures are provided in Chapter Three.

Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in Employment Equity planning, implementation, monitoring, or reporting within public universities. Detailed inclusion criteria and sample composition are presented in Chapter Three.

### **1.9.5 Data Analysis**

A thematic analysis approach was employed to interpret the data, allowing for the systematic identification of patterns of meaning related to the experiences of EE

practitioners (Kempen, 2012; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework guided the analytic process, and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software supported the organisation of the dataset (Soratto, Pires & Friese, 2020). Technical and procedural details of the analytic process are elaborated in Chapter Three.

## 1.10 MEASURES TO ENSURE SCIENTIFIC RIGOUR

To operationalise Lincoln and Guba's (1986) measures of trustworthiness, the study would embed practical strategies aligned with dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. **Dependability** would be strengthened by maintaining a transparent, well-documented research process, ensuring that decisions, procedures, and methodological shifts are traceable and can be followed by another researcher under similar conditions. **Credibility** would be operationalised through prolonged and meaningful engagement with EE practitioners, the use of appropriate qualitative methods, and careful comparison of emerging interpretations with participants' accounts to ensure that the findings authentically reflect their realities. **Transferability** would be enhanced by providing rich, contextual descriptions of the research setting, participant characteristics, and institutional environments, allowing readers to assess whether the findings may be applicable to other university contexts. Finally, **confirmability** would be achieved by ensuring that interpretations arise directly from the data, rather than from researcher bias, and are supported by practices such as maintaining an audit trail, reflexive note-taking, and documenting the rationale for analytical decisions. Credibility was further enhanced through opportunities for participants to verify interpretations, while peer scrutiny of coding decisions supported analytical dependability. Collectively, these operational measures would reinforce the integrity and scientific rigour of the study.

## 1.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection, and formal permission was obtained from the participating universities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that their involvement was voluntary and free from coercion. Given the existing professional relationships and potential power dynamics within the

EE Community of Practice (CoP) networks, the researcher took additional steps to protect participants from feeling obligated to participate or disclose information that might compromise their professional standing. These measures included emphasising that participation or non-participation would have no consequences within the CoP, conducting interviews in neutral settings, and ensuring that no identifying information would be shared with colleagues or institutional leadership. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously upheld, particularly to safeguard participants who might critique institutional practices or leadership decisions. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without explanation, and all data were securely stored to prevent unauthorised access. These measures collectively ensured that ethical principles were not only applied but also adapted to address the unique relational and power dynamics inherent in the study context.

## **1.12 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

The methodological choices in this study offered several strengths but also necessitated careful consideration of their inherent limitations. The phenomenological orientation allowed for an in-depth exploration of EE practitioners' lived experiences, yet it also introduced the challenge of interpreting subjective accounts without imposing the researcher's own assumptions—a risk commonly associated with interpretivist work (Al-Busaidi, 2008; Choy, 2014). Likewise, although convenience sampling enabled access to members of the EE Community of Practice, it also risked restricting participation to individuals already engaged in EE discourse, potentially narrowing the range of perspectives captured (Etikan et al., 2016). The use of focus groups facilitated rich interaction but may have amplified power dynamics within CoP networks, potentially influencing participants' willingness to voice dissenting or critical viewpoints. Thematic analysis facilitated systematic interpretation of the data (Kempen, 2012), yet it required sustained reflexivity to ensure that coding decisions reflected participants' meanings rather than the researcher's preconceptions (Stevenson & Josefy, 2019). Overall, while the methodological approach aligned well with the study's exploratory aims, its reliance on subjective interpretations, relational dynamics among participants, and the researcher's mediating role necessitated ongoing scrutiny to uphold the integrity of the findings.

## **1.13 CHAPTER OUTLINE**

An overview of the dissertation structure is provided below:

### **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

Chapter 1 introduces the study by outlining its context within South African public universities and highlighting the legislative and theoretical foundations that shape the implementation of Employment Equity (EE). The chapter presents the problem statement, aims, objectives, and research questions, and provides a brief overview of the overall research approach. It concludes with an overview of how ethical considerations and scientific rigour were upheld.

### **Chapter 2 – Employment Equity**

Chapter 2 provides the conceptual and contextual grounding for the study. It discusses the South African EE landscape, elaborates on the theoretical frameworks guiding the study, and outlines the legislative environment shaping EE practice. The chapter also reviews relevant empirical literature to identify existing gaps and justify the need for the present research.

### **Chapter 3 – Research Design and Methodology**

Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodological choices that underpin the study. It explains and justifies the qualitative orientation, data generation strategies, and analytical approach, and outlines measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and manage ethical considerations.

### **Chapter 4 – Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings**

Chapter 4 presents and interprets the findings that emerged from the data analysis. The themes are discussed in relation to existing scholarship and the study's theoretical framework, offering insight into the lived experiences of EE practitioners and informing the development of practice-oriented guidelines.

### **Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Recommendations**

Chapter 5 synthesises the main conclusions of the study and proposes recommendations for EE practice, policy, and future research. The chapter also offers

a brief reflection on the researcher's learning and engagement throughout the research process.

#### **1.14 SUMMARY**

This chapter introduced the study and established the context for exploring EE practitioners' perspectives in South African public universities. It outlined the research problem, objectives, questions, significance, and the conceptual and methodological foundations guiding the inquiry. Subsequent chapters build on these foundations to develop a deeper understanding of how EE practitioners experience and interpret the implementation of Employment Equity within the higher education sector.

Chapter 2 will discuss Employment Equity by outlining the context of EE practices in South Africa, providing the legislative and theoretical frameworks within which EE is managed, and, lastly, discussing previous research on the implementation of EE.

## **CHAPTER 2 – EMPLOYMENT EQUITY**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter reviews literature relevant to Employment Equity (EE) to establish the conceptual, contextual, and theoretical foundations of the study. The discussion begins by outlining the contemporary context in which EE is practised in South Africa, focusing on persistent inequalities that shape transformation efforts. This contextualisation is followed by an examination of the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, as well as an overview of the legislative environment that regulates the implementation of EE.

The chapter further considers the role of EE practitioners as institutional actors tasked with facilitating compliance, promoting organisational transformation, and managing equity-related processes. Finally, findings from previous research on EE implementation are synthesised to identify gaps in existing knowledge, particularly the limited focus on the perspectives of EE practitioners in public universities. These insights guide the present study, which seeks to contribute to the discourse on workplace transformation in the higher education sector.

While previous studies have examined Employment Equity primarily through legal compliance, demographic outcomes, or employee perceptions, fewer studies have foregrounded the institutional actors responsible for implementation. This chapter, therefore, also positions EE practitioners as strategic agents whose experiences may illuminate why Employment Equity initiatives succeed, stagnate, or generate resistance within public universities.

#### **2.1.1 Conceptualising employment equity**

Employment Equity is both a legislative mechanism and an organisational transformation strategy. In the South African context, it refers to deliberate measures aimed at eliminating unfair discrimination and advancing equitable representation of historically disadvantaged groups across occupational levels. Although often reduced to numerical compliance targets, contemporary scholarship argues that Employment

Equity should also encompass inclusive culture, fair access to opportunity, leadership accountability, and sustainable talent development (Booyesen, 2018; Morley, 2022).

Two broad interpretations of Employment Equity are evident in the literature. A compliance-oriented interpretation emphasises legal reporting, numerical targets, and statutory obligations. A transformation-oriented interpretation focuses on institutional redesign, capability development, fairness, and substantive equality outcomes. Where institutions privilege compliance over transformation, Employment Equity risks becoming symbolic rather than developmental. This distinction is highly relevant to understanding the role tensions experienced by EE practitioners.

## **2.2 CONTEXT OF EE PRACTICE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Employment Equity in South Africa is implemented within a socio-historical environment deeply shaped by inequalities of race, gender, and disability. These inequalities continue to influence organisational dynamics and transformation outcomes. EE practitioners operate within this complex environment, where entrenched disparities and perceptions of inequity affect institutional culture, workforce planning, and policy implementation. The following subsections outline the key contextual dimensions that are relevant to understanding the challenges of implementing EE.

### **2.2.1 Race**

Racial inequality remains a central feature of South African labour markets and continues to shape the context in which EE practitioners work. Historical workplace racialisation, rooted in apartheid-era policies, produced deeply entrenched patterns of occupational segregation. Wood and Bischoff (2020) attribute this racialisation to labour practices shaped by Fordism and systemic racial control, resulting in the disproportionate representation of white employees in skilled and managerial positions and black employees in lower-skilled roles. Ndinda and Ndlovu (2022) similarly note that racial classification under apartheid created structural inequalities that persist in contemporary employment patterns.

Although job reservation and other racially discriminatory measures have been abolished, their effects remain visible in organisational demographics and access to opportunities. These historical legacies influence the pace of workplace transformation and contribute to resistance, scepticism and contestation surrounding EE initiatives. The EE practitioner must therefore navigate organisational structures where racial disparities, although legally prohibited, continue to influence recruitment, promotion, and perceptions of fairness.

International pressures also played a role in shifting labour practices during the late apartheid era. As Webster and Forrest (2021) explain, the ILO's condemnation of discriminatory practices and the UN's call for disinvestment contributed to the establishment of reviews such as the Wiehahn Commission, which recommended deracialising labour relations and expanding workers' rights. These developments laid the groundwork for subsequent legislative reforms; however, they did not eliminate the deeply embedded inequalities that continue to constitute the context of EE today.

The persistence of racial inequalities in the labour market reinforces the necessity for EE measures, while simultaneously shaping the challenges practitioners face when implementing transformation initiatives in public universities.

### **2.2.2 Gender**

Gender inequality constitutes another dimension of the societal context in which EE is implemented. Patterns of gendered marginalization in the workplace are well documented, often conceptualised through the metaphor of the "glass ceiling," which limits women's advancement to senior positions (Bruckmüller & Braun, 2020). Historical discrimination under apartheid contributed to skewed income distributions and limited opportunities for women (Musetsho, Isac & Dobrin, 2021). These dynamics intersect with contemporary institutional cultures, creating persistent barriers to gender equity.

Although legal and policy developments—such as the Charter for Effective Equality and constitutional commitments to non-sexism—have sought to redress gender inequalities, their effects remain uneven (Haastrup, 2020). Women continue to

experience exclusion from informal networks, limited access to career development opportunities, and implicit biases that impede advancement. These challenges also affect EE practitioners who must address gender disparities in contexts where competing interpretations of fairness and merit may impede organisational change.

Gender inequality also intersects with race and other identity dimensions, creating compounded forms of exclusion. Haastrup (2020) argues that gendered discrimination persists alongside racialised inequalities and that non-binary and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) identities face unique forms of marginalisation. These intersectional issues complicate the implementation of EE measures, highlighting the need for nuanced approaches that address multiple forms of inequality simultaneously.

### **2.2.3 Disability**

Disability inequality poses additional challenges in the EE context. People with disabilities (PwDs) continue to experience reduced employment prospects and workplace integration barriers, influenced by organisational perceptions, limited managerial competence, and structural constraints (Breen & Forwell, 2021; Nxumalo, 2020). McKinney and Swartz (2021) note that insufficient understanding of disability contributes to exclusionary practices, affecting both recruitment and retention. These factors hinder organisations' ability to meet EE targets and create inclusive workplaces.

Employers' disability management approaches influence how PwDs are supported. Catrone et al. (2023) describe three dominant models—the moral, medical, and social models—which shape organisational responses to disability. The persistence of medical and moral models in some organisations continues to reinforce exclusion, whereas the social model emphasises the removal of environmental and attitudinal barriers. EE practitioners must therefore navigate these differing perspectives and facilitate reasonable accommodation measures in ways that align with legislative requirements and organisational capacity.

The underrepresentation of PwDs and the challenges of mainstreaming disability within transformation strategies further underscore the complexities facing EE practitioners. Advancing disability equity requires appropriate organisational support, adequate resources, and improved understanding among managers and employees, all of which influence the effectiveness of EE initiatives.

## **2.3 LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK**

The implementation of Employment Equity in South Africa is situated within a comprehensive legal framework designed to address past inequalities and promote fair labour practices. This framework establishes employers' obligations, regulates workplace relations, and outlines employees' rights. For EE practitioners in public universities, understanding and navigating this legal environment is central to their operational role. The following sections provide an overview of key legislative provisions relevant to the study.

Although South Africa's legislative framework for equality is comprehensive, implementation outcomes remain uneven across sectors. This suggests that legislation alone is insufficient to secure transformation. Effective implementation depends on leadership commitment, organisational capability, accountability systems, and the practical agency of those tasked with operationalising policy. In this regard, EE practitioners serve as central mediators between legal obligations and institutional practice.

### **2.3.1 Equality and Social Justice**

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 108 of 1996, provides the foundational basis for equality and social justice. Its preamble and Bill of Rights commit the state to creating a society grounded in dignity, equality, and freedom (South Africa, 1996). These principles underpin subsequent legislation aimed at eliminating discrimination and promoting equitable participation in the labour market.

To give effect to constitutional commitments, the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, 4 of 2000 (PEPUDA), was introduced. PEPUDA prohibits

unfair discrimination, harassment, and hate speech on both listed and analogous grounds. Its relevance to EE lies in its articulation of broad equality standards that employers must uphold when developing and implementing workplace policies.

Judicial decisions have reinforced the constitutional commitment to equality. For instance, in *Nongena v Ali NO and Others* (JR231/09), the Labour Court affirmed that discriminatory practices grounded in patriarchal norms are unlawful. Although such cases do not directly involve EE practitioners, they shape the legal environment within which EE-related decisions are made, influencing organisational policy formulation and the interpretation of fairness in employment contexts.

Overall, this legislation establishes the normative foundation for EE measures and informs the responsibilities of EE practitioners who support institutional compliance and promote equitable workplace practices.

### **2.3.2 Protecting the Rights of Employees**

The right to fair labour practices, enshrined in Section 23(1) of the Constitution, is operationalised through labour legislation that regulates workplace relationships. The Labour Relations Act (LRA) (66 of 1995) seeks to advance this right by regulating collective bargaining, dispute resolution, and unfair labour practices (South Africa, 1995). Relevant provisions include protections against unfair discipline, unfair discrimination, and unfair conduct relating to promotion, demotion, and benefits. These provisions intersect with EE when allegations of unfair treatment arise in recruitment or promotion processes.

The Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) (75 of 1997) further protects employees by regulating working hours, leave entitlements, and other minimum standards. As an ILO-compliant statute, the BCEA contributes to eliminating discriminatory working conditions and complements the objectives of the EEA. For EE practitioners, these Acts provide the broader labour relations framework within which transformation initiatives must operate. They also define boundaries for organisational decision-making, particularly in contexts where employment equity intersects with other labour rights.

### 2.3.3 Establishing Affirmative Action Measures

The Employment Equity Act (EEA) 55 of 1998 is the central legislation governing affirmative action (AA) and workplace transformation in South Africa. The Act aims to eliminate unfair discrimination and achieve equitable representation of designated groups across occupational levels and categories. These dual objectives reflect the intention to promote both formal equality (equal treatment) and substantive equality (equitable outcomes) (Joubert, 2017; Wood & Bischoff, 2020).

Several scholars caution that where affirmative action is implemented narrowly as target attainment, it may generate perceptions of tokenism, procedural compliance, or resistance. By contrast, when linked to mentoring, succession planning, developmental pathways, and inclusive leadership practices, affirmative action is more likely to produce durable transformation outcomes (Morley, 2022; Thomas, 2020).

The EEA obliges designated employers to develop employment equity plans, conduct barrier analyses, and implement measures to advance workplace diversity and representation. EE practitioners are directly responsible for guiding institutions through these processes. Key components of AA measures are outlined below.

#### **Eliminating unfair discrimination**

Sections 6(1) and 6(4) of the EEA prohibit unfair discrimination and require employers to ensure equal pay for work of equal value. Policies relating to recruitment, promotion, and remuneration must therefore be free from discriminatory practices. Litigation in this area highlights common challenges in EE implementation. For example:

- In *Impala Platinum Ltd v Jonase & Others* (JR698/15), failure by the CCMA to adequately consider policy criteria relating to skill requirements led to an incorrect finding of discrimination, later overturned by the Labour Court (Patel & Coetzer, 2017).
- In *Sun International Limited v SACCAWU obo Ramerafe*, the Labour Court affirmed that pay differentials based on rational and justifiable reasons do not constitute unfair discrimination (Pienaar & Osmond, 2019).

- In *Naidoo & Others v Parliament of the Republic of South Africa* [2018] ZALCCT 38, the court emphasised that discrimination claims based on arbitrary grounds require evidence of infringement of human dignity.

These cases illustrate the complexity of discrimination claims and underscore the need for EE practitioners to ensure that institutional policies comply with legal requirements while supporting transparent, defensible decision-making processes.

### **Implementing Affirmative Action measures**

Section 13 of the EEA requires designated employers to implement AA measures to address historical disadvantages affecting designated groups. Such measures include:

- Identifying and removing barriers to equitable participation.
- Advancing workplace diversity consistent with constitutional values (South Africa, 1996).
- Providing reasonable accommodation, particularly for PwDs (South Africa, 2015).
- Ensuring equitable representation across job levels.
- Facilitating skills development and succession planning.

The Skills Development Act (SDA) 97 of 1998 supports AA through training and development initiatives, while the Employment Services Act (ESA) 4 of 2014 regulates the employment of foreign nationals in scarce skill areas. Although these statutes aim to enhance the employability of designated groups, their effectiveness depends on organisational commitment and adequate resource allocation. Englert and Runciman (2019) note several limitations of the ESA, including income disparities and limited protection for outsourced workers, highlighting the complexities involved in achieving equitable employment relations.

Employers implementing AA must therefore balance regulatory compliance with organisational realities. Hicks-Clarke and Iles (2000) caution that AA should not result in new forms of exclusion but should seek to bridge inequalities to the benefit of all stakeholders. Challenges persist where AA measures are insincerely implemented or perceived as tokenistic, undermining the credibility of transformation efforts.

### **2.3.4 Development and Implementation of EE Plans**

Effective EE planning is essential for achieving substantive transformation. Section 24 of the EEA requires employers to assign senior managers with the authority and resources necessary to monitor and implement EE plans. The Code of Good Practice on the Preparation, Implementation and Monitoring of the Employment Equity Plan outlines the processes that employers must follow, including conducting workforce analyses, identifying employment barriers, and developing strategies to address them. Additional Codes of Good Practice support specific aspects of EE implementation, including:

- Integration of EE into HR policies;
- Prevention and management of sexual harassment;
- Employment of persons with disabilities; and
- Management of HIV/AIDS in the workplace.

For EE practitioners, these codes provide operational guidance while also establishing expectations for organisational behaviour. Ensuring alignment between institutional policies and these standards is a key responsibility that influences the success of EE initiatives.

### **2.3.5 EE in South African Public Universities**

Public universities are subject to both the EEA and the Higher Education Act (HEA) (101 of 1997). They must report on transformation progress to the Department of Labour (DoL) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), with Section 37 of the HEA requiring institutions to implement AA measures that address the underrepresentation of designated groups. Despite these requirements, transformation in the sector remains uneven.

Table 1 from DHET (2021) indicates slow progress in achieving demographic representivity across occupational levels. African, Coloured, and Indian groups are underrepresented in senior positions, while employees with disabilities fall short of the national 2% target. The transformation agenda, guided by Education White Paper 3

and DHET strategic frameworks, has emphasised the need for integrated workforce and succession planning. However, Legoabe et al. (2015) found that many academic and professional staff lack an understanding of EE's importance, which hampers institutional efforts.

**Table 2.1: Demographic profile of South African public universities**

|                   | <b>GENDER</b> | <b>A</b> | <b>C</b> | <b>I</b> | <b>W</b> | <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>BLACK</b> |
|-------------------|---------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|--------------|--------------|
| National EAP      | Male          | 43,6%    | 5,0%     | 1,8%     | 4,9%     | 55,3%        | 50,4%        |
|                   | Female        | 35,8%    | 4,1%     | 0,9%     | 3,9%     | 44,7%        | 40,8%        |
|                   | Total         | 79,4%    | 9,1%     | 2,7%     | 8,8%     | 100,0%       | 91,2%        |
| Top Management    | Total         | 18,9%    | 7,4%     | 9,5%     | 61,1%    | 3,1%         | 35,8%        |
|                   | Male          | 10,8%    | 3,2%     | 5,9%     | 30,3%    | 2,0%         | 19,9%        |
|                   | Female        | 8,1%     | 4,2%     | 3,6%     | 30,8%    | 1,1%         | 15,9%        |
| Senior Management | Total         | 25,1%    | 7,1%     | 7,6%     | 54,7%    | 5,5%         | 39,8%        |
|                   | Male          | 14,4%    | 3,5%     | 3,2%     | 22,0%    | 3,7%         | 21,1%        |
|                   | Female        | 10,7%    | 3,6%     | 4,4%     | 32,7%    | 1,8%         | 18,7%        |
| Middle Management | Total         | 50,0%    | 9,5%     | 4,5%     | 31,9%    | 4,2%         | 64,0%        |
|                   | Male          | 22,5%    | 4,6%     | 1,7%     | 10,4%    | 2,8%         | 28,8%        |
|                   | Female        | 27,5%    | 4,9%     | 2,8%     | 21,5%    | 1,4%         | 35,2%        |
| Junior Management | Total         | 64,7%    | 12,1%    | 2,7%     | 18,3%    | 2,2%         | 79,5%        |
|                   | Male          | 19,7%    | 3,9%     | 0,7%     | 4,2%     | 1,3%         | 24,3%        |
|                   | Female        | 45,0%    | 8,2%     | 2,0%     | 14,1%    | 0,9%         | 55,2%        |

Source: Adapted from DHET report (2021)

The demographic profile suggests that progress has been uneven across occupational levels, with representation improving more rapidly at lower and middle levels than in senior leadership positions. This pattern may indicate structural blockages in promotion pipelines, weak succession planning, or institutional resistance at senior levels. For practitioners, these patterns create pressure to meet targets despite constraints that may lie beyond their formal authority.

EE practitioners in universities, therefore, operate within a complex environment that requires balancing statutory compliance, institutional autonomy, and sectoral transformation priorities. Their perspectives on these dynamics are central to this study.

## **2.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is underpinned by a three-tiered theoretical framework comprising the Agency Theory, Identity Negotiation Theory (INT), and the Psychological Contract Theory. These theories offer complementary analytical lenses for understanding the perspectives and experiences of EE practitioners who implement employment equity in public universities. Agency Theory explains structural accountability tensions; Identity Negotiation Theory explains interpersonal legitimacy and role identity tensions; Psychological Contract Theory explains motivation, trust, and commitment dynamics. Together, they provide a multi-level explanation of EE practitioner experiences. The selection of multiple theories is grounded in the view that EE practitioners operate within complex organisational environments characterised by conflicting expectations, competing identities, and relational demands (Varpio et al., 2020). Each theory contributes to explaining different dimensions of the practitioner's role and is presented below.

### **2.4.1 The Agency Theory**

The Agency Theory posits that relationships between principals and agents are inherently characterised by divergent interests, information asymmetries, and potential conflicts (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). In the context of EE implementation, the Vice-Chancellor acts as the principal and carries statutory responsibility for driving workplace transformation, as outlined in Section 13 of the EEA (South Africa, 1998). The EE practitioner, who is responsible for operationalising EE activities, functions as the agent acting on behalf of the principal.

The theory assumes that the agent is expected to advance the principal's interests (Anthony & Govindarajan, 2005). However, in organisational practice, misalignment between strategic intentions and operational practices frequently occurs. Ng and Sears (2020) note that senior leaders' transformation commitments may be inadequately communicated or inconsistently interpreted, resulting in discretionary implementation by practitioners. This dynamic has implications for the effectiveness of EE measures and highlights the need for clarity in organisational directives.

In addition to hierarchical expectations, EE practitioners face competing demands from employees. Worthington et al. (2020) describe diversity managers as balancing dual roles—administrative oversight and practical implementation—which often lead to tensions between organisational efficiency and transformation imperatives. Nadiv and Kuna (2020) found that practitioners regularly encounter:

- Divergent employee expectations regarding transformation;
- Tensions between institutional autonomy and national transformation goals;
- Role confusion due to poorly defined mandates; and
- Conflicts arise when practitioners lack adequate training.

These conditions mirror the agency dilemma, where practitioners must reconcile their obligations to the institution with expectations from employees and external regulatory bodies. Where executive leaders delegate Employment Equity responsibilities without decision-making authority or adequate resources, practitioners may carry accountability without power—an archetypal agency problem. Adopting the Agency Theory, therefore, enables an examination of how practitioners experience and navigate these conflicting pressures in their daily work.

#### **2.4.2 Identity Negotiation Theory**

Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) explains how individuals construct, negotiate, and affirm their personal and professional identities through ongoing social interactions (Dickens et al., 2019). In the workplace, identity negotiation becomes essential when individuals occupy roles characterised by high relational demands and conflicting expectations, as is the case for EE practitioners.

Identity Negotiation Theory views identity as multidimensional, encompassing aspects such as gender, social class, cultural background, and professional role (Collier & Thomas, 1988; Ting-Toomey, 2015). Negotiating these identities requires competencies such as adaptability, empathy, cross-cultural sensitivity, and active listening (Srikandi & Rahmanto, 2021). When identity negotiations are successful, individuals experience affirmation, understanding, and respect from peers, supervisors, and stakeholders (Malik et al., 2022).

However, in complex organisational environments—particularly those involving transformation agendas—identities may become contested. Yuan et al. (2019) argue that unsuccessful identity negotiation can lead to diminished agency, identity deficits, and intentions to leave a profession. Sung (2022) notes that identity conflicts arise when individuals struggle to reconcile the demands associated with multiple identities, leading to emotional strain and cognitive dissonance.

EE practitioners often operate at the intersection of competing identities, acting as compliance officers, change agents, intermediaries between employees and management, and advocates for transformation. These overlapping identities may be difficult to reconcile in environments where transformation initiatives are contested or where institutional cultures resist change. INT therefore provides a useful framework for analysing how EE practitioners interpret their roles, affirm their professional identity, and maintain relational effectiveness within their institutions.

In university contexts, practitioners may simultaneously be viewed as compliance enforcers, transformation advocates, bureaucratic administrators, or symbolic representatives of change. These competing role identities can undermine legitimacy and increase emotional labour.

### **2.4.3 Psychological Contract Theory**

Psychological Contract Theory centres on the implicit expectations and obligations that exist between employees and employers. These contracts are unwritten, subjective, and shaped by ongoing interactions (Schaft et al., 2020). In the context of EE implementation, the psychological contract provides insight into how EE practitioners perceive organisational commitment to transformation and how this influences their own engagement.

The theory outlines several phases in the psychological contract process (Schaft et al., 2020):

1. Creation: Expectations are formed during induction and early organisational socialisation.

2. Maintenance: Ongoing exchange of information, resources, and support strengthens the contract.
3. Renegotiation or Breakdown: When expectations are unmet or obligations are violated, relationships weaken and may require renegotiation or dissolve entirely.

Maia and Bastos (2019) argue that psychological contracts foster organisational commitment when both parties perceive the relationship as reciprocal. However, these contracts are highly subjective (Bi, 2019) and influenced by individual experiences and interpretations.

In the context of EE, the psychological contract is shaped by several factors:

- The extent to which institutions support practitioners with adequate authority, resources, and information;
- The clarity of transformation priorities communicated by leadership;
- The consistency of organisational behaviour with stated equity commitments;
- The nature of relational exchanges between practitioners, employees, and leaders.

When EE practitioners' perspectives are disregarded, particularly in strategic planning and decision-making, they may perceive a breach of their psychological contract. Probst et al. (2020) warn that such breaches can lead to moral disengagement, where individuals become less committed to ethical standards or disengage from organisational objectives. For practitioners mandated to facilitate transformation, breaches of the psychological contract may diminish their effectiveness and commitment. Where institutions publicly endorse transformation but privately under-resource implementation, practitioners may perceive inconsistency between rhetoric and action, increasing disengagement and reduced organisational trust.

Consequently, adopting the Psychological Contract Theory allows the study to explore how organisational actions and relational dynamics influence practitioners' perceptions of fairness, reciprocity, and commitment within their roles.

## **2.5 PREVIOUS RESEARCH CONDUCTED ON EE IMPLEMENTATION**

A substantial body of research has examined the implementation of Employment Equity in South Africa. Although studies differ in sectoral focus and methodology, a consistent conclusion is that slow transformation rarely stems from a single cause. Rather, implementation barriers typically emerge through the interaction of leadership commitment, organisational culture, capability constraints, communication failures, and weak accountability systems. The following thematic synthesis groups these recurring findings.

### **2.5.1 Poor Management of Diversity and Lack of Organisational Commitment**

Research consistently shows that ineffective diversity management and insufficient organisational commitment hinder the implementation of EE (Joubert, 2017). These shortcomings manifest in several ways.

#### **Accountability Issues**

The EEA assigns responsibility for transformation to employers, yet studies indicate that this responsibility is often shifted or poorly coordinated. Oosthuizen et al. (2019) found that employers regularly devolve EE responsibilities to HR departments, distancing senior management from transformation efforts. In public institutions, staff transformation responsibilities has been delegated to line managers, even though these managers may have limited influence over vacancies or sector-specific shortages (Adonis & Silinda, 2021).

Within the university sector, the Commission for Employment Equity (CEE, 2020) and Harding (2018) noted ongoing underrepresentation of designated groups in management positions, despite statutory reporting requirements. Universities may also prioritise internationalisation and global rankings, inadvertently limiting transformation opportunities (Brandenburg, De Wit & Jones, 2020).

The cumulative effect of shifting accountability is that organisations pursue EE compliance rather than genuine diversity and transformation (Ronnie & Bam, 2020).

Motshabi (2020) cautions that such compliance-driven approaches are insufficient to redress inequality and may entrench superficial or incremental change.

### **Insufficient Resource Allocation**

EE implementation requires financial, human, and informational resources (Coetzee et al., 2019). However, studies report chronic under-resourcing of transformation activities. Maleka and Siziba (2019) found that key functions related to EE in government departments lacked funding, administrative capacity, and institutional support.

In higher education, Adonis and Silinda (2021) attribute the slow implementation of policy directives—such as Education White Paper 3—to insufficient capacity and ineffective support structures. Similarly, Nadiv and Kuna (2020) found that EE practitioners are often appointed without adequate training, limiting their ability to respond to complex transformation demands.

### **Role Conflict**

Role conflict occurs when employees face incompatible expectations within their roles (Schaack, 2020). For EE practitioners, this conflict is pronounced. Nadiv and Kuna (2020) identified several competing pressures:

- Some employees support transformation, while others resist it, creating conflicting expectations.
- Organisational rhetoric on transformation often diverges from actual practices.
- Practitioners may have to defend managerial decisions while simultaneously advocating for designated groups.
- Many face these challenges without appropriate preparation or institutional support.

These tensions align with the principal–agent dilemma described in agency theory. Because senior leaders' expectations are not always clearly articulated, practitioners may exercise discretion, leading to inconsistent implementation (Ng & Sears, 2020). Role conflict, therefore, significantly impacts the experiences of EE practitioners and the effectiveness of organisational transformation.

## **Poor and Inconsistent Policy Implementation**

Despite a strong legislative framework, inconsistent policy implementation persists across sectors. Warikoo and Allen (2020) note that affirmative action is not a guaranteed right but is applied at the discretion of employers, except within the public service where numerical targets exist.

In higher education, Adonis and Silinda (2021) highlight several structural barriers contributing to inconsistent implementation:

- insufficient institutional capacity;
- prioritisation of institutional autonomy over transformation;
- limited integration of staff transformation in national planning; and
- reliance on top-down interventions such as SSAUF programmes.

The Equity Index developed by Breetzke and Hedding (2018) revealed slow progress in academic staff transformation due to entrenched institutional cultures, competition between equity and quality imperatives, and the private sector's poaching of black academics. These findings underscore the complexity of EE implementation in universities and the importance of understanding practitioners' perspectives in this context.

Across these studies, a common pattern emerges where accountability is devolved downward, and transformation is not owned by executive leadership. Employment Equity becomes administratively managed rather than strategically led. This distinction is likely to shape the daily experiences of EE practitioners.

### **2.5.2 Negative Employee Perceptions**

Employee perceptions significantly influence the implementation of EE. Studies consistently report that negative perceptions—particularly relating to fairness and merit—undermine transformation efforts.

Oosthuizen et al. (2019) found that white employees often view EE as reverse discrimination, whereas black and female employees may view it as tokenism. These perceptions stem from historical inequalities, unclear communication, and

organisational cultures that have not fully embraced EE objectives. Joubert (2017) notes that distrust in EE processes threatens organisational cohesion and competitiveness.

Misunderstandings about the purpose of gender transformation initiatives fuel workplace tensions. April and Govender (2022) found that while white employees in the banking sector perceived EE unfavourably, black employees supported EE as a tool for redress.

Effective communication has emerged as a critical factor for mitigating negative perceptions. Kanjere and Lebea (2019) found that poor communication about EE goals and processes is a major obstacle to achieving transformation targets. These findings underscore the importance of how EE practitioners facilitate dialogue, education, and communication within their institutions.

These findings suggest that employee resistance is often less about Employment Equity itself and more about how policies are communicated, justified, and operationalised. Practitioners, therefore, play a crucial interpretive role in shaping perceptions of legitimacy.

### **2.5.3 A Lack of Structured Diversity Management**

Diversity management (DM) and EE are often conceptualised as complementary but distinct approaches to workplace transformation. Köllen (2021) traces the origins of DM to the United States, where it emerged as an alternative to affirmative action, emphasising the business case for diversity and expanding beyond race and gender to encompass multiple identity dimensions.

In South Africa, DM is widely regarded as a collective organisational responsibility (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021), yet implementation is frequently fragmented. Studies indicate that EE practitioners are frequently excluded from strategic decision-making, particularly in workforce and succession planning, reinforcing the operational rather than strategic positioning of EE within organisations (Booyesen, 2018). Oosthuizen et

al. (2019) emphasise that EE should be integrated into broader workforce strategies to support equitable representation and organisational productivity.

Succession planning, which forms a critical component of workforce planning, is often overlooked or inconsistently implemented in organisations. In universities, Musakuro and De Klerk (2021) found that these responsibilities are frequently delegated to Institutional Planning Offices, resulting in misalignment between institutional transformation strategies and EE imperatives. Studies by Theys and Schultz (2020), and Nunoo (2020), confirm that ineffective succession planning leads to perceptions of unfairness, missed transformation opportunities, and inconsistent institutional performance.

Collectively, these findings illustrate that diversity management in South Africa lacks the structured, integrated approach necessary for sustainable transformation. Understanding how EE practitioners experience these organisational inconsistencies is therefore critical.

The literature also indicates that Employment Equity and diversity management should not be treated as substitutes. Employment Equity addresses representational justice and redress, whereas diversity management focuses on inclusion, belonging, and organisational performance. Sustainable transformation requires integration of both approaches.

#### **2.5.4 Guidelines identified in prior research to improve ee implementation**

Prior studies propose several recurring guidelines for improving Employment Equity implementation. These include visible executive sponsorship, integration of EE into strategic planning, succession planning for designated groups, mentoring and leadership development programmes, improved workforce analytics, transparent recruitment systems, anti-bias training, and regular communication of progress (Booyesen, 2018; Morley, 2022; Thomas, 2020).

Other scholars emphasise that accountability should be embedded into performance management systems so that transformation outcomes are not treated as peripheral

responsibilities. In higher education specifically, coordinated workforce planning and academic pipeline development are repeatedly identified as necessary for sustainable representational change. These recommendations inform the later guideline-development objective of the present study.

## **2.6 SUMMARY**

This chapter reviewed literature relevant to understanding the implementation of Employment Equity in South Africa, with particular emphasis on the contextual, legislative, and organisational factors shaping EE practice in public universities. The chapter began by outlining the socio-historical context of race, gender, and disability inequalities that continue to influence workplace dynamics and transformation efforts. It then examined the legislative framework that mandates EE, including the Constitution, the EEA, PEPUDA, the LRA, the BCEA, the SDA, the ESA, and the HEA.

A three-tiered theoretical framework comprising Agency Theory, Identity Negotiation Theory, and Psychological Contract Theory was presented to provide conceptual grounding for examining EE practitioners' perspectives. The review demonstrated how these theories collectively illuminate the complexities of role expectations, relational dynamics, and identity negotiations inherent in the work of EE practitioners.

The chapter also synthesised findings from previous research on EE implementation, highlighting persistent challenges such as inadequate organisational commitment, insufficient resources, role conflict, inconsistent policy implementation, negative employee perceptions, and the absence of structured diversity management. These issues underscore the importance of examining EE from the perspective of practitioners directly responsible for facilitating transformation.

The literature review, therefore, established the need for the present study and provided the conceptual and empirical foundation for the methodological choices discussed in the next chapter. Importantly, the literature revealed that while extensive attention has been given to policy design and organisational outcomes, limited empirical attention has focused on the lived experiences, constraints, and strategic insights of EE practitioners themselves. This unresolved gap directly motivates the

present study. Chapter Three outlines the research design and methodology used to explore EE practitioners' perspectives on the implementation of EE in South African public universities.

## **CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter presents and justifies the research design, research paradigm, methodological choices, and research methods employed to investigate the perspectives of Employment Equity (EE) practitioners regarding the implementation of EE initiatives in selected South African public universities. The chapter is structured to provide a coherent methodological logic chain that links the research problem, research aim, philosophical orientation, methodological approach, and the strategies used to collect and analyse empirical data.

The chapter begins by explaining the research design and the philosophical paradigm that underpin the study. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the qualitative research methodology, including the phenomenological approach that guided the study's interpretive focus on exploring the lived experiences of EE practitioners. Thereafter, the chapter discusses the research setting, target population, sampling strategy, data collection methods, and the analytic procedures used to interpret the collected data. Measures to ensure scientific rigour and trustworthiness are reviewed, followed by ethical considerations that guided the research process. The chapter concludes by outlining the strengths and limitations of the methodology and summarising its key aspects.

Through this structure, the chapter ensures that methodological decisions are explicitly aligned to the nature of the research problem—namely, the limited research attention given to the subjective experiences, meaning-making processes, and professional realities of EE practitioners who are responsible for facilitating workplace transformation in South African public universities.

### **3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN**

Research design provides a strategic plan that connects the research problem to the procedures used to generate and analyse empirical data (Saunders et al., 2019). In

this study, the research problem stems from the observed disjuncture between legislative imperatives for advancing workplace transformation and the limited consideration of EE practitioners' perspectives in organisational decision-making. Existing literature suggests slow progress in transformation within universities and a lack of empirical engagement with practitioners who implement EE interventions daily. This methodological gap motivated the need for a research design that could generate nuanced, experience-based insights into how EE practitioners perceive and interpret the implementation of EE measures.

An exploratory research design was therefore adopted. Exploratory designs are suitable for studies aiming to understand phenomena that have received limited scholarly attention and where existing theories or empirical evidence are inadequate (Hunter et al., 2019). Such designs emphasise openness, flexibility, and sensitivity to participants' perspectives. Exploratory research does not aim to test predetermined hypotheses but instead seeks to illuminate the depth, complexity, and contours of poorly understood phenomena (Saunders et al., 2019). For this reason, the design aligns with the study's aim of generating insight—rather than prediction—regarding the subjective and contextual realities of EE practitioners.

Importantly, the exploratory design complements the phenomenological approach used in the study, as both focus on uncovering participants' lived experiences, meanings, and interpretations (Miller et al., 2023). This alignment ensures coherence between the study's research design and its broader philosophical assumptions.

Exploratory qualitative designs are particularly appropriate when prior research is limited for a specific occupational group or when dominant studies have overlooked actor-centered experiences. In this case, prior Employment Equity research has focused more heavily on policy compliance, demographic outcomes, or employee perceptions than on the experiences of practitioners responsible for implementation. The design was therefore selected to generate practitioner-centered insights.

### **3.2.1 Research Paradigm and Philosophical Assumptions**

A research paradigm reflects a researcher's underlying worldview about the nature of reality, how knowledge is created, and which methodological approaches are appropriate for studying a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which is well-suited to research seeking to understand socially constructed meanings and subjective human experiences (Ngulube & Ukwoma, 2019). Because this study explores the perceptions of EE practitioners, interpretivism provides the necessary philosophical grounding for examining how individuals interpret their roles, challenges, and interactions within institutional transformation processes.

Interpretivist research assumes that human experiences and organisational phenomena cannot be understood through objective measurement alone but must be examined through close engagement, dialogue, and reflection with participants (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). This paradigm is therefore appropriate for understanding how EE practitioners interpret EE policies, negotiate complex role expectations, and make sense of the organisational contexts in which they operate.

The interpretivist paradigm comprises four key components—ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods (Meihami, 2020)—that together shape the study's approach to knowledge creation. Rhetoric, although not traditionally part of paradigm discussions, is also acknowledged because qualitative writing styles influence how findings are presented (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Jonsen et al., 2018). Each component is explained below in relation to the study.

#### **Ontology**

Ontology concerns assumptions about the nature of reality and what can be known (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). In interpretivist studies, reality is viewed as multiple, subjective, and socially constructed. In this study, the "reality" of EE implementation is not treated as a single observable truth but rather as a composite of diverse experiences, interpretations, and meanings expressed by different EE practitioners.

EE practitioners' perspectives are shaped by their professional roles, organisational contexts, interactions with line managers and university executives, and their experiences with EE legislation (Carson et al., 2011; Sultana, 2020). Consequently, a relativist ontological stance was adopted, recognising that each participant holds unique and valid perspectives that collectively enrich the understanding of EE implementation (Cuthbertson et al., 2020).

This relativist stance enabled the study to explore variations in how EE practitioners conceptualise workplace transformation, interpret challenges, and negotiate their agency within complex institutional structures.

### **Epistemology**

Epistemology refers to assumptions about how knowledge is produced (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). From an interpretivist perspective, knowledge is co-constructed through the interaction between the researcher and participants, who together explore the meanings attached to their lived experiences (Sultana, 2020; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

This study, therefore, assumed a subjectivist epistemology, in which meaning arises through dialogue, interpretation, and engagement rather than through objective measurement. Close interaction with EE practitioners—through focus groups, observations, and iterative questioning—was considered essential for gaining insight into their deep-seated interpretations of EE implementation (Rahi, 2017; Meihami, 2020).

The epistemological stance justified the use of qualitative methods, which can capture subjective expressions, enabling the researcher to appreciate how EE practitioners make sense of their complex organisational environments.

### **Methodology**

Methodology refers to the overarching strategy used to conduct the study and achieve the research objectives (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm and the exploratory research design, the study adopted a qualitative methodology. Qualitative methodology offers the flexibility and depth necessary to

examine complex, context-bound experiences, such as the perceptions of transformation processes among EE practitioners.

The methodological choice recognises that EE implementation is embedded within social, organisational, and legislative contexts that influence how practitioners understand and enact their roles. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for studies that aim to uncover these lived experiences in natural settings (Grove & Gray, 2019; Ngulube & Ukwoma, 2019).

Because the researcher is herself an EE practitioner, the methodological assumptions also required acknowledgment of axiology—the influence of values and positionality (Killam, 2013). Reflexivity was therefore incorporated through field notes and reflective journaling (Bleiker et al., 2019), ensuring the researcher stayed aware of how personal experiences and assumptions might shape interactions with participants.

Given the researcher's professional proximity to the field, reflexivity was treated as an ongoing discipline rather than a once-off acknowledgement. This included documenting assumptions before each data collection session, recording reactions immediately afterward, and revisiting analytic interpretations to distinguish participant meanings from researcher inference.

## **Methods**

Within the interpretivist paradigm, methods refer to the techniques used to collect and analyse data (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). In this study, qualitative methods—encompassing focus group discussions, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews—were employed to capture the nuanced perspectives of EE practitioners. These methods allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms, ensuring the authenticity of their voices (Kennedy, 2019).

The rhetorical stance adopted in writing the dissertation follows a conversational but academically rigorous qualitative narrative style, as suggested by Jonsen et al. (2018). This rhetorical stance supports transparency in describing how the research unfolded in practice.

### **3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This section outlines the qualitative methodology employed in the study and explains how it aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, the exploratory research design, and the overall aim of understanding EE practitioners' perspectives on EE implementation in South African public universities. Methodological decisions were guided by the need to generate contextually rich, deep, and credible insights into how EE practitioners experience and interpret transformation processes within their institutional environments.

#### **3.3.1 Qualitative Research Methodology**

Qualitative methodology is concerned with understanding social phenomena by exploring participants' subjective meanings, experiences, and interpretations (Green, 2007). As noted by Kempen (2012), qualitative methods provide a foundation for producing detailed descriptive accounts of human experiences and are particularly useful for studies that require immersion in real-world contexts. In this study, the aim was not to measure EE implementation using numerical indicators, but to understand how EE practitioners perceive and navigate the implementation of EE initiatives within their institutional settings.

The qualitative methodology provided the flexibility and depth required to explore complex organisational dynamics and to engage directly with participants in their natural environments (Saunders et al., 2019). This was essential because EE practitioners' experiences are shaped by their everyday interactions with university executives, HR practitioners, line managers, and other staff. The methodology, therefore, enabled the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants (Ngozwana, 2018; Ngulube & Ukwoma, 2019).

The following considerations justified the suitability of a qualitative methodology for this study:

- **Contextual immersion:**

Qualitative research allows the researcher to understand experiences within the context in which they occur. Conducting the study within the context of public universities enabled a deeper understanding of the institutional systems, power relations, and administrative realities that shape the implementation of EE.

- **Exploration of meaning-making:**

EE practitioners' perspectives are shaped by the meanings they attach to their roles, challenges, and interactions. Qualitative inquiry enables the researcher to explore these meanings through direct engagement and dialogue (Wright et al., 2016).

- **Recognition of subjectivity:**

Because experiences related to EE implementation are inherently subjective and vary across institutions, qualitative methodology acknowledges and values this multiplicity of experiences (Singh, 2019).

- **Inductive reasoning:**

The study relied on inductive processes to derive patterns, meanings and insights from the data rather than testing predetermined hypotheses. As Kennedy (2019) notes, inductive reasoning is central to qualitative inquiry, allowing findings to emerge organically from participant accounts.

- **Contribution to practice:**

Qualitative research is well suited for generating context-specific insights that can inform practical improvements in institutional transformation processes—one of the key aims of this study (Kennedy, 2019).

The qualitative methodology thus allowed the researcher to access the richness and nuance of EE practitioners' experiences and to identify key themes relevant for developing a contextual understanding of EE implementation in South African public universities.

### **3.3.2 Research Approach**

To further align the study with its aim of exploring lived experiences, a phenomenological approach was adopted. Phenomenology, as described by Tomaszewski et al. (2020), seeks to uncover and describe the essence of participants' lived experiences of a phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon of interest is the implementation of EE within the unique context of South African public universities.

Phenomenology is appropriate when research seeks to understand how individuals perceive, construct, and interpret their experiences, rather than focusing on external behaviours or measurable outcomes (Creswell, 2023; Frechette et al., 2020). Given that EE implementation is shaped by individual perceptions, institutional cultures, and contextual constraints, phenomenology provides the methodological depth needed to generate insights grounded in participants' subjective realities.

The study's use of phenomenology was informed by the following considerations:

- **Focus on lived experience**

EE practitioners' daily engagement with EE implementation shapes their perspectives. Phenomenology provided the structure for exploring these experiences in depth.

- **Exploring essence and meaning**

The approach facilitated the identification of shared meanings among practitioners across different types of universities, enabling the development of an interpretive narrative of EE implementation.

- **Dialogical engagement**

Phenomenological research recognises dialogue as a means of accessing lived experience. Group-based dialogue through focus groups helped elicit detailed descriptions of EE practitioners' interpretations and meaning-making processes (Farias & Rudman, 2019).

- **Bracketing assumptions**

As the researcher is also an EE practitioner, bracketing was essential to manage preconceptions. A reflective diary was used to document personal assumptions,

emotional reactions, and insights, with the aim of enhancing research integrity (Umanilo, 2019).

Although traditional phenomenological studies often rely on individual interviews, contemporary qualitative literature acknowledges the usefulness of focus groups when the phenomenon under study is socially constructed, organisationally embedded, and collectively experienced (Tomaszewski et al., 2020; Urcia, 2021). In this study, EE practitioners regularly meet as a community of practice and engage collaboratively on EE matters, making focus groups an appropriate strategy for exploring shared experiences.

Phenomenology, therefore, served as a coherent and appropriate research approach for examining how practitioners understand, interpret, and navigate their roles within the implementation processes of EE in public universities.

While classical phenomenology frequently privileges individual in-depth interviews, more recent qualitative scholarship recognises that shared professional experiences may also be meaningfully explored through focus groups where participants collectively construct and validate lived meanings. Because EE practitioners operate within a professional community of practice and regularly engage in collective problem-solving, focus groups were considered methodologically appropriate for accessing both individual and shared dimensions of experience.

### **3.3.3 Research Setting**

Contextualising the research setting is crucial for understanding how institutional dynamics influence the experiences of EE practitioners (Dodgson, 2019). The study was conducted within the South African public university sector, comprising 26 universities established under the Higher Education Act (HEA). These universities are diverse in their mandates, structures, and histories, and are categorised into three types (Garraway & Winberg, 2019):

- **Research-intensive universities**, which prioritise postgraduate education and knowledge production;

- **Comprehensive universities**, which combine traditional academic offerings with vocational and professional programmes through mergers with former technikons; and
- **Universities of technology**, which focus on applied sciences and vocational training.

The transformation agenda within higher education is influenced by national imperatives, legislative requirements, and internal institutional strategies. Through Universities South Africa (USAf), Vice-Chancellors collaborate on sector-wide policies and initiatives aimed at strengthening transformation, governance and accountability. USAf also hosts an Employment Equity Community of Practice (EE CoP), which brings together EE practitioners responsible for coordinating workplace transformation within their respective institutions.

This setting influenced the study in several ways:

- **Diverse institutional environments**

Experiences of EE implementation differ across institutional types due to variations in organisational culture, academic structures, and capacity for workforce planning.

- **National transformation pressure**

Universities are required to submit EE reports to the Department of Labour (DoL) and transformation reports to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), intensifying pressure on EE practitioners tasked with coordinating compliance.

- **Community of Practice structure**

Because EE practitioners regularly engage through the EE CoP, they share common reference points and challenges, which enriches the collaborative nature of focus group discussions.

- **Complex organisational hierarchies**

EE practitioners operate under the authority of Vice-Chancellors (as accounting officers) and must collaborate with HR directors, line managers and transformation committees, making their work both relationally and structurally complex.

The research setting thus provided a rich and contextually embedded environment for understanding EE practitioners' lived experiences, organisational roles and meaning-making processes in relation to EE implementation.

The sectoral setting was also analytically useful because public universities simultaneously face statutory compliance obligations, institutional autonomy claims, budgetary constraints, labour relations pressures, and transformation expectations. These competing demands create a rich environment within which practitioner experiences can be explored.

### **3.3.4 Research Methods**

This section presents the specific methods used to identify participants, negotiate access to the research setting, collect empirical data, and analyse the data. In line with the qualitative, interpretivist, and phenomenological framing of the study, the methods were selected for their suitability in capturing the shared and subjective experiences of EE practitioners in implementing Employment Equity (EE) in South African public universities. The following subsections describe the target population, sampling strategy, the process of gaining access to participants, and the procedures followed for data collection and analysis.

#### **3.3.4.1 Target Population**

A target population refers to a group of individuals who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research question (Saunders et al., 2019). The target population for this study consisted of the 26 EE practitioners employed across South Africa's public universities. These individuals belong to the USAf Employment Equity Community of Practice (EE CoP) and are formally tasked with coordinating and implementing EE initiatives within their institutions.

The selection of EE practitioners as the target population was justified by the following factors:

- **Legislative mandate**

In accordance with Section 24 of the EEA, Vice-Chancellors (as designated employers) are required to assign senior managers to oversee and implement EE plans. These managers constitute the EE practitioners included in the study.

- **Direct involvement in EE implementation**

EE practitioners engage directly with organisational structures, workplace policies, HR practices, and transformation strategies. Their work puts them at the centre of the EE implementation process, making their perspectives highly relevant.

- **Finite population**

The number of EE practitioners is fixed and identifiable, forming a finite population of 26 individuals (Etikan et al., 2016). This makes the population well-defined and feasible for purposive engagement within qualitative research.

- **Broad institutional representation**

The population spans three types of universities—research-intensive, comprehensive, and technological—ensuring exposure to diverse organisational contexts.

EE practitioners thus constituted the most appropriate group for examining the lived experiences and interpretations underpinning EE implementation in South African public universities.

### **3.3.4.2 Sampling**

A convenience sampling strategy was adopted because the population of EE practitioners was small, specialised, geographically dispersed, and accessible through the USAf EE Community of Practice. However, convenience sampling was not based on mere ease of access. It was combined with purposive logic, as only participants with direct responsibility for Employment Equity implementation were eligible.

Inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Current involvement in EE planning, implementation, monitoring, or reporting;
- Employment within a South African public university;
- Membership or participation in the EE Community of Practice;

- Willingness to participate voluntarily;
- Ability to contribute experiential insight into EE implementation.

Although convenience sampling may limit representational breadth, qualitative phenomenological inquiry prioritises depth, relevance, and experiential richness over statistical representativeness.

A total of **six participants** took part in the study. Participation was distributed across three focus groups aligned to institutional categories as follows:

| <b>Focus Group</b> | <b>University Type</b>               | <b>Participants</b> |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Group 1            | Research-intensive university sector | 2                   |
| Group 2            | Comprehensive university sector      | 2                   |
| Group 3            | University of technology sector      | 2                   |

The use of small groups was intentional, enabling each participant sufficient opportunity to contribute detailed experiential accounts. Mini-focus groups of 2–4 participants are recognised as particularly useful where participants are specialised professionals and where discussion topics require depth rather than breadth (Morgan, 2019).

Data adequacy was assessed through information power rather than numerical size alone (Malterud et al, 2016). Where participants possess highly relevant expertise, dialogue is focused, and the study aim is narrow, smaller samples may be sufficient (Hennink et al, 2019). By the third focus group, no substantially new categories were emerging, indicating adequate informational depth.

However, recognising the methodological risks associated with convenience sampling, primarily related to potential bias and limited representativeness (Stratton, 2021), the study incorporated several safeguards:

- **Criteria of accessibility and willingness**

Only EE practitioners who were available during the data collection period and willing to participate were included.

- **Phenomenological suitability**

Participants were selected because they possessed direct lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation, aligning with phenomenological principles (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

- **Reflexivity to minimise bias**

Given the researcher's insider status within the EE CoP, reflexive journaling was used to monitor and mitigate potential influence on participant selection and interaction (Dodgson, 2019).

- **Triangulation across university types**

To enhance diversity in perspectives, sampling ensured participation from each of the three university categories (Garraway & Winberg, 2019).

Although convenience sampling inherently limits generalisability, the aim of qualitative, phenomenological research is depth rather than breadth. The sampling method was therefore appropriate for eliciting rich, detailed accounts of EE practitioners' experiences.

### **3.3.4.3 Negotiating Access to the Field**

Access to the research field is a strategically critical and ethically sensitive component of qualitative research (Chughtai & Myers, 2017). In organisational research, gaining access often requires navigating institutional protocols, gatekeepers, and power dynamics (Riese, 2019). Because this study focused on EE practitioners within public universities, the researcher needed to secure approval from multiple stakeholders before data collection could commence. The process involved the following steps:

- **Institutional Gatekeeping**

Registrars were identified as the formal gatekeepers for each university, responsible for granting permission for organisational research. Letters were submitted to the Registrars, including:

- a clear explanation of the study's purpose;
- details of data collection procedures;

- ethical assurances; and
- requests for permission to engage with EE practitioners.

This aligns with Stevenson and Josefy's (2019) recommendation that access must be formally sanctioned to maintain organisational trust and integrity.

- **Ethical Clearance**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa (UNISA) Research Ethics Committee before approaching the participants. Ethical approval ensured compliance with standards intended to prevent harm, protect confidentiality, and promote responsible research conduct.

- **Access to Participant Details**

POPIA (2013) allows access to publicly available records without additional consent. However, recognising that not all records were up to date, the researcher requested that the USAf secretariat confirm the current EE practitioner list and sought practitioners' consent to use their updated contact details for research purposes.

- **Relationship-Building**

The researcher established rapport with participants by aligning their communication with the collegial norms of the EE CoP. This supported open dialogue and trust, which are essential for qualitative inquiry (Alexander & Smith, 2019).

Through these procedures, access was negotiated respectfully and ethically, ensuring transparency and protection of participants' rights.

#### **3.3.4.4 Data Collection**

Multiple qualitative methods were used to ensure rich, triangulated data, consistent with the phenomenological approach and the interpretivist paradigm. Data collection included:

- Focus group interviews (primary method)
- Semi-structured interview guides
- Participant observation

- Reflexive note-taking

### **Focus Group Interviews**

Focus groups served as the principal data collection method. They are effective for eliciting collective views, exploring shared experiences, and stimulating memory through group interaction (Kempen, 2012). Because EE practitioners regularly engage as a CoP, focus groups were particularly appropriate.

Following Nyumba et al. (2018), the focus groups were structured as follows:

- Three sessions, one for each university type (comprehensive, research-intensive, university of technology)
- Group size: Focus groups were conducted as three mini-focus groups consisting of two participants each. Mini-focus groups are appropriate for specialised professional populations because they promote deeper reflection, fuller participation, and greater confidentiality comfort.
- Duration: approximately 90 minutes
- Moderator: An EE practitioner with strong rapport-building, listening and observational skills
- Platform: Microsoft Teams, selected for accessibility, cost-effectiveness and recording capability (Archibald et al., 2019)

Data saturation, defined as the point at which no new insights or themes emerged (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020; Saunders et al., 2018), was used as the criterion for concluding data collection. Redundancy of themes—not repetition alone—guided this decision, consistent with Aguboshim (2021).

Advantages of focus groups in this study included:

- enabling EE practitioners to voice shared organisational experiences;
- facilitating contextualised discussion;
- allowing rapid collection of large volumes of qualitative data (Aguilar-Solano, 2020); and
- supporting triangulation across institutional contexts (Busetto et al., 2020).

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

A semi-structured interview guide (Annexure A) was used to steer the focus group discussions. The guide allowed for flexibility in exploring emergent ideas while ensuring alignment with the research aims (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

The guide was piloted with EE practitioners who did not participate in the final study to test clarity, flow, and timing. Feedback from this pilot informed minor refinements, thereby enhancing the reliability and procedural validity (Busetto et al., 2020).

### **Non-Participant Observational Field Notes**

Because data collection occurred online, formal participant observation in the ethnographic sense was not undertaken. Instead, structured observational field notes were used to document interaction dynamics, tone shifts, pauses, agreement/disagreement patterns, and contextual issues such as connectivity interruptions. These notes supplemented the verbal data but did not constitute an independent primary dataset.

An observation guide (Annexure B), adapted from Frechette et al. (2020), ensured structured documentation of:

- participants' reactions and emotional expressions;
- interaction patterns;
- environmental challenges (e.g., connection instability); and
- potential researcher influences.

The researcher maintained a dual role as both a professional colleague and a researcher, requiring heightened reflexivity (Geddis-Regan et al., 2022). Reflexive field notes helped monitor positionality, manage bias, and interpret interactions within context.

### **3.3.4.5 Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed a structured thematic approach grounded in phenomenological principles. Because phenomenology centres on meaning-making, thematic analysis

provided a systematic yet flexible framework for interpreting the essence of participants' experiences (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Initial coding generated descriptive labels such as “excluded from strategy”, “compliance pressure”, “limited authority”, “leadership silence”, and “role overload”. Through iterative comparison, these were consolidated into higher-order themes relating to strategic marginalisation, accountability ambiguity, capacity constraints, and compliance-driven transformation. Theme refinement continued until internal coherence and distinctiveness were achieved.

### **Thematic Analysis Using Braun and Clarke (2006)**

The six steps of Braun and Clarke (2006) were used:

**1. Familiarisation:**

Reading and re-reading transcripts to immerse in the data (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

**2. Generating initial codes:**

Coding segments of text inductively and deductively using Atlas.ti. Codes were continuously compared with the literature and theory using the constant comparison technique (Kolb, 2012).

**3. Searching for themes:**

Grouping codes into broader patterns representing significant meanings.

**4. Reviewing themes:**

Ensuring themes accurately reflected the data and were internally coherent (Wright et al., 2016).

**5. Defining and naming themes:**

Clarifying the essence of each theme and how themes relate to one another.

**6. Producing the report:**

Integrating themes into a coherent narrative connected to literature, theory, and the research aim.

### **Data Analysis Tool: Atlas.ti**

Atlas.ti was used to manage, code, and retrieve qualitative data, supporting:

- systematic organisation;
- efficient handling of large datasets; and

- transparent, auditable analysis processes (Woods et al., 2016; Soratto et al., 2020; Smit & Scherman, 2021).

Although phenomenology traditionally employs approaches such as Moustakas's or Colaizzi's, the use of Braun and Clarke's model was justified because the study sought both descriptive and interpretive insights into participants' shared experiences.

### **3.3.5 Ensuring the Scientific Rigour of the Study**

Ensuring scientific rigour is critical in qualitative research to enhance the trustworthiness, credibility, and integrity of the findings. In this study, trustworthiness was ensured through the classical framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), consisting of dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Each component is discussed below, with explicit reference to how it was operationalised in the study to address earlier methodological limitations.

#### **a. Dependability**

Dependability refers to the stability, consistency, and replicability of the research process over time (Stahl & King, 2020). To enhance dependability, the study implemented the following strategies:

- **Peer Debriefing:**

An experienced qualitative researcher served as a peer reviewer and evaluated decisions made during the design, data collection, and analysis phases. Peer debriefing ensured that methodological decisions were defensible and reduced the influence of researcher subjectivity.

- **Reflexive analysis:**

The researcher maintained reflexive notes to document thought processes, value judgments, and methodological decisions. This diary created an audit trail demonstrating how interpretations were derived from the data.

- **Bracketing:**

As an insider to the phenomenon, the researcher engaged in bracketing—

suspending personal beliefs and assumptions—to avoid influencing data interpretation (Bleiker et al., 2019). Notes were documented for later review during peer evaluation sessions.

- **Reflexive auditing:**

The cumulative documentation of field notes, process decisions, and peer feedback formed a systematic record, enabling external scrutiny of the study process.

These strategies, taken together, ensured a coherent research process that could be repeated in a similar context.

## **b. Credibility**

Credibility concerns the accuracy of the findings in reflecting participants' views and experiences (Aguilar-Solano, 2020; Stahl & King, 2020). Member checking involved sending concise thematic summaries to participants electronically after transcription and preliminary analysis. Participants were invited to confirm accuracy, clarify intent, or indicate misinterpretation. Minor wording clarifications were incorporated. The study employed several techniques to strengthen credibility:

- **Triangulation**

- **Theoretical triangulation** was achieved by drawing on three complementary theoretical frameworks—the Agency Theory, Identity Negotiation Theory, and Psychological Contract Theory.
- **Site triangulation** entailed collecting data from practitioners in three distinct university types: research-intensive, comprehensive, and universities of technology.
- **Methodological triangulation** was achieved through the concurrent use of interviews, observations, and field notes.

- **Member checking**

Participants were invited to review summaries of interpretations after the focus group discussions. This validation ensured that interpretations accurately reflected their intended meanings, rather than being influenced by the researcher's bias.

- **Prolonged engagement**

Data collection took place over a two-month period, allowing for meaningful engagement with participants and fostering rapport. Extended engagement enabled

the researcher to understand the nuances of institutional contexts, thereby strengthening interpretive accuracy (Muzari, Shava, & Shonhiwa, 2022).

- **Reflexive analysis**

The researcher carefully examined the potential influence of personal values, professional background, and assumptions on data interpretation (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

These strategies ensured that findings authentically represented participants' lived experiences.

### **c. Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which research findings can be applied to similar contexts (Boswell & Cannon, 2014). Qualitative research does not aim for universal generalisation; rather, it seeks "fittingness," whereby findings may be meaningfully applied to comparable contexts.

To enhance transferability, the study included:

- **Thick description:**

The research setting, data collection environment, participant characteristics, and institutional contexts were thoroughly described, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings.

- **Transparency of method:**

Detailed procedural accounts of sampling, access negotiation, interview processes, and analysis methods allow other researchers to replicate or adapt the study in similar environments.

- **Contextual grounding:**

Because South African public universities share legislative, regulatory, and workforce transformation requirements, findings may be transferable to similar higher education contexts.

While generalisation is not claimed, transferability is strengthened by explicit methodological clarity.

#### **d. Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the study's findings accurately reflect participants' experiences, rather than being influenced by researcher bias or expectations (Schneiderman, 2020). It was achieved through:

- **Triangulation of sites and methods**

Multiple data sources reduced reliance on a single perspective or institutional context.

- **Audit trail**

Documentation of raw data, transcripts, coding schemes, theme development, and reflexive notes ensured transparency of analytic decisions.

- **Use of direct quotations**

The final analysis incorporated participants' verbatim statements to ensure that themes emerged from actual data.

- **Peer involvement**

An additional researcher reviewed the coding logic, category development, and thematic interpretation to minimise subjective distortion.

Reflexive memos were retained throughout coding to document why particular interpretive decisions were made and how alternative explanations were considered before final theme construction. These strategies ensured that interpretations were grounded in empirical evidence.

### **3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical conduct is foundational to qualitative research, particularly when participants share personal or professional experiences that may expose vulnerability (Connelly, 2014). Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of South Africa (UNISA), and strict adherence to ethical principles guided all stages of the research process.

Given the small professional community involved, the risk of deductive disclosure was carefully considered. Accordingly, institutional names, job titles, province identifiers, and role-specific descriptors were removed or generalised in reporting.

### **3.4.1 Obtaining Informed Consent**

Participants received detailed information about:

- the purpose of the study,
- methods of data collection,
- the intended use and storage of data,
- potential risks, and
- their right to withdraw at any stage.

Consent was obtained electronically, in accordance with the protocols for online qualitative research. POPIA (2013) provisions regarding publicly available information were observed, although additional consent was sought due to the sensitive nature of organisational research.

### **3.4.2 Ensuring No Harm to Participants**

Participants were informed that:

- their participation was voluntary;
- they could withdraw without consequence;
- the topics discussed would not expose them to institutional sanction.

The researcher's dual role as colleague and researcher required vigilance to minimise unintentional coercion. Reflexive monitoring was used to ensure that participants did not feel compelled to provide information that made them uncomfortable.

### **3.4.3 Ensuring Confidentiality and Anonymity**

To protect identity and sensitive information:

- All data were stored in a password-protected electronic environment.
- Pseudonyms were used during analysis and reporting.
- Participants in online focus groups were encouraged to use screen names that did not reveal personal identity, consistent with Newman et al. (2021).

- Recordings were securely archived and will be destroyed after the mandated retention period.

Given the small size of the EE practitioner community, special caution was exercised to avoid inadvertently identifying institutions or individuals.

### **3.4.4 Compensation**

Although compensation in qualitative research is debated (Newman et al., 2021), the costs of data collection for online participation were anticipated. Participants were therefore provided with small reimbursement vouchers to cover potential connectivity costs. Compensation was deliberately minimal to avoid coercion or undue influence.

## **3.5 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

### **STRENGTHS**

1. **Appropriateness of Research Design:** The phenomenological approach was well-suited for capturing the lived experiences of EE practitioners.
2. **Sampling Strength:** Convenience sampling allowed inclusion of information-rich participants with direct experience of the phenomenon.
3. **Strong Data Collection Procedures:** Focus groups facilitated in-depth exploration, co-creation of meaning, and rich dialogue among practitioners.
4. **Robust Data Analysis:** The use of thematic analysis and Atlas.ti enabled the systematic handling of large datasets and rigorous coding processes.

### **LIMITATIONS**

1. **Limited Generalisability:** Findings cannot be generalised to all universities, given contextual differences, the small sample, and non-probability sampling.
2. **Dependence on Online Platforms:** Connectivity issues occasionally interfered with participation and may have influenced the depth of engagement.

3. **Learning Curve with Atlas.ti:** The researcher required additional time to develop proficiency in Atlas. This is reflected in the tool's complexity and training demands (Choy, 2014).
4. **Potential Insider Bias:** Although mitigated through reflexivity, the researcher's insider status may have influenced interactions and interpretations.
5. **Limited group size variation:** While mini-focus groups enhanced depth, larger group interaction may have generated broader contestation of views.

Despite these limitations, the study maintained methodological coherence, ethical integrity, and scientific rigour.

### **3.6 SUMMARY**

This chapter presented and justified the qualitative research design, interpretivist paradigm, phenomenological approach, and associated methods used to investigate the perspectives of EE practitioners regarding the implementation of EE in South African public universities. The chapter detailed:

- the research paradigm and philosophical assumptions (ontology, epistemology, methodology, methods, rhetoric);
- the qualitative methodology and phenomenological approach guiding the study;
- the target population, sampling strategies, negotiation of access, and data collection procedures;
- thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework and Atlas.ti;
- robust measures for ensuring trustworthiness and ethical integrity; and
- the strengths and limitations of the research approach.

The revised methodology demonstrates clear alignment among the research problem, the interpretivist paradigm, the phenomenological orientation, the specialist sample, the data generation methods, and the trustworthiness procedures.

The next chapter presents the data analysis and findings derived from implementing these methodological procedures.

## CHAPTER 4 – RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the empirical findings generated through a qualitative inquiry into the experiences of Employment Equity (EE) practitioners in implementing EE in South African public universities. Guided by the study's interpretivist paradigm and phenomenological approach, the findings illuminate how practitioners interpret, enact, and make sense of EE within their institutional contexts. The chapter is structured around the study's three research objectives:

1. To explore the perspectives of EE practitioners on the implementation of EE at South African public universities;
2. To identify the challenges experienced with EE implementation;
3. To develop evidence-based recommendations to strengthen EE implementation in the sector.

In presenting the findings, the chapter moves beyond reporting participant views to interpret how organisational structures, leadership practices, institutional cultures, and resource conditions shape practitioners' experiences. Accordingly, findings are analysed not only descriptively but also explanatorily, drawing on the Agency Theory, Identity Negotiation Theory, and Psychological Contract Theory introduced earlier.

To ensure analytic rigour, the themes presented in this chapter emerged through inductive coding and thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) analytical framework, as elaborated in Chapter 3. The analytic process involved iterative coding, data condensation, clustering related codes, and abstraction to construct higher-order themes. Atlas.ti supported systematic management and organisation of data, with parent codes reflecting overarching thematic patterns and child codes capturing the nuanced dimensions of practitioners' experiences.

Findings are presented thematically and supported by verbatim excerpts from participants to illustrate meaning and contextualise the interpretation. Where

paraphrased, efforts were taken to preserve the intent and tone of participants' accounts, in line with Flick's (2014) guidance on authenticity in qualitative presentation.

## **4.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY'S PARTICIPANTS**

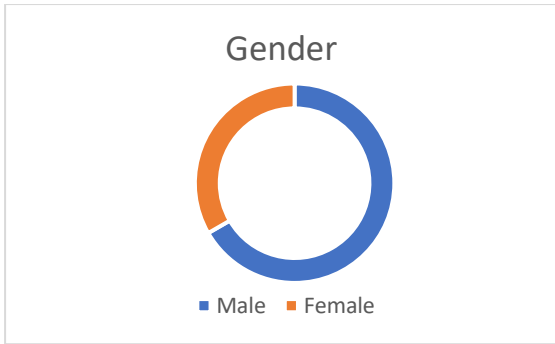
In qualitative research, participant characteristics serve to contextualise the interpretative findings rather than to provide statistical generalisation (Saunders et al., 2019). Accordingly, this section summarises the demographic and professional profiles of the six EE practitioners whose perspectives underpin the findings. These individuals were purposefully selected based on their direct responsibility for EE implementation within their respective institutions, including research-intensive universities, comprehensive universities, and universities of technology.

The practitioners included three directors, one EE specialist, one HR practitioner, and one EE/HR manager. All held formal responsibility for institutional EE planning, monitoring, reporting, and transformation-related coordination. Their positions positioned them as key informants with experiential insight into the complexities, constraints, and opportunities associated with EE implementation.

These characteristics are not presented for statistical inference, but to contextualise how role seniority, demographic identity, and professional experience may shape the meanings participants attach to transformation, authority, exclusion, and institutional accountability.

### **4.2.1 Gender**

Although gender was not used as a sampling criterion, the final sample consisted of four men and two women, as illustrated in Figure 4.1. This distribution mirrors broader institutional patterns in which women remain underrepresented in senior HR and transformation roles at universities. Although it does not yield a quantitative conclusion, this contextual imbalance provides insights into the gendered leadership dynamics discussed in later sections.



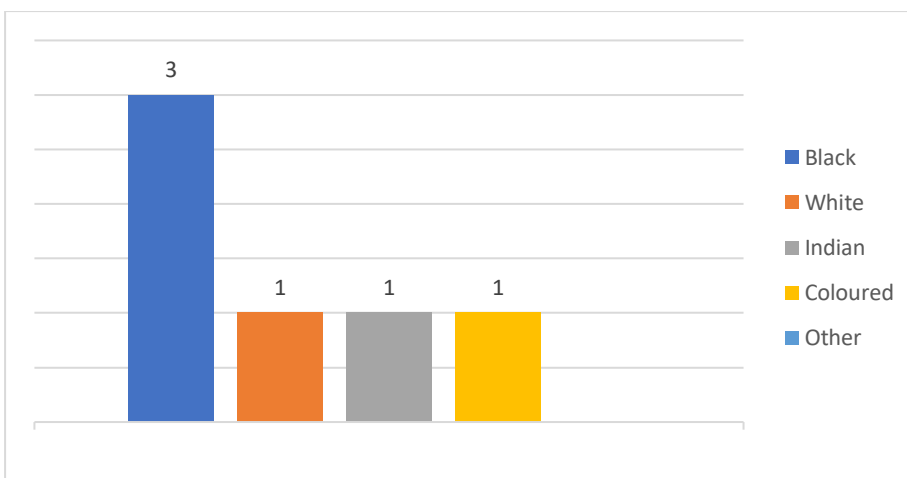
**Figure 4.1: Gender**

#### 4.2.2 Work Experience

Participants possessed between two and more than five years of experience in EE and transformation, ensuring adequate exposure to institutional processes and procedures. Their varied levels of experience enriched the analysis by providing longitudinal and comparative insights into the evolving EE environment.

#### 4.2.3 Race

Consistent with the demographic profile of transformation and HR units in many public universities, most participants were Black, as illustrated in Figure 4.2. Given their positionality within historically racialised institutions, these identities shaped their interpretations of transformation, representativeness, and institutional culture.



**Figure 4.2: Race**

#### 4.2.4 Age

Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 54 years, with the majority between 35 and 44 years. This age distribution in Table 4.1 reflects a mix of early-career and mid-career practitioners who bring both fresh perspectives and seasoned institutional knowledge to the implementation of EE.

**Table 4.1: Age**

| Age range              | 18-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| Number of participants | 0     | 2     | 3     | 1     | 0     | 0   |

#### 4.2.5 Job Position

Most participants held senior roles—such as directors and managers—responsible for overseeing institutional EE plans. Their strategic vantage point afforded rich insights into governance issues, systemic barriers, and leadership accountability structures. Their roles also align well with the Agency Theory lens used in this study, as these practitioners act as agents executing mandates from institutional leadership (principals).

**Table 4.2: Job Position**

| Job position    | Number of participants |
|-----------------|------------------------|
| Director        | 3                      |
| EE specialist   | 1                      |
| HR practitioner | 1                      |
| Manager         | 1                      |

These characteristics are recontextualised narratively here to align with qualitative reporting standards and to avoid an overly quantitative representation that is inconsistent with the adopted methodology.

### 4.3 PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES ON EE IMPLEMENTATION

The first research objective sought to explore the perspectives of EE practitioners on the implementation of EE at South African public universities. This section presents the overarching theme and its subthemes, which emerged inductively through thematic analysis. The findings reflect practitioners' lived experiences as they navigated institutional, relational, and systemic aspects of EE implementation. The insights also reveal the extent to which EE is conceptualised as either a compliance exercise or a meaningful driver of transformation.

Across the institutions represented in this study, practitioners held diverse yet interconnected perspectives regarding the implementation of EE. These perspectives were shaped by institutional history, leadership commitment, organisational culture, and the extent of organisational understanding of EE principles. Table 4.3 summarises the varied perspectives of employment equity practitioners on the implementation of employment equity across various universities.

**Table 4.3: Perspectives on EE implementation**

| Main Theme                       | Description                               | Example Quote  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Lack of EE Knowledge</b>      | Limited understanding among line managers | "The majority of line managers do not understand what employment equity is about." |
| <b>Compliance Orientation</b>    | EE is viewed as a legal requirement       | "Employment equity is a compliance process."                                       |
| <b>Diversity and Inclusivity</b> | EE is seen as a driver for diversity      | "We need a workforce that represents the diversity of our country."                |

| <b>Main Theme</b>                    | <b>Description</b>   | <b>Example Quote</b>   |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Institutional Mechanisms</b>      | Structural and procedural efforts to promote EE compliance | “All appointments are approved by the Vice Chancellor to ensure compliance.”       |
| <b>Monitoring and Reporting</b>      | Tracking and evaluation of EE targets is a priority        | “We produce monthly management reports on what we are doing.”                      |
| <b>Targeted Recruitment</b>          | Strategic hiring to achieve representativeness             | “We use deviation processes and re-advertise to find designated group candidates.” |
| <b>Leadership and Accountability</b> | Senior management oversight                                | “Processes overseen by the Deputy Vice Chancellor.”                                |
| <b>Transformation as Process</b>     | Broader institutional change                               | “Transformation is more than just employment equity in terms of numbers.”          |
| <b>Disability Disclosure</b>         | Fear and stigma issues                                     | “People are reluctant to disclose their disabilities.”                             |

From the coded data, five dominant subthemes were identified:

1. EE as compliance-driven rather than transformative
2. Limited EE knowledge and capacity among line managers and staff
3. Diversity and inclusivity as core values driving EE
4. Institutional mechanisms supporting or constraining EE implementation
5. Transformation as a long-term, multisectoral process beyond numerical representation

Although presented separately for analytical clarity, the five subthemes were deeply interconnected. Limited EE knowledge among line managers often reinforced a compliance-oriented implementation approach. In turn, compliance approaches weakened transformative intent, while inconsistent institutional mechanisms reduced accountability. Where governance systems were stronger, practitioners were better able to promote diversity and long-term transformation goals.

Each subtheme is unpacked below, supported by illustrative quotations.

### 4.3.1 EE as a Compliance-Driven Process

A dominant perception across participants was that EE remains largely a statutory compliance requirement rather than a transformative organisational priority. Practitioners consistently noted that EE is implemented “because it must be done”, not because institutions fully embrace its potential for equity and social justice.

Participant 2 explained:

*“In our environment, the majority of line managers do not understand what employment equity is about, which is a process where we require an equitable workforce profile across all the occupational categories, which will be aligned to the economically active population that we are utilising as an institution.”*

This echoes findings in the literature where EE implementation in South Africa is often reduced to a legislative obligation, resulting in minimal transformation impact (Joubert, 2017; Motshabi, 2019). This compliance focus aligns with Agency Theory, which argues that agents (EE practitioners) often operate within constraints imposed by principals (senior leadership), whose priorities may not fully support the intended transformation goals (Anthony & Govindarajan, 2005; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Participants further noted that EE processes, such as workforce profiling, target setting, and reporting, are often treated as administrative exercises rather than opportunities for structural change.

Participants further noted that EE processes, such as workforce profiling, target setting, and reporting, are often treated as administrative exercises rather than opportunities for structural change. This suggests that many institutions respond primarily to external regulatory pressure rather than to internal commitment to transformation. From an Agency Theory perspective, leaders as principals may prioritise reputational compliance and risk avoidance, while practitioners as agents are left to administer reporting systems without sufficient strategic authority to drive deeper reform.

### **4.3.2 Limited EE Knowledge and Capacity Among Line Managers**

A recurring challenge influencing practitioners' perspectives was the limited understanding of EE among line managers and staff, which undermines meaningful implementation. Many participants noted that insufficient knowledge leads to inappropriate recruitment decisions, misinterpretation of EE targets, and resistance to change.

Participant 4 articulated this gap:

“Without a solid understanding of employment equity and transformation, implementation becomes problematic.”

This finding suggests that implementation failure is not always ideological resistance; it may also stem from capability deficits. Where managers misunderstand EE, they may unintentionally reproduce inequitable recruitment or promotion decisions while believing they are acting fairly.

These findings align with Mushariwa (2020), who argued that inadequate knowledge of EE legislation and principles contributes to slow transformation in higher education institutions. In this study, participants emphasised the need for continuous training and sensitisation for line managers, as their decisions materially influence the institution's demographic profile.

### **4.3.3 Diversity and Inclusivity as Core Drivers of EE**

Despite the challenges, practitioners demonstrated strong personal and professional commitment to the values of diversity, equity, inclusivity, and belonging. They articulated EE not merely as a legal requirement but as a mechanism to create a more representative and socially just workforce.

Participant 4 described this view:

“Implementing equity is about creating opportunities for designated groups... diversity and inclusivity are the major drivers for EE.”

This perspective aligns closely with the Identity Negotiation Theory, which emphasises mutual respect, affirmation, and the creation of inclusive spaces where diverse identities can thrive (Srikandi & Rahmanto, 2021; Malik et al., 2022). The emphasis on inclusivity also resonates with PEPUDA (2000) and the constitutional imperative for substantive equality. However, the contrast between practitioner commitment and institutional constraints indicates a recurring tension: those most committed to transformation often possess the least structural power to implement it.

Participants repeatedly stressed that these ideals are often overshadowed by day-to-day operational pressures, resource constraints, and institutional cultures resistant to change.

#### **4.3.4 Institutional Mechanisms Supporting or Constraining EE**

The data revealed considerable variation across universities in terms of the institutional systems that facilitate or obstruct EE implementation. Practitioners referenced several mechanisms, including:

- targeted recruitment processes (e.g., re-advertising for designated groups)
- leadership oversight and approvals (e.g., Vice Chancellor sign-off on appointments)
- developmental programmes (e.g., talent pipeline, accelerated development)
- monitoring and reporting systems
- employment equity committees

These mechanisms play a crucial role in shaping implementation outcomes.

Participant 6 explained:

“We produce monthly management reports... we make sure that there is always communication about employment equity.”

These mechanisms proved effective only when accompanied by genuine executive support. Monitoring systems alone did not guarantee change; rather, they functioned as enabling tools when leaders acted on the information produced.

The presence of monitoring systems, succession planning, and leadership involvement reinforced the dynamics of Agency Theory. Leaders act as principals, making final decisions on EE processes, while practitioners execute technical EE functions. Where leadership commitment was strong, EE implementation appeared more coordinated.

However, practitioners also noted that these mechanisms were often inconsistently applied or lacked institutional authority, resulting in fragmented implementation and weak accountability.

#### **4.3.5 Transformation as a Long-Term, Multidimensional Process**

Participants repeatedly emphasised that transformation cannot be reduced to EE numerical targets. It is a long-term, multidimensional process involving cultural change, justice, social responsiveness, and structural reform.

Participant 2 expressed:

“Transformation is more than just employment equity in terms of numbers... it is connected to justice, culture, and responsiveness to political and environmental changes.”

This understanding aligns with the viewpoints of Badat (2010) and Jansen (2017), who argue that transformation in higher education requires more than demographic representation; it demands shifts in institutional culture, power relations, and epistemic practices.

Participants from historically black universities noted that progress varies significantly across institutions. Some historically white institutions were perceived as having undergone symbolic transformation rather than substantive change.

Participant 1 commented:

“Some universities think that if you change the vice chancellor and make them black, then you have transformed the university. It doesn’t work like that.”

This distinction between symbolic and substantive transformation was significant across interviews. Participants repeatedly differentiated visible representational change from deeper reform involving culture, decision-making norms, inclusion, and equitable opportunity structures.

This view highlights how surface-level transformation continues to mask deeper structural inequities. Figure 4.3 provides a graphical illustration of the network analysis generated in Atlas TI of the varied perceptions of employment equity practitioners regarding employment equity within universities in South Africa. The network analysis reveals that many participants believe that employment equity policies have been implemented in universities in South Africa.

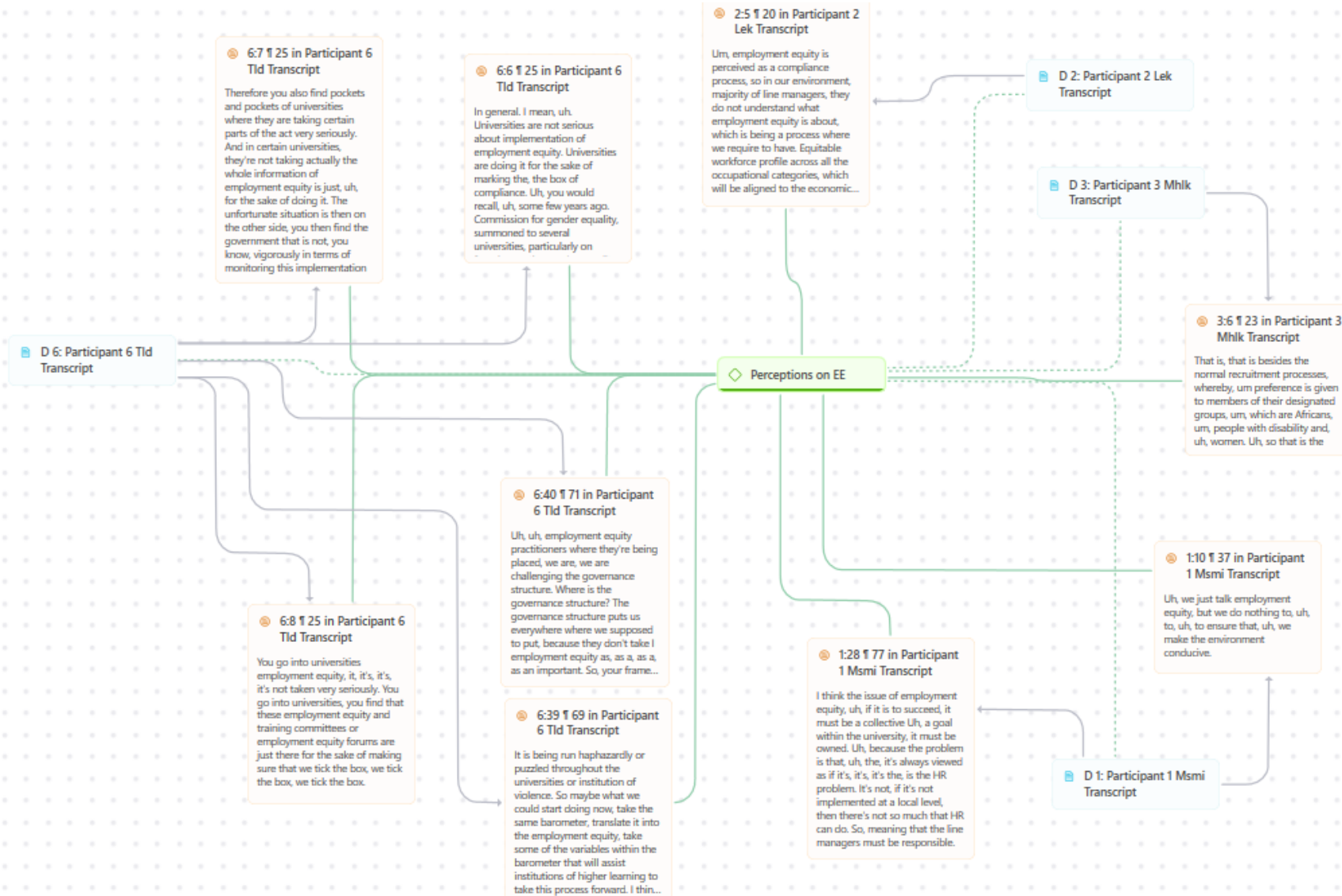


Figure 4.3: Perceptions of EE

#### 4.4 PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EMPLOYMENT EQUITY

This section addresses Research Objective 1 by extending practitioners' perspectives to their assessment of actual institutional progress, and Research Objective 2 by revealing barriers that slow implementation.

While participants acknowledged the constitutional and legislative imperatives that mandate the implementation of EE, their perceptions of actual progress in universities varied considerably. Progress was described as uneven and incremental, often hampered by systemic constraints. Uneven progress indicates that compliance obligations alone do not produce consistent outcomes. Institutions with stronger governance capacity, leadership commitment, and developmental pipelines appeared to progress faster than those relying on passive compliance.

A recurring sentiment was that progress in EE implementation is occurring, but at a pace much slower than anticipated. This mirrors findings by Kanjere and Lebea (2019), who observed that progress across universities remains inconsistent and often symbolic.

Participant 1 summarised this ambivalence:

“The speed with which universities are implementing EE is frustratingly slow.”

Likewise, Participant 4 noted:

“There are changes, but the pace is very slow. We still have a long journey ahead.”

Despite concerns about the slow pace, practitioners acknowledged pockets of improvement. These included:

- use of deviation processes to ensure that overrepresented groups are not prioritised;
- increased monitoring of EE targets at senior management level;
- institutional reporting mechanisms that track progress;
- succession planning and leadership development programmes for designated groups.

Participant 6 highlighted:

“We produce monthly management reports... we make sure that there is constant communication about employment equity.”

This suggests that accountability routines such as reporting may contribute positively when embedded in broader management systems. Where reporting becomes ritualistic, however, it risks becoming another symbolic exercise.

This demonstrates attempts to embed EE into institutional performance monitoring systems, thereby promoting accountability. However, as noted by Soudien (2015), such systems only yield significant progress when coupled with strong leadership commitment—an element that varied across institutions.

Figure 4.4 provides the results of the Atlas TI-generated Network analysis of the varied views of employment equity practitioners on the progress of employment equity implementation across various universities.

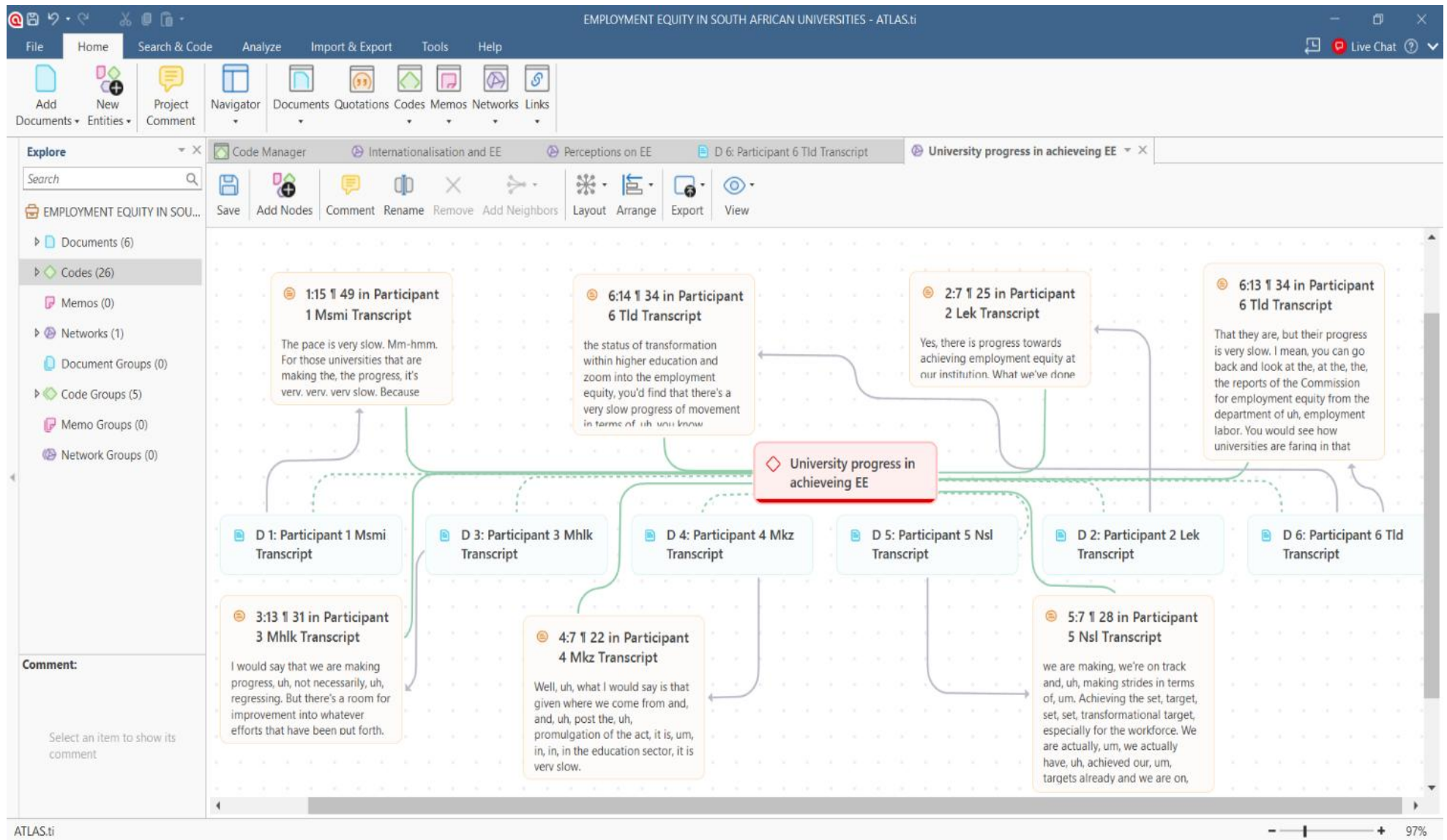
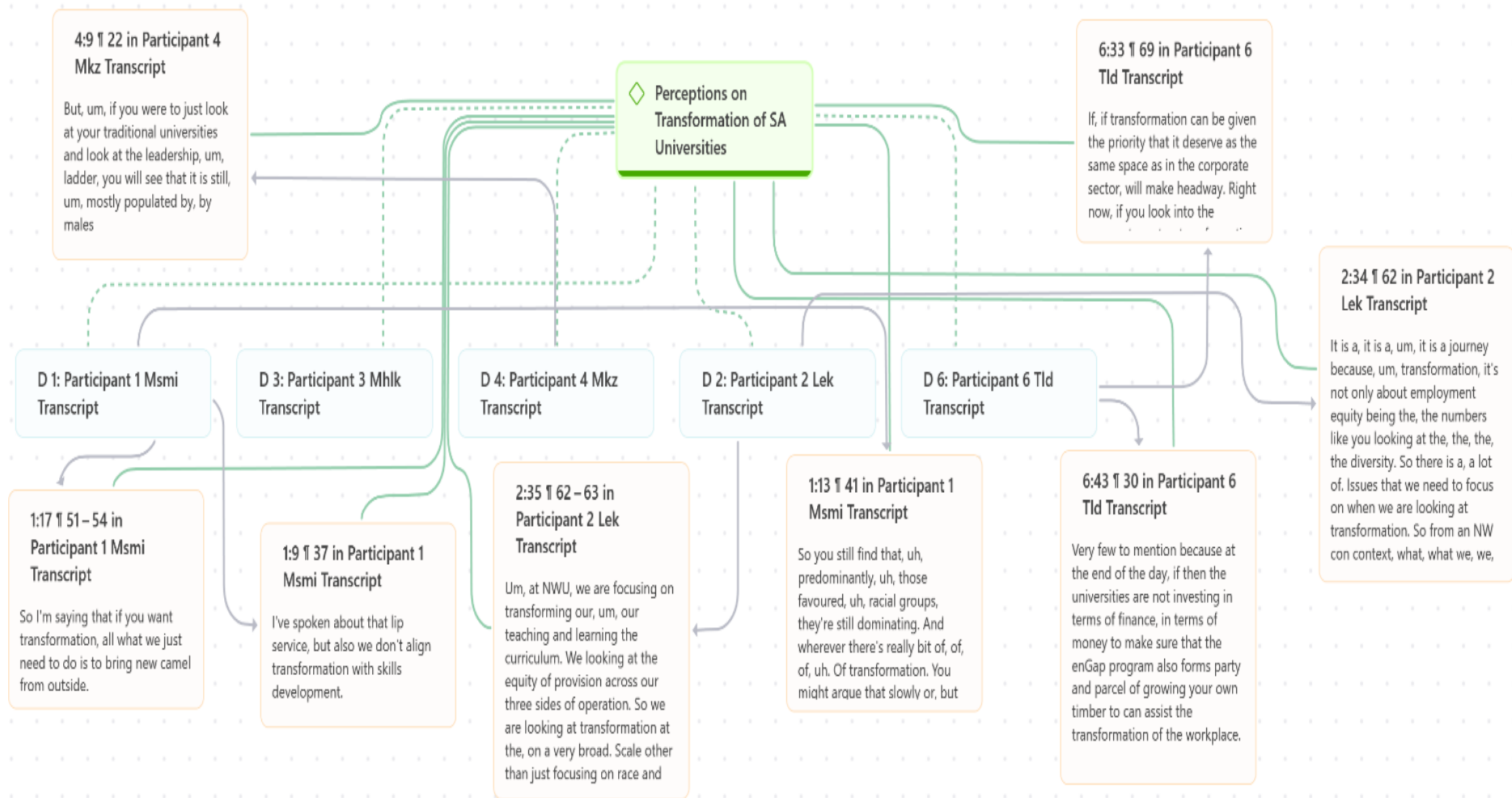


Figure 4.4: Progress of EE implementation

## **4.5 TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICA'S HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR**

This section addresses Research Objective 1 by exploring how practitioners conceptualise transformation beyond Employment Equity, and Research Objective 2 by identifying broader sectoral barriers affecting EE implementation.

Transformation emerged as a dominant theme across all interviews. Participants consistently emphasised the intertwined nature of employment equity and institutional transformation, while also highlighting that transformation extends far beyond demographic representativeness. Figure 4.5 illustrates measures to promote transformation and EE.



**Figure 4.5: Measures to promote transformation and EE**

### **4.5.1 Transformation as a Complex and Ongoing Process**

Participants conceptualised transformation as a multifaceted, long-term process involving:

- changes in institutional culture
- inclusion and belonging
- representativeness in leadership
- curriculum and linguistic transformation
- justice-oriented institutional reform
- responsiveness to broader societal changes

Participant 2 articulated this more expansive view:

“Transformation is not only about employment equity... it is connected to justice, culture, performance indicators, wellbeing, and responsiveness to environmental and political changes.”

Participants, therefore, viewed EE as necessary but insufficient. Numerical representivity was seen as one dimension of transformation, but not a substitute for institutional justice, belonging, or systemic inclusion.

This view reflects scholarship that positions transformation as a systemic process requiring shifts in power, culture, and values (Badat, 2010; Soudien, 2015).

### **4.5.2 Barriers to Institutional Transformation**

Despite expressing optimism about ongoing efforts, practitioners identified a range of structural and cultural barriers:

- historical legacies of apartheid, especially racialised campus cultures
- dominance of Afrikaans or Eurocentric institutional cultures
- resistance to transformation among staff
- symbolic rather than substantive transformation
- elite capture of leadership roles by previously advantaged groups

Participant 1 offered a strong critique:

“Many universities think that appointing a black vice-chancellor equals transformation. It doesn’t. The deeper systems remain unchanged.”

This finding reflects how surface-level leadership diversification may coexist with unchanged organisational cultures. In Identity Negotiation Theory terms, formal inclusion does not automatically generate identity affirmation, legitimacy, or belonging.

This aligns with Mayer et al. (2019), who caution against “window-dressing transformation,” in which visible representation masks unchanged institutional cultures.

#### **4.5.3 Competition for Scarce Skills and the “Leaking Pipeline”**

A significant barrier to transformation identified by participants was the competition for scarce talent among designated groups—particularly African females and individuals with disabilities.

Participant 3 explained:

“Because of competition among universities, it’s not easy to attract or retain individuals required to transform, especially at senior levels.”

Participants framed recruitment shortages not merely as labour market problems, but as cumulative consequences of weak postgraduate pipelines, poor retention, unequal institutional prestige, and inter-university competition.

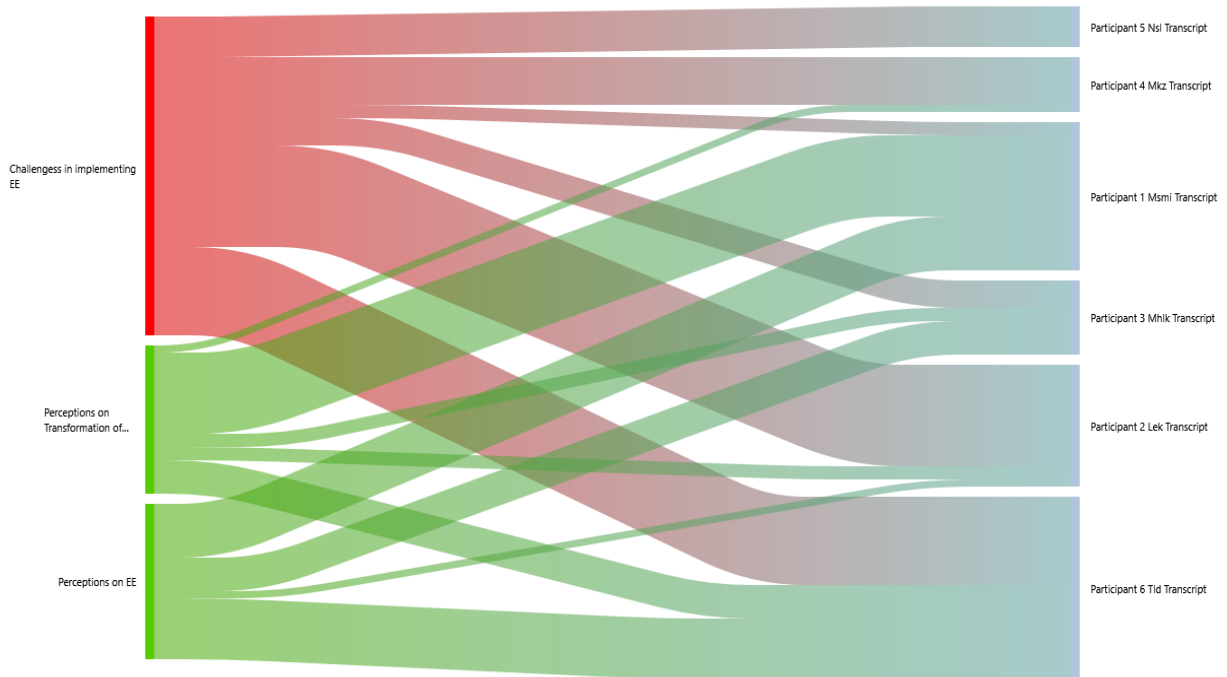
This is consistent with the national trend of a shrinking professoriate, where senior academic positions remain dominated by older white academics while younger black academics struggle to progress due to structural barriers (Mkhize, 2015).

Donor funding and institutional prestige further exacerbate these structural inequities.

Participant 1 stated:

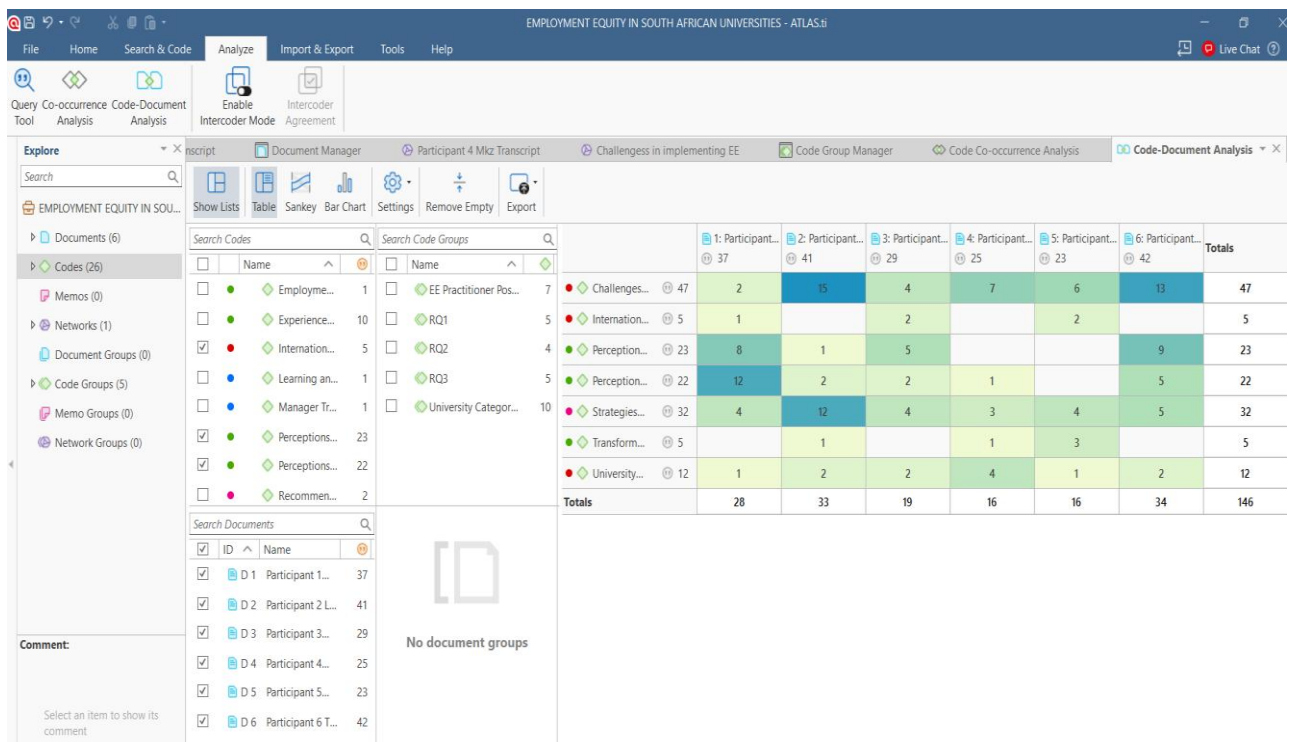
“Big universities get most donor funding, but they do little to promote transformation. The structural advantages remain.”

This finding supports Adonis and Silinda (2021), who argue that institutional autonomy, when unchecked, can reinforce historical patterns rather than disrupt them.



**Figure 4.6: Perceptions on EE, transformation and challenges**

Figures 4.6 and 4.7 illustrate variation in how participants prioritised issues rather than differences in participant importance. Some practitioners focused strongly on operational barriers and target pressures, while others emphasised transformation culture and strategic progress. This variation likely reflects institutional context, leadership climate, and role exposure rather than individual disposition alone.



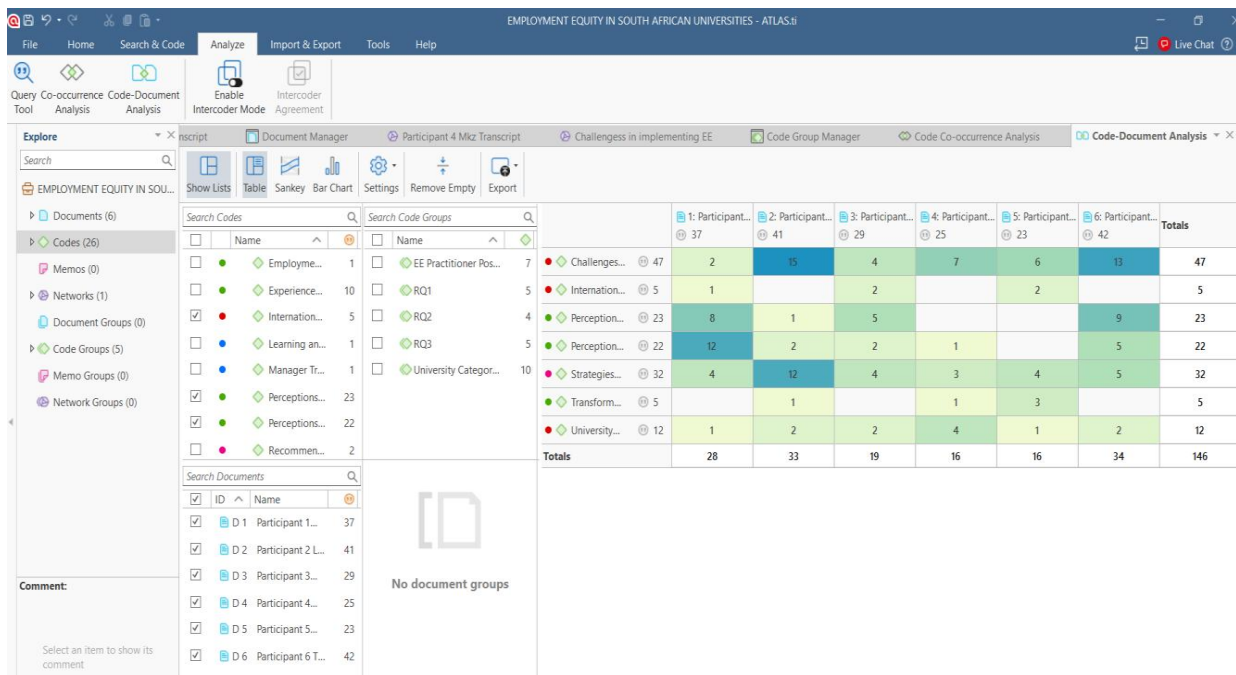
**Figure 4.7: Code document table supporting the Sankey diagram findings**

The code document table supports visualisation of the findings, showing that Participant number 2 presented the most challenges, with a total of 15 codes related to meeting EE targets, while Participant number 6 presented the second-most challenges, with a total of 13 codes. The following section provides a detailed discussion of the challenges highlighted by participants during the formal interview process.

#### **4.6 CHALLENGES FACED IN ACHIEVING EMPLOYMENT EQUITY IN UNIVERSITIES**

The second research objective required identifying the challenges practitioners encounter in implementing EE. Findings reveal that the implementation of EE is constrained by structural, operational, cultural, and systemic barriers that intersect and compound one another.

Figure 4.8 provides the code-document analysis of the challenges faced in implementing EE policies and achieving EE targets.



**Figure 4.8: Challenges in implementing EE policies and achieving EE targets**

The code document analysis table shows that all participants reported facing several challenges in implementing EE policies and achieving their EE targets.

These challenges are not uniform across institutions; they differ by institutional type, history, campus culture, and resource availability.

Through thematic analysis, the following key challenges emerged:

1. Fragmentation and structural misalignment
2. Scarcity of suitably qualified candidates in designated groups
3. Institutional culture and resistance to change
4. Competition (“poaching”) and high turnover
5. Challenges related to disability and disclosure
6. Patriarchy and gendered barriers
7. Aging professoriate and limited academic pipeline
8. Leadership inconsistencies and accountability gaps
9. Policy instability and legislative uncertainty

These challenges rarely operated in isolation. For example, leadership inconsistency intensified fragmentation; weak talent pipelines worsened representational shortages; and resistant institutional cultures undermined otherwise sound EE policies. The findings, therefore, suggest a system of mutually reinforcing barriers rather than separate obstacles.

Each theme is expanded below.

#### **4.6.1 Fragmentation and Structural Misalignment**

The most pronounced operational challenge was the fragmented nature of EE implementation, particularly in multi-campus universities.

Participant 2 described:

“Our university has three campuses... the diversity of each campus complicates target-setting, because reporting must reflect the university as a whole.”

Fragmentation also weakened practitioner authority because responsibility was dispersed across campuses, faculties, and committees. This created accountability ambiguity — a central agency problem.

This mirrors the arguments of April and Govender (2022) and Ng and Sears (2020), who argue that HR planning in universities is often fragmented and poorly aligned with EE objectives.

Fragmentation manifested as:

- inconsistent implementation across faculties and campuses
- misaligned recruitment and succession planning
- minimal integration between EE plans and institutional strategy

Such fragmentation weakens the practitioner’s agency, reinforcing the principal–agent challenges outlined in Agency Theory.

#### **4.6.2 Scarcity of Suitably Qualified Candidates**

All practitioners stressed the shortage of qualified applicants from designated groups, especially:

- African women for senior leadership roles
- People with disabilities
- Academics in specialised disciplines (e.g., STEM, IT)

Participant 4 explained:

“We need more women in senior leadership positions but getting them is a big challenge. It took five years to fill some posts.”

This shortage is documented in literature, where the academic pipeline remains dominated by males and historically advantaged groups (Breetzke & Hedding, 2019). Disability disclosure emerged as a related challenge.

Participant 2 highlighted:

“We struggle to attract people living with disabilities... many do not want to disclose because of fear of victimisation.”

Candidate scarcity, therefore, appeared partly external (limited pipeline) and partly internal (retention failures, unattractive cultures, weak development pathways).

This finding supports McKinney and Swartz (2021), who argue that stigma significantly impedes disability inclusion.

#### **4.6.3 Institutional Culture and Resistance to Change**

Participants underscored how entrenched institutional cultures—often shaped by historical language practices, traditions, and unspoken norms—can obstruct EE.

Participant 2 stated:

“Some of our buildings are still written in Afrikaans... some groups do not feel welcome.”

Resistance to EE surfaced in the form of:

- passive resistance to hiring underrepresented groups
- preference for internal candidates despite equity considerations
- tacit opposition to organisational change

Resistance was frequently subtle rather than overt — manifesting through delay, proceduralism, preference rationalisations, or passive non-cooperation.

This theme resonates with the literature that identifies culture as a critical barrier to transformation (Soudien, 2015; Habib, 2019).

#### **4.6.4 Competition for Scarce Skills and High Staff Turnover**

Competition for scarce designated candidates across the sector contributed to high turnover.

Participant 2 noted:

“Universities poach employees from each other... especially those from designated groups.”

Similarly, Participant 3 stated:

“We develop people, but they resign and join other universities.”

These dynamics undermine internal development programmes and threaten long-term EE gains.

#### **4.6.5 Patriarchy, Gender Bias and the Glass Ceiling**

Gender inequality emerged as a deeply entrenched barrier. Participants described:

- patriarchal assumptions favouring men for leadership
- gender stereotyping
- women’s dual roles as caregivers affecting career progression
- tokenistic appointments lacking real authority

Participant 4 explained:

“It’s a patriarchal world... even when you have the skill, you know it might go to a male.”

This supports Mushariwa (2020), who identifies institutionalised gender bias as a persistent barrier in higher education.

#### **4.6.6 Aging Professoriate and Limited Academic Pipeline**

The dominance of older white academics in senior professoriate roles continues to limit opportunities for transformation.

Participant 3 observed:

“Professor posts are filled by people nearly at retirement... it’s hard to recruit younger academics at this level.”

This reflects national concerns regarding succession planning in academia (Cloete, 2016; Mkhize, 2015).

#### **4.6.7 Leadership Gaps and Accountability Challenges**

Participants observed inconsistencies in leadership commitment to EE and an absence of consequences for non-compliance.

Participant 1 stated:

“Some universities do not meet their targets, but there are no consequences.”

Where no consequences followed target failure, practitioners perceived that symbolic commitment outweighed substantive accountability. This weakened morale and diluted the urgency of implementation.

This finding is consistent with Adonis and Silinda (2021), who argue that university autonomy can shield institutions from accountability on transformation.

#### 4.6.8 Policy Instability and Legislative Uncertainty

Recent amendments to the Employment Equity Act created uncertainty about future compliance expectations.

Participant 3 explained:

“New amendments are coming, but we don’t know what will be included.”

Legislative instability can weaken institutional planning, especially in multi-year EE strategies.

#### 4.7 PRACTITIONERS’ RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING EE IMPLEMENTATION

The third research objective sought to provide guidelines and make recommendations for the implementation of Employment Equity (EE) in South African public universities. Practitioners proposed a range of strategies grounded in their lived experiences and the organisational realities they confront. These recommendations reflect both reactive and proactive approaches to the persistent structural, cultural, and operational challenges identified earlier.

Table 4.4 provides a summary of the challenges and recommended strategies discussed in the following sections.

**Table 4.4: EE challenges and corresponding strategies**

| CHALLENGES                       | STRATEGIES ADOPTED   |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Governance and structural issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Streamlining EE interventions and strategies</li><li>• Flexible EE strategic plans and revising EE interventions once legislative amendments have been passed</li><li>• Harmonising EE employment categories and organisational promotion policies to reduce inequities.</li></ul> |

| CHALLENGES   | STRATEGIES ADOPTED  |
|--|---|
| Fragmentation, conflict, and lack of buy-in                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Robust dialogue and constructive engagement on EE and transformation.</li> <li>• Regular awareness campaigns to build cultural intelligence, civility, and respect.</li> <li>• Embedding civility/respect into performance contracts and reviews.</li> </ul> |
| Limited accountability for EE implementation                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrating EE targets into key performance areas (KPA's).</li> <li>• Quarterly EE progress reporting to line managers.</li> <li>• Development of multi-year EE plans aligned with institutional strategy.</li> </ul>  |
| Resource constrains  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering incentives to attract individuals from designated groups</li> </ul>   |
| Scarcity of suitably qualified candidates in designated groups       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal training and development initiatives</li> <li>• Succession planning and accelerated leadership development programmes.</li> <li>• Building a ready pool of designated group candidates for senior roles.</li> </ul>                                 |
| Underrepresentation of women and black academics in senior positions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affirmative action policies to prioritise recruitment of women and designated groups.</li> <li>• Setting aside posts for female and African candidates in leadership.</li> <li>• Leadership development targeted at women and black academics.</li> </ul>    |
| Institutional barriers   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discourage the dominance of certain groups and promote diversity</li> </ul>  |
| Cultural barriers  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discourage and remove cultural norms, stereotypes and biases that create exclusionary workplaces</li> </ul>  |
| Aging professoriate and generational gaps                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Succession planning to prepare younger academics from designated groups.</li> </ul>  |

| CHALLENGES   | STRATEGIES ADOPTED   |
|--|--|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accelerated leadership programmes to address gaps in professoriate demographics.</li> </ul>   |
| High staff turnover and competition (“poaching”) for scarce skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Retention-focused development programmes.</li> <li>Building internal capacity through targeted training to reduce reliance on external recruitment.</li> </ul>                              |
| Historical legacies and cultural resistance                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awareness and sensitisation campaigns to challenge entrenched norms.</li> <li>Promoting workplace diversity as a shared institutional value rather than a compliance obligation.</li> </ul> |

The analysis revealed four broad clusters of recommendations:

1. Strengthening governance and accountability mechanisms
2. Developing and sustaining talent pipelines
3. Enhancing representativeness through deliberate EE practices
4. Transforming institutional culture to support inclusion

These recommendations correspond directly to the barriers identified earlier. Governance remedies address accountability gaps; talent strategies address pipeline shortages; representational measures address demographic imbalance; and cultural interventions address resistance and exclusion. These clusters correspond directly with the framework subsequently developed in this chapter.

#### 4.7.1 Governance and Accountability

Participants emphasised that EE cannot succeed without strong governance structures, coherent oversight, and leadership accountability. Several institutions have already begun integrating accountability requirements into their management systems, particularly through reporting and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

Participant 2 described their approach:

“We provide employment equity progress reports quarterly, and we have developed a successive EE plan for 2024 to 2026. Managers are assessed against these targets.”

Practitioners proposed the following governance interventions:

- Integrating EE targets into performance management systems for senior management and line managers.
- Standardising institutional reporting mechanisms to ensure transparency.
- Strengthening EE committees to ensure they have the authority to influence recruitment and selection decisions.
- Ensuring Vice Chancellors and executive management actively champion EE, reflecting the principal–agent alignment emphasised in Agency Theory.
- Aligning EE plans with institutional strategic plans, avoiding fragmentation and ad hoc implementation.

These recommendations align with higher education scholarship emphasising the centrality of leadership commitment and coherent governance frameworks (Badat, 2010; Habib, 2019).

#### **4.7.2 Talent Management: Developing Internal Capacity**

A central theme across practitioners' recommendations was the need for systematic talent development to address shortages in critical areas and senior roles among designated groups. This "grow your own timber" approach was described as essential to overcoming structural imbalances in the academic pipeline.

Participant 6 noted:

"Sometimes you have to invest in training... internships and leadership development programmes help create a talent pool."

Key talent management recommendations included:

- Succession planning to prepare designated employees for future leadership roles.
- Accelerated leadership development programmes targeting women and African academics.
- Robust mentoring and coaching initiatives, particularly for early-career academics.

- Internships, postgraduate funding, and lecturer development programmes to strengthen the academic pipeline.
- Reduced reliance on external recruitment through deliberate internal capacity-building.

These recommendations align with research by Breetzke and Hedding (2019) and Meyiwa (2020), who argue that universities must develop long-term academic pathways to transform the professoriate and senior management structures.

#### **4.7.3 Enhancing Representation Through Deliberate EE Practices**

Practitioners proposed several strategies to address underrepresentation among designated groups, especially:

- African women
- People with disabilities
- Younger academics
- Black academics in senior roles

Participant 4 emphasised gender-focused recruitment:

“For some posts, women are strongly encouraged to apply... some posts are set aside for female candidates.”

Representation-focused strategies included:

- Affirmative action measures, including targeted recruitment and setting aside posts for designated groups.
- Re-advertising positions when applicant pools lack representation.
- Deviation processes that prevent overrepresentation of non-designated groups.
- Transparent monitoring of demographic patterns using HR information systems.
- Incentives (where resources allow) to attract scarce candidates from designated groups.

These approaches reflect the affirmative action measures envisaged in the Employment Equity Act and correspond with the demographic imperatives described by Leck, Saunders and Charbonneau (1996).

#### **4.7.4 Transforming Institutional Culture**

Practitioners emphasised that structural interventions alone are insufficient without parallel efforts to transform institutional culture. They highlighted several strategies to build inclusive, respectful, and diversity-conscious workplaces.

Participant 2 explained:

“We run awareness campaigns... people need to understand values like respect and diversity.”

Cultural transformation recommendations included:

- Regular diversity, inclusion, and EE awareness campaigns.
- Dialogue platforms for staff to engage meaningfully with transformation issues.
- Recognition and reward programmes (e.g., organisational citizenship awards), reinforcing inclusive values.
- Addressing language dominance and historical symbols that alienate marginalised groups.
- Embedding civility and respectful conduct into performance reviews.
- Eliminating cultural norms and biases that reinforce exclusion or tokenism.

These approaches align with Soudien’s (2015) argument that transformation requires shifts in institutional culture and identity, not only demographic changes.

### **4.8 FRAMEWORK FOR ADVANCING EMPLOYMENT EQUITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES**

Drawing on practitioners’ empirical insights and recommendations, the study developed a framework to advance EE in universities. The framework consolidates the strategies identified across the thematic analysis and organises them into four interconnected domains:

1. Governance and Accountability
2. Talent Management
3. Representation and Employment Equity Practices
4. Institutional Culture

The framework is both explanatory and prescriptive. It proposes that progress in Employment Equity is most likely when governance creates accountability, talent systems create supply, representational practices create access, and an inclusive culture creates retention and legitimacy. Weakness in any one domain may undermine gains in the others.

The framework is underpinned by the understanding that EE implementation requires coordinated, systemic, and sustained action across all institutional levels. It also reflects the relational dynamics highlighted by Agency Theory and the identity-affirming principles embedded in Identity Negotiation Theory.

The framework, as depicted in Figure 4.9, summarises the strategies for advancing employment equity in universities. The sections below expand on each domain of the framework.



**Figure 4.9: Framework on strategies for advancing EE in SA universities**

Source: Author's own construction

#### **4.8.1 Domain 1: Governance and Accountability**

Effective governance provides the structural backbone for EE implementation. Without strong leadership, clear reporting channels, and accountability systems, EE becomes fragmented or symbolic. Key components include:

- Council and executive oversight of EE performance
- Integration of EE targets into senior management KPAs
- Functional EE committees with decision-making authority
- Multi-year EE plans aligned with institutional strategy
- Transparent quarterly reporting to track progress
- Monitoring mechanisms to ensure adherence to affirmative action measures

As Cloete (2016) and Jansen (2017) note, transformation stalls when governance fails to enforce accountability or integrate EE into institutional performance frameworks. Governance, therefore, serves as the activating mechanism of the framework, determining whether the remaining domains receive authority, resources, and sustained oversight.

#### **4.8.2 Domain 2: Talent Management**

Talent management addresses both the supply and retention of designated candidates. A systemic approach ensures continuity and sustainability of EE efforts.

Key components include:

- Succession planning for academic and administrative leadership roles
- Talent pipeline development, including postgraduate funding and lecturer development
- Mentoring and coaching for early-career academics
- Accelerated development programmes for potential leaders
- Retention strategies, including improved working conditions and recognition
- Reduced administrative burdens for equity candidates, particularly early-career academics

These strategies align with research emphasising the need for long-term capacity-building to address the “leaking pipeline” phenomenon (Breetzke & Hedding, 2019). Talent management addresses delayed transformation by expanding the future pool of suitably qualified candidates rather than relying solely on immediate recruitment.

#### **4.8.3 Domain 3: Representation and EE Practices**

Representation remains central to achieving the constitutional imperative of a diverse and equitable workforce. Key components include:

- Targeted recruitment and affirmative action
- Setting aside posts for women and African academics
- Re-advertising when equity goals are not met
- Strategic deviation processes to avoid entrenching overrepresentation
- Monitoring recruitment, promotion and retention patterns

- Ensuring disability inclusion through disclosure support and workplace accommodation

These practices align with the demographic goals outlined in the Employment Equity Act (South Africa, 1998) and recent studies on representational barriers in universities (Mayer et al., 2019). Representation is the visible outcome of successful upstream governance and talent interventions.

#### **4.8.4 Domain 4: Institutional Culture**

An inclusive culture ensures the sustainability of EE progress by shaping experiences of belonging, recognition, and respect. Key components include:

- Awareness campaigns on diversity, EE, and discrimination
- Initiatives to address institutional language dominance
- Conflict resolution and grievance mechanisms that protect equity candidates
- Platforms for open dialogue about transformation
- Reward systems reinforcing inclusive values
- Interventions addressing sexism, racism, and microaggressions

As Soudien (2015) argues, institutional culture determines whether EE becomes embedded or remains superficial. Culture serves as the sustainability mechanism of the framework, as representation without inclusion may lead to turnover, disengagement, or symbolic compliance.

#### **4.9 SUMMARY**

This chapter presented a thematic and interpretive analysis of EE practitioners' experiences regarding the implementation of Employment Equity in public universities. The findings showed that implementation outcomes are shaped not by single causes, but by the interaction of leadership commitment, governance quality, organisational culture, capability pipelines, and practitioner agency. Three major findings emerged:

1. EE implementation is uneven and often compliance-driven, despite pockets of innovation and progress.

2. Significant structural, cultural, and systemic barriers continue to impede substantive transformation, including scarce skills, patriarchal cultures, campus fragmentation, organisational resistance, and limited accountability.
3. Practitioners demonstrated strong commitment to transformation, resulting in practical recommendations for improving EE implementation across governance, talent management, representativeness, and institutional culture.

The chapter culminated in a framework for advancing EE in South African universities, grounded in empirical evidence, aligned with transformation imperatives, and informed by relevant theoretical perspectives.

The findings also extended the study's theoretical framework: Agency Theory explained accountability tensions, Identity Negotiation Theory illuminated belonging and legitimacy struggles, while Psychological Contract Theory helped explain disengagement where institutions failed to match transformation rhetoric with support.

The next chapter applies this framework and integrates these findings with the literature, presenting the study's conclusions and recommendations.

## CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This concluding chapter synthesises the study's purpose, integrates the empirical findings from Chapter 4 with the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3, and presents recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. The study examined the perspectives of Employment Equity (EE) practitioners regarding the implementation of EE in six South African public universities. It addressed three research objectives:

- (1) to explore practitioner perceptions of EE implementation;
- (2) to identify challenges hindering EE implementation; and
- (3) to formulate recommendations for strengthening EE in public universities.

In addition to responding to these objectives, this chapter interprets the broader significance of the findings for transformation governance, organisational behaviour, and policy implementation in higher education institutions. It therefore moves beyond summary to articulate the study's theoretical, practical, and sectoral contributions (Saunders et al., 2019).

South Africa's commitment to redressing historical inequalities is grounded in the constitutional imperative to promote substantive equality and dismantle the discriminatory structures created under apartheid. The Employment Equity Act (55 of 1998) was enacted to advance equitable representation of designated groups and eliminate discriminatory institutional practices. Despite this robust legislative framework, the literature reveals persistent disparities in higher education workplaces, including underrepresentation of Black academics, gendered leadership patterns, and fragmented approaches to transformation (Jansen, 2017; Bam & Ronnie, 2020; Wood & Bischoff, 2020). The empirical findings of this study confirm that these challenges remain entrenched and unevenly addressed across universities.

While some universities have made progress—particularly in middle-level recruitment—practitioners noted that senior leadership structures continue to reflect

historical privilege. Recruitment pipelines for African, Coloured, Indian, female, and disabled candidates remain weak, and retention is challenged by sector-wide competition, resource imbalances, and unsupportive institutional cultures. These realities underscore the need for universities to understand the complexities of EE implementation beyond numerical compliance and to confront the structural, cultural, and procedural barriers that shape organisational behaviour.

This chapter, therefore, draws together the study's insights into a coherent narrative, articulating what the findings mean for transformation in South Africa's higher education sector and offering practical and policy-oriented recommendations to strengthen EE implementation.

## **5.2 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS**

The study explored the implementation of EE through the insights of practitioners who drive transformation within their institutions. The key findings are organised around the three research objectives.

Collectively, the findings indicate that Employment Equity outcomes are not determined by legislation alone, but by the interaction between institutional leadership, organisational culture, practitioner capability, governance systems, and labour market realities (Wood & Bischoff, 2020; Adonis & Silinda, 2021).

### **5.2.1 Perceptions of Employment Equity and Transformation**

Practitioners' perceptions of EE varied considerably, reflecting differences in institutional history, leadership orientation, organisational culture, and levels of policy understanding. These perceptions were interpreted through Agency Theory, Identity Negotiation Theory, and Psychological Contract Theory, which collectively illuminate the relational dynamics underpinning EE implementation.

#### **Perceptions shaped by compliance versus transformation**

Many practitioners saw EE primarily as a compliance-driven process to ensure regulatory obligations were met. This reflects what Motshabi (2019) and Bam and

Ronnie (2020) describe as a procedural approach, in which EE becomes an administrative exercise rather than a mechanism for institutional transformation. Others articulated a broader, values-driven understanding of EE, positioning it as a tool for promoting diversity, inclusion, belonging, and social justice, echoing the argument for substantive equality.

### **Theoretical interpretation of perceptions**

- **Agency Theory** illuminated the tension between leadership (principals) and EE practitioners (agents). Practitioners reported limited authority, insufficient resources, and unclear expectations, which constrained their ability to fulfil EE mandates effectively. This misalignment contributed to agency conflict and inconsistent implementation.
- **Identity Negotiation Theory** highlighted how transformation depends on fostering inclusive institutional identities. Initiatives such as awareness campaigns and organisational citizenship awards promote affirmation and belonging but remain insufficient where deeper prejudices, stigma (especially regarding disability), or cultural dominance persist.
- **Psychological Contract Theory** explained practitioners' experiences of feeling undervalued or unsupported. Perceptions of leadership indifference or insufficient guidance created a sense of unmet expectations, diminished motivation, and reinforced procedural implementation.

### **Knowledge gaps and limited understanding of EE**

Practitioners emphasised widespread misunderstanding of EE policies among employees and line managers. This knowledge deficit is consistent with findings by Oosthuizen et al. (2019) and Joubert (2017), who argue that insufficient conceptual clarity leads to fragmented implementation and resistance to transformation. Limited training and poor communication were identified as key causes.

### **Transformation as process, not event**

Participants conceptualised transformation as an ongoing, multidimensional process that must integrate justice, organisational culture, demographic change, and environmental responsiveness. This aligns with Wood and Bischoff (2020) and

underscores that transformation requires sustained commitment rather than episodic interventions.

A notable contribution of these findings is that practitioners did not reject Employment Equity itself; rather, they challenged narrow and procedural modes of implementation. This distinction is important because resistance may be directed less at equity goals than at how institutions operationalise them (Joubert, 2017; Oosthuizen et al., 2019).

### **5.2.2 Challenges Affecting EE Implementation**

The study revealed a range of structural, cultural, operational, and systemic challenges that hinder the implementation of EE across universities.

#### **Structural and strategic misalignment**

Practitioners reported that multi-campus institutions struggled to balance demographic profiles across campuses, leading to internal inequities and inconsistent reporting. Weak succession planning and poor integration of EE goals with strategic and workforce planning further hindered progress. These findings support the assertions of Tamtik and Guenter (2019) and Kanjere and Lebea (2019) that fragmented systems hinder effective EE implementation.

#### **Leadership and accountability deficits**

Weak leadership involvement, inconsistent monitoring systems, unclear reporting lines, and insufficient authority for EE committees were observed. Agency Theory explains this as a breakdown in the principal–agent relationship, in which practitioners lack the decision-making authority needed to advance transformation.

#### **Cultural barriers and resistance**

Historical institutional cultures—encompassing language preferences, stereotypes, discrimination, and the dominance of groups in key departments—continue to hinder diversity. These cultural legacies reinforce the need for institutional identity transformation as emphasised by Soudien (2015).

### **Limited talent pipelines and poor retention**

Practitioners highlighted a persistent shortage of qualified Black and female candidates for senior roles, as well as a scarcity of academics with disabilities. Sector-wide competition and poaching exacerbate retention issues. These challenges reflect long-standing pipeline weaknesses identified by Mkhize (2015), Cloete (2016), and Breetzke and Hedding (2019).

### **Disability-related stigma**

Stigma surrounding disability continues to limit disclosure and representation. This aligns with McKinney and Swartz (2021), who highlight knowledge gaps, fear of discrimination, and systemic barriers as ongoing obstacles to disability inclusion.

these barriers were mutually reinforcing. For example, weak leadership reduced accountability, which enabled fragmented systems; fragmented systems weakened talent planning; and poor culture undermined retention. This suggests that isolated interventions are unlikely to succeed unless universities adopt integrated change strategies (Kezar & Posselt, 2020).

### **5.2.3 Recommendations emerging from the findings**

The study's recommendations are grouped into implementation horizons to improve practicality, sequencing, and institutional feasibility.

#### **Short-term priorities (0–12 months)**

- Integrate EE targets into executive and line-management performance agreements.
- Standardise quarterly EE dashboards and reporting systems.
- Provide mandatory EE and bias-awareness training for managers and selection panels.
- Review disability disclosure and accommodation procedures.

#### **Medium-term priorities (1–3 years)**

- Develop succession plans for scarce and senior roles.
- Establish mentoring and leadership pipelines for women, Black academics, and employees with disabilities.

- Strengthen EE committee mandates and governance authority.
- Align EE plans with institutional strategic and workforce plans.

### **Long-term priorities (3–5 years)**

- Reshape institutional culture through sustained inclusion programmes.
- Build postgraduate-to-academic pipelines to transform the professoriate.
- Embed EE into broader transformation scorecards linked to funding or recognition incentives.

### **Feasibility considerations**

Short-term actions are administratively achievable with existing systems. Medium-term actions require moderate investment and leadership commitment. Long-term actions require sustained cultural change, resourcing, and policy continuity (Morley, 2022; Kezar & Posselt, 2020).

## **5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following research directions are recommended:

1. **Comparative institutional studies** examining historically advantaged and disadvantaged universities to understand contextual variation in EE implementation.
2. **Longitudinal transformation studies** tracking the sustainability of EE interventions over time.
3. **Stakeholder comparison studies** involving unions, executives, academics, and students to compare transformation perceptions.
4. **Intersectional workforce studies** examining how race, gender, disability, and class jointly shape progression and exclusion (Crenshaw, 1991).
5. **Evaluation studies** testing the effectiveness of specific EE governance or talent-pipeline models.
6. **Leadership studies** exploring how leadership styles, executive turnover, and governance quality affect EE outcomes.
7. **Mixed-methods studies** combining demographic trend analysis with qualitative experience data.

8. **Theory-building studies** refining Agency Theory and Identity Negotiation Theory in the context of higher education transformation.

## 5.4 CONCLUSION

The study set out to explore EE practitioners' perspectives on the implementation of Employment Equity in six South African public universities. The findings reveal that practitioners operate within historically shaped organisational environments characterised by competing priorities, uneven leadership commitment, fragmented systems, and contested understandings of transformation.

While South Africa possesses a comparatively robust legislative framework for equity, legislation alone has not guaranteed substantive institutional change. Instead, successful implementation depended on whether universities translated legal obligation into accountable governance, inclusive culture, and sustained capability development (Wood & Bischoff, 2020).

The study also makes a theoretical contribution. Agency Theory explained how practitioners often carry responsibility without sufficient authority. Identity Negotiation Theory illuminated the importance of belonging, legitimacy, and recognition in transformation processes. Psychological Contract Theory explained declining motivation where institutional rhetoric was not matched by support. Together, these lenses provide a multi-level explanation of why implementation stalls or advances.

Ultimately, the study shows that meaningful Employment Equity requires more than demographic compliance. It requires coordinated systems, leadership accountability, developmental pipelines, and cultures that sustain inclusion. Universities that fail to integrate these dimensions risk symbolic rather than substantive transformation.

## **5.5 SUMMARY**

This chapter synthesised the findings of the study, highlighted its theoretical and practical contributions, and presented recommendations for enhancing EE implementation in South African universities. The chapter emphasised that meaningful EE implementation requires:

- Strategic alignment and strong governance;
- Clear role definitions and empowered EE structures;
- Consistent training and organisational learning;
- Inclusive organisational cultures;
- Sustainable talent management pipelines; and
- Policy reforms responsive to the higher education context.

The chapter, therefore, demonstrates that Employment Equity should be understood simultaneously as a legal obligation, a governance challenge, a talent management issue, and a cultural transformation process.

By integrating empirical insights with theoretical perspectives, the chapter reaffirmed that Employment Equity is not merely a legislative obligation but a transformative imperative central to the realisation of justice, representation, and inclusivity in South Africa's higher education sector.

## **5.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON STUDY**

This study contributes to scholarship on higher education transformation by foregrounding the lived experiences of the practitioners tasked with implementing Employment Equity at universities. In doing so, it shifts analytical attention from policy design and demographic outputs to the organisational processes through which transformation is enabled, delayed, negotiated, or resisted.

The study's originality lies in demonstrating that practitioner perspectives provide an essential but underutilised source of institutional intelligence. These actors occupy a strategic position between executive leadership, line management, labour structures,

and employees, allowing them to observe both formal policy intent and everyday implementation realities.

Empirically, the study identified how accountability gaps, fragmented systems, weak talent pipelines, resistant cultures, and symbolic compliance interact to constrain progress. Conceptually, it offered an integrated framework linking governance, talent management, representation, and culture as mutually dependent drivers of sustainable transformation.

The study, therefore, argues that the future of Employment Equity in higher education will depend less on the existence of policy and more on the quality of implementation architecture through which policy is enacted (Kezar & Posselt, 2020; Morley, 2022). In this sense, equity is both a moral imperative and a test of institutional capability.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abutabenjeh, S., & Jaradat, R. (2018). Clarification of research design, research methods, and research methodology: A guide for public administration researchers and practitioners. *Teaching Public Administration*, 36(3), 237-258.
- Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American college of clinical pharmacy*, 4(10), 1358-1367.
- Adonis, C. K., & Silinda, F. (2021). Institutional culture and transformation in higher education in post-1994 South Africa: a critical race theory analysis. *Critical African Studies*, 13(1), 73-94.
- Aguboshim, F. C. (2021). Adequacy of sample size in a qualitative case study and the dilemma of data saturation: A narrative review. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 10(3), 180-187.
- Aguilar Solano, M. (2020). Triangulation and trustworthiness: advancing research on public service interpreting through qualitative case study methodologies. *FITIS PosInternational Journal*. 2020; 7 (1), 31-52.
- Ahlstedt, C., Lindvall, C. E., Holmström, I. K., & Athlin, Å. M. (2019). What makes registered nurses remain in work? An ethnographic study. *International journal of nursing studies*, 89, 32-38.
- Al-Ababneh, M.M., 2020. Linking ontology, epistemology and research methodology. *Science & Philosophy*, 8(1), 75–91.
- Al-Busaidi, Z. Q. (2008). Qualitative research and its uses in health care. *Sultan Qaboos University Medical Journal*, 8(1), 11.
- Alexander, B. N., & Smith, A. D. (2019). Organizational access in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 14(2), 172-193.
- Alharahsheh, H. H., & Pius, A. (2020). A review of key paradigms: Positivism VS interpretivism. *Global Academic Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(3), 39-43.

- Anthony, R. N., & Govindarajan, V. (2005). *Management Control Systems*. McGraw-Hill Education.
- April, R. & Govender, C. (2022). Understanding affirmative action leadership in the South African financial context. *African Journal of Business Management*, 16(5), 90-103.
- Archibald, M. M., Ambagtsheer, R. C., Casey, M. G., & Lawless, M. (2019). Using zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection: perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 18, 1609406919874596.
- Badat, S. (2010). *The Challenges of Transformation in Higher Education and Training Institutions in South Africa*. Development Bank of Southern Africa.
- Badat, S. (2018). *The social role of higher education in South Africa: Trends, challenges and opportunities*. University of the Free State Press.
- Bam, A. & Ronnie, L. (2020). Inclusion at the workplace: An exploratory study of people with disabilities in South Africa. *International Journal of Disability*, 15(e6), 1-9.
- Bi, Q. (2019). Cultivating loyal customers through online customer communities: A psychological contract perspective. *Journal of Business Research*, 103, 34-44.
- Bleiker, J., Morgan-Trimmer, S., Knapp, K., & Hopkins, S. (2019). Navigating the maze: Qualitative research methodologies and their philosophical foundations. *Radiography*, 25, S4-S8.
- Booyesen, L.A.E., 2018. Employment equity and diversity management in South Africa: Barriers to strategic integration. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 16, a998.
- Boswell, C. & Cannon, S. 2014. *Introduction to nursing research: Incorporating evidenced-based practice*. Sudbury: Jones & Bartlett Learning.
- Boudreau, J., & Lawler III, E. E. (2014). Stubborn traditionalism in HRM: Causes and consequences. *Human Resource Management Review*, 24(3), 232-244.
- Brandenburg, U. (2020). Internationalisation in higher education for society–IHES in the times of corona. *Sociální pedagogika| Social Education*, 8(1), 11-24.

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Breen, J. & Forwell, S., 2021. *The difference model of disability: A focus on employment*. In: N. Ferreira, I. Potgieter & M. Coetzee, eds. Agile coping in the digital era: Emerging issues for research and practice. Cham: Springer, pp.275–298.
- Breetzke, G. D., & Hedding, D. W. (2018). The changing demography of academic staff at higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. *Higher Education*, 76, 145-161.
- Breetzke, G.D. & Hedding, D.W. (2019). The academic pipeline: Advancing early-career academics in South African universities. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 33(2), 1–15.
- Bruckmüller, S. & Braun, M., 2020. *One group's advantage or another group's disadvantage?* How comparative framing shapes explanations of, and reactions to, workplace gender inequality. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 37(4), pp.456–474.
- Busetto, L., Wick, W., & Gumbinger, C. (2020). How to use and assess qualitative research methods. *Neurological Research and Practice*, 2, 1-10.
- Carson, J. L., Terrin, M. L., Noveck, H., Sanders, D. W., Chaitman, B. R., Rhoads, G. G., & Magaziner, J. (2011). Liberal or restrictive transfusion in high-risk patients after hip surgery. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 365(26), 2453-2462.
- Catrone, R. G., Baires, N. A., Martin, M. R., & Brown-Hollie, J. P. (2023). An intersectional examination of disability and race models in behavior-analytic practice. *Behavior and Social Issues*, 32(1), 152-181.
- Choy, L. T. (2014). The strengths and weaknesses of research methodology: Comparison and complimentary between qualitative and quantitative approaches. *IOSR journal of humanities and social science*, 19(4), 99-104.
- Chughtai, H., & Myers, M. D. (2017). Entering the field in qualitative field research: A rite of passage into a complex practice world. *Information Systems Journal*, 27(6), 795-817.

- Cloete, N. (2016). *The South African Higher Education System: Performance and Policy*. Centre for Higher Education Trust.
- Coetzee, M., Mitonga-Monga, J. & Swart, B., 2019. Human resource management practices and employment equity implementation in South African organisations. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 17, a1087.
- Collier, M. J., & Thomas, M. (1988). Cultural identity: An interpretive perspective. *Communication Monographs*, 55(2), 99–120.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758809376111>
- Connelly, L. M. (2014). Ethical considerations in research studies. *Medsurg nursing*, 23(1), 54-56.
- Council on Higher Education. (2022). *VitalStats: Public higher education 2020*. Council on Higher Education.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cuthbertson, L. M., Robb, Y. A., & Blair, S. (2020). Theory and application of research principles and philosophical underpinning for a study utilising interpretive phenomenological analysis. *Radiography*, 26(2), e94-e102.
- Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2021. *Staffing South Africa's universities framework (2013–2020): Final monitoring and evaluation report*. Pretoria: DHET.
- Dickens, D. D., Womack, V. Y., & Dimes, T. (2019). Managing hypervisibility: An exploration of theory and research on identity shifting strategies in the workplace among Black women. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 113, 153-163.
- Dodgson, J. E. (2019). Reflexivity in qualitative research. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 35(2), 220-222.
- Englert, T., & Runciman, C. (2019). Challenging workplace inequality: precarious workers' institutional and associational power in Gauteng, South Africa. *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, 101(1), 84-104.

- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American journal of theoretical and applied statistics*, 5(1), 1-4.
- Farias, L., & Rudman, D. L. (2019). Challenges in enacting occupation-based social transformative practices: A critical dialogical study. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 86(3), 243-252.
- Flick, U. (2014). *Introducing research methodology. A beginner's guide to doing a research project*. Berlin: Sage.
- Frechette, J., Bitzas, V., Aubry, M., Kilpatrick, K., & Lavoie-Tremblay, M. (2020). Capturing lived experience: Methodological considerations for interpretive phenomenological inquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1609406920907254.
- Garraway, J., & Winberg, C. (2019). Reimagining futures of universities of technology. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, 7(2), 38-60.
- Geddis-Regan, A. R., Exley, C., & Taylor, G. D. (2022). Navigating the dual role of clinician-researcher in qualitative dental research. *JDR Clinical & Translational Research*, 7(2), 215-217.
- Green, D. O. N. (2007). Using qualitative methods to assess academic success and retention programs for underrepresented minority students. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2007(136), 41-53.
- Grove, S.K. & Gray, J.R., 2019. *Understanding nursing research: Building an evidence-based practice*. 7th ed. St. Louis, MO: Elsevier.
- Haastrup, T. (2020). Gendering South Africa's foreign policy: Toward a feminist approach?. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16(2), 199-216.
- Habib, A. (2019). *Rebels and Rage: Reflecting on #FeesMustFall*. Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- Harding, M. (2018). Employment equity reporting - a statutory plan for equality. *TFM Magazine*, 2(15), 35-37.

- Hennink, M. M., Kaiser, B. N., & Weber, M. B. (2019). What influences saturation? Estimating sample sizes in focus group research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 29(10), 1483–1496. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732318821692>
- Hicks-Clarke, D., & Iles, P. (2000). Climate for diversity and its effects on career and organisational attitudes and perceptions. *Personnel review*, 29(3), 324-345.
- Hunter, D., McCallum, J., & Howes, D. (2019). Defining exploratory-descriptive qualitative (EDQ) research and considering its application to healthcare. *Journal of Nursing and Health Care*, 4(1).
- Jain, H. C., Horwitz, F., & Wilkin, C. L. (2012). Employment equity in Canada and South Africa: A comparative review. *The International journal of human resource management*, 23(1), 1-17.
- Jansen, J.D. (2017) *As by Fire: The End of the South African University*. Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishers. ISBN 9780624080305.
- Jensen, M.C. & Meckling, W.H., 1976. Theory of the firm: Managerial behavior, agency costs and ownership structure. *Journal of Financial Economics*, 3(4), pp.305–360.
- Jensen, M. C., & Meckling, W. H. (2019). Theory of the firm: Managerial behavior, agency costs and ownership structure. In *Corporate governance*, 77-132. Gower.
- Jonsen, K., Fendt, J. & Point, S., 2018. Convincing qualitative research: What constitutes persuasive writing? *Organizational Research Methods*, 21(1), pp.30–67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428117706533>
- Joubert, Y. T. (2017). Workplace diversity in South Africa: Its qualities and management. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 27(4), 367-371.
- Kanjere, M., & Lebea, N. (2019). The role of Lepelle water board management in achieving employment equity targets. *Gender and Behaviour*, 17(4), 14340-14360.
- Kempen, E. (2012). *Exploring Research* 8th Edition. Salkind, NJ.(Ed.)(2012). New York, NY, USA. Published by Pearson. [http://www.pearson.com/\\$157.46](http://www.pearson.com/$157.46). ISBN: 9780205114481. 407 pages.

- Kennedy, K. M. (2019). Promoting the qualitative research approach in the discipline of forensic and legal medicine: Why more qualitative work should be promoted and how that can be achieved. *Journal of forensic and legal medicine*, 62, 72-76.
- Kezar, A., & Posselt, J. (2020). Higher education administration and equity reform: Governance, leadership and change. *Review of Higher Education*, 43(4), 1121–1145.
- Killam, L.A., 2013. *Research terminology simplified: Paradigms, axiology, ontology, epistemology and methodology*. La Vergne, TN: Laura Killam.
- Kolb, S. M. (2012). Grounded theory and the constant comparative method: Valid research strategies for educators. *Journal of emerging trends in educational research and policy studies*, 3(1), 83-86.
- Köllén, T. (2021). Diversity management: A critical review and agenda for the future. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 30(3), 259-272.
- Leck, J. D., Saunders, D. M., & Charbonneau, M. (1996). Affirmative action programs: An organizational justice perspective. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 17(1), 79-89.
- Legoabe, R., de klerk, J., van Niekerk, M., Letsoalo, M., Matotoka, D., & Subrayen, R. (2015). *Joint Study into Gender Transformation in the Higher Education Sector*. Reg, N. P. O. Gender Transformation in the Higher Education Sector.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1986). But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New directions for program evaluation*, 1986(30), 73-84.
- Maia, L. G., & Bastos, A. V. B. (2019). Climbing the ladder of performance: Are psychological contract and organizational commitment steps?. *BAR-Brazilian Administration Review*, 16.
- Maleka, M. J., & Siziba, D. (2019). Barriers to implementing employment equity in a government department. *Journal of Public Administration*, 54(1), 75-85.
- Malik, A., Putri, L. D., Putri, S. N., & Hartani, H. S. (2022). Identity Negotiation of Cina Benteng Community in Building Tolerance. *Journal of Governance*, 7(2), 363-369.

- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753–1760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>
- Mayer, C. H., Oosthuizen, R. M., & Tonelli, L. (2019). Subjective experiences of employment equity in South African organisations. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 17(1), 1-12.
- McKinney, E. L., & Swartz, L. (2021). Employment integration barriers: Experiences of people with disabilities. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(10), 2298-2320.
- Meihami, H. (2020). A biographical narrative analysis of the challenges of applied linguists across different research abilities to conduct qualitative studies. *Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills)*, 39(1), 45-70.
- Meyiwa, T. (2020). Transformation and gender equity in South African universities: Progress, challenges and possibilities. *Agenda*, 34(1), 4–15.
- Miller, E. M., Porter, J. E., & Barbagallo, M. S. (2023). Patient and family members' experiences with language and environment when receiving bad news: A qualitative exploratory study. *Palliative & Supportive Care*, 1-7.
- Mkhize, N. (2015). Race, access and staff diversification in South African universities. *Transformation*, 87, 1–21.
- Morgan, D. L. (2019). *Basic and advanced focus groups*. Sage.
- Motshabi, K. B. (2020). Decolonising Affirmative Action in 21st Century Africa: Reparatory alternatives for affirming South Africa. *Journal of Decolonising Disciplines*, 2(1).
- Morley, L. (2022). Gender equality and inclusion in higher education leadership: Structural barriers and transformative pathways. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 76(4), 655–672. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12345>
- Musakuro, R. N., & de Klerk, F. (2021). Academic talent: Perceived challenges to talent management in the South African higher education sector. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 19, 1394.

- Musetsho, M., Isac, N., & Dobrin, C. (2021). Gender Inequalities in the Workplace: Case Study of South Africa. *Management and Economics Review*, 6(1), 70-81
- Mushariwa, M. (2020). The Cycles of Affirmative Action in the Transformation of the Workplace. *SA Mercantile Law Journal*, 32(1), 99-112.
- Muzari, T., Shava, G. N., & Shonhiwa, S. (2022). Qualitative Research Paradigm, a Key Research Design for Educational Researchers, Processes and Procedures: A Theoretical Overview. *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(1), 14-20.
- Nadiv, R. & Kuna, S (2020). Diversity management as navigation through organizational paradoxes. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, (39)4, 355-377.
- Ndinda, C. & Ndlovu, S., 2022. Race, racial classification and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 44(1), 1–20.
- Newman, P. A., Guta, A., & Black, T. (2021). Ethical considerations for qualitative research methods during the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergency situations: Navigating the virtual field. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 16094069211047823.
- Ng, E. S., & Sears, G. J. (2020). Walking the talk on diversity: CEO beliefs, moral values, and the implementation of workplace diversity practices. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 164, 437-450.
- Ngozwana, N. (2018). Ethical dilemmas in qualitative research methodology: Researcher's reflections. *International Journal of Educational Methodology*, 4(1), 19-28
- Ngulube, P., & Ukwoma, S. C. (2019). Cartographies of research designs in library information science research in Nigeria and South Africa, 2009–2015. *Library & Information Science Research*, 41(3), 100966.
- Nunoo, G. K. (2020). *A study of employment equity in higher education institutions in Durban South Africa*. Unpublished Master's dissertation. University of KwaZulu Natal. Durban.
- Nxumalo, L. (2020). Developing a Transformational Leadership Model to Effectively Include Persons with Disabilities in the Workplace. , 2(1), 25-36.

- Nyumba, T., Wilson, K., Derrick, C. J., & Mukherjee, N. (2018). The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation. *Methods in Ecology and evolution*, 9(1), 20-32.
- Olmos-Vega, F. M., Stalmeijer, R. E., Varpio, L., & Kahlke, R. (2023). A practical guide to reflexivity in qualitative research: AMEE Guide No. 149. *Medical teacher*, 45(3), 241-251.
- Omar, F. (2020). *Employment equity and employee morale at a selected public service organisation in Cape Town, South Africa* (Doctoral dissertation, Cape Peninsula University of Technology).
- Omar, F. & Kiley, J. (2022). Employment equity and employee morale at a selected public service organisation in Cape Town, South Africa. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 20(1), doi:10.4102/sajhrm.v20i0.1917.
- Oosthuizen, R. M., Tonelli, L., & Mayer, C.-H. (2019). Subjective experiences of employment equity in South African organisations. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 17, Article a1074.  
<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v17i0.1074>
- OpenAI (2024). ChatGPT [Large Language Model]. Available at: <https://chat.openai.com> (Accessed: 13 December 2025).
- Patel, A & Coetzer, S. 2017. Pregnancy was not the reason for different treatment. In Clive Dekker Hofmeyr. Employment Alert . 4 September 2017-ref page
- Pienaar, H & Osmond, J. 2019. Differentiation doesn't always equal discrimination: Defences against unfair discrimination claims. In Clive Dekker Hofmeyr. Employment Alert. 15 April 2019
- Probst, T. M., Petitta, L., Barbaranelli, C., & Austin, C. (2020). Safety-related moral disengagement in response to job insecurity: Counterintuitive effects of perceived organizational and supervisor support. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 162, 343-358.
- Rahi, S. (2017). Research design and methods: A systematic review of research paradigms, sampling issues and instruments development. *International Journal of Economics & Management Sciences*, 6(2), 1-5.

- Republic of South Africa. (1996). *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Republic of South Africa. (1998). *Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Republic of South Africa. (1995). *Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Republic of South Africa. (1997). *Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Republic of South Africa. (1997). *Higher Education Act 101 of 1997*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Riese, M., 2019. *Accessing organisations for research: Negotiating entry, consent and power relations*. In: P. Atkinson et al., eds. SAGE Research Methods Foundations. London: Sage.
- Ronnie, L. & Bam, A., 2020. Employment equity and affirmative action: An exploratory study of compliance versus transformation in South African organisations. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 18, a1243.
- Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., ... & Jinks, C. (2018). Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & quantity*, 52, 1893-1907.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). Research methods for business students eight edition. *QualitativeMarket Research: An International Journal*.
- Schaack, D.D., Le, V.N., McCall, L. & He, H., 2020. Job resources, organizational climate, and staff retention in public sector organisations. *Public Personnel Management*, 49(2), 246–270.
- Schaft, A. van der, Lub, X., Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M., & Solinger, O. N. (2020). *The influence of psychological contract breach on sustainable employability*. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 118, Article 103404. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.103404>

- Shneiderman, B. (2020). Bridging the gap between ethics and practice: guidelines for reliable, safe, and trustworthy human-centered AI systems. *ACM Transactions on Interactive Intelligent Systems (TiiS)*, 10(4), 1-31.
- Singh, D. (2019). Understanding philosophical underpinnings of research with respect to various paradigms: Perspective of a research scholar. In *ANVESH-2019 Doctoral Research Conference in Management* (pp. 1-26).
- Smit, B., & Scherman, V. (2021). Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software for scoping reviews: A case of ATLAS. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 16094069211019140.
- Soratto, J., Pires, D. E. P. D., & Friese, S. (2020). Análisis temático de contenido mediante el software ATLAS. *Revista Brasileira de Enfermagem*, 73.
- Soudien, C., 2015. *Inside out: The practice and politics of transformation in South Africa's universities*. Cape Town: African Minds.
- Srikandi, M. B., Pawito, P., & Rahmanto, A. (2021). Cultural Identity Negotiation of Javanese-Muslim Settlers with Indigenous Balinese-Hindus: A Study of Intercultural Communication Strategies. *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding*, 8(1), 24-31.
- Stahl, N. A., & King, J. R. (2020). Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 44(1), 26-28.
- Stansfield, G. & Mcaciso, Z. 2019. Is arbitrariness a sufficient ground to establish unfair discrimination in wage differentiation disputes in terms of s6(1) of the EEA? In Clive Dekker Hofmeyr. *Employment Alert*. 4 March 2019
- Stevenson, R. M., & Josefy, M. (2019). Knocking at the gate: The path to publication for entrepreneurship experiments through the lens of gatekeeping theory. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 34(2), 242-260.
- Stratton, S. J. (2021). Population research: convenience sampling strategies. *Prehospital and disaster Medicine*, 36(4), 373-374.
- Sultana, F. (2020). Paradigm shift and diversity in finance. *Journal of Finance and Accounting Research*, 2(1), 94-113.

- Sung, C. C. M. (2022). Identity conflicts and negotiations: narratives of Asian international students' experiences in Hong Kong. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 43(5), 639-656.
- Tamtik, M., & Guenter, M. (2019). Policy analysis of equity, diversity and inclusion strategies in Canadian universities—How far have we come?. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 49(3), 41-56.
- Theys, N. & Schultz, C. (2020). A qualitative perspective of talent management. *Journal of Contemporary Management*, 17(1), 64-85.
- Thomas, K. M. (2020). *Diversity dynamics in the workplace* (2nd ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Ting-Toomey, S. (2015). *Identity negotiation theory*. In Y. Y. Kim (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of intercultural communication* (pp. 1–11). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118611463.wbielc141>
- Tomaszewski, L. E., Zarestky, J., & Gonzalez, E. C. (2020). Planning qualitative research: Design and decision making for new researchers. *The International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1609406920967174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920967174>
- Umanailo, M.C.B., 2019. Phenomenological research methodology in social sciences. *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, 8(9), 543–546.
- Urcia, I. A. (2021). Comparisons of adaptations in grounded theory and phenomenology: Selecting the specific qualitative research methodology. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 20, 16094069211045474.
- Vaismoradi, M., Jones, J., Turunen, H., & Snelgrove, S. (2016). Theme development in qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 6(5), 100–110. <https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v6n5p100>
- Varpio, L., Paradis, E., Uijtdehaage, S., & Young, M. (2020). The distinctions between theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework. *Academic Medicine*, 95(7), 989-994.

- Warikoo, N., & Allen, U. (2020). A solution to multiple problems: the origins of affirmative action in higher education around the world. *Studies in Higher Education, 45*(12), 2398-2412.
- Webster, E. & Forrest, K., 2021. *The Wiehahn Commission and the reform of labour relations in South Africa*. In: C. Southall (ed.), *The new black middle class in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media, pp.xx–xx.
- Wood, G., & Bischoff, C. (2020). Human resource management in Africa: current research and future directions—evidence from South Africa and across the continent. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 33*(3), 444-471.
- Woods, M., Paulus, T., Atkins, D. P., & Macklin, R. (2016). Advancing qualitative research using qualitative data analysis software (QDAS)? Reviewing potential versus practice in published studies using ATLAS. ti and NVivo, 1994–2013. *Social science computer review, 34*(5), 597-617.
- Worthington, R. L., Stanley, C. A., & Smith, D. G. (2020). Advancing the professionalization of diversity officers in higher education: Report of the Presidential Task Force on the Revision of the NADOHE standards of professional practice. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 13*(1), 1.
- Wright, S., O'Brien, B. C., Nimmon, L., Law, M., & Mylopoulos, M. (2016). Research design considerations. *Journal of graduate medical education, 8*(1), 97-98.
- Yuan, R., Liu, W., & Lee, I. (2019). Confrontation, negotiation and agency: exploring the inner dynamics of student teacher identity transformation during teaching practicum. *Teachers and Teaching, 25*(8), 972-993.

# ANNEXURE A – INTERVIEW GUIDE

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

### NOTES:

The researcher will:

1. Explain the purpose of the study; why and how participants were selected for the study.
2. Thank participants for their interest and time, indicating the expected duration of the process.
3. Seek informed consent for participation by explaining the potential risks and mitigation plans for any risks. Explain how the data will be managed and disposed of upon conclusion of the study.
4. Explain her role, introduce the moderator and the role s/he will play in the data collection process.
5. Announce any logistical arrangements that need to be observed in the process, including protocols of providing information during the COVID-19 era; and
6. Observe any natural occurrences during the process of data collection.

Because the data collection is online, the researcher will ensure technical support if connectivity is lost during the data collection process.

### A. Background Questions

**NB:** This section gathers information that will enable the researcher to contextualise the findings. It is appreciated that universities differ according to their mandates, which may have an influence on the nature of responses that you may provide. It is also acknowledged that literature identified the applicable reporting lines, length of service in the role and role definition as factors that could affect the perspectives of EE practitioners. It is thus necessary to have this information for purposes of data analysis only.

- A1. Please state type of your university – comprehensive, UoT or research-intensive
- A2. What is your current role within the South African public university?
- A3. How long have you been employed in this role?
- A4. Please share your reporting lines within the university, indicating the department and job title.
- A5. Are you part of the executive management team?

**B. Perspectives of EE practitioners regarding implementation of EE in SA public universities**

- B1. General perceptions on how the university approaches the implementation of EE?
- B2. Views regarding EE to achieve workplace transformation?
- B3. Opinions of whether the university makes progress| regarding the EE implementation.

**C. Challenges of EE in SA public universities**

- C1. Please share initiatives implemented by your university regarding workplace transformation, indicating what worked and what did not work pertaining to these initiatives?
- C2. In your experience, what have been the major challenges facing the university in achieving workplace transformation?
- C3. Specifically, what challenges has your university experienced pertaining to the implementation of Affirmative Action measures?
- C4. If your university underwent a Director-General's review in terms of the EEA, please share the main concerns regarding these and how the university has addressed these concerns?

- C5. Please share your views regarding clarity of your role as an EE practitioner, indicating challenges you have experienced in fulfilling this role.
- C6. Please comment on how your educational background assisted you in navigating the challenges of the role.
- C7. Any other views you might have regarding the transformation of South African universities?

**D. Proposals regarding EE guidelines**

This study proposes the development of guidelines to enhance the implementation of EE initiatives in South African public universities.

- D1. Could you please share with me considerations that need to be made in this regard?
- D2. What contributions would such guidelines make towards the achievement of workplace transformation?
- D3. What process would you recommend should be followed in that regard?

**E. Additional views and suggestions**

- E1. Is there anything that I may have omitted that should be considered in this study?
- E2. Are there any other referrals you could make for more information to be solicited to achieve the objectives of this study?

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!**

## ANNEXURE B – OBSERVATION GUIDE

**Participant Code:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interview Mode:**  Face-to-face  Online

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

### A. Context & Setting

- Private, uninterrupted setting
- Time pressure evident
- Institutional symbols / policy materials visible
- Hierarchical or surveillance cues present

### B. Non-Verbal Behaviour

- Open posture       Defensive posture
- Consistent eye contact     Avoidant eye contact
- Expressive gestures used
- Non-verbal shifts during sensitive EE topics

### C. Emotional Tone

- Calm     Frustrated     Fatigued     Optimistic     Mixed
- Emotional restraint / emotional labour evident
- Moral or ethical tension expressed

### D. Speech & Interaction Style

- Confident, fluent speech
- Hesitations / long pauses
- Self-corrections or guarded phrasing
- Repetition of key terms (e.g., compliance, transformation)
- Topic avoidance observed

### E. Power & Positionality

- Frequent references to senior management / authority
- Defensive language around accountability
- Expression of agency in EE implementation
- Expression of constraint or marginalisation

### F. Congruence

- Verbal and non-verbal cues aligned
- Tensions or contradictions evident
- Policy discourse dominates over lived experience

### G. Engagement with Interviewer

- Open and forthcoming
- Guarded or cautious
- Seeks reassurance or validation
- Justifies institutional practices

# ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE



College of Economic and Management Sciences\_ERC Human Resource  
Department

Date: 02/01/2024

Dear: Ms Neo Bokaba

**Decision: Ethics Approval  
from January 2024 to January  
2027**

NHREC Registration # : (if applicable)

Ref #: 1929

Name: Ms Neo Bokaba

Student #: 55165702

Staff #:

---

**Researcher:** Ms Neo Bokaba

1 Jan Smuts Ave Braamfontein

Johannesburg

55165702@mylife.unisa.ac.za 0605445775

**Supervisor:** Prof Mariette Coetzee Coetzm@unisa.ac.za

**Co-Supervisor:**

**Co-Researcher(s):**

**Email address:**

**The perspectives of Employment Equity practitioners on the implementation of Employment Equity in South African public universities.**

**Qualification:** MCOM HRM

---

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Economic and Management Sciences\_ERC Human Resource Department for the above-mentioned research study Ethics approval is granted for three.

## CERTIFICATE FROM EDITOR

*B Nel*  
*Translator and text editor*

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Contact number: | 0727597412                               |
| Address:        | <u>Kareeberg 73</u><br>Olympus, Pretoria |
| Email:          | Bibinat14@gmail.com                      |

To whom it may concern

This is to confirm that I, B. Nel, was responsible for the language editing of Ms. Bokaba's master's dissertation. In the course of this work, I utilised AI-assisted tools and editing software to support the editing and structuring of the content, while retaining full responsibility for the final edited version. The title of the study was:

*THE PERSPECTIVES OF EMPLOYMENT EQUITY  
PRACTITIONERS ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF  
EMPLOYMENT EQUITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC  
UNIVERSITIES*

The author is responsible for addressing all the suggested changes and queries. Furthermore, I do not accept responsibility for any changes made to the document after it was submitted.

B Nel  
17 December 2025