

Reimagining Dignified Inclusive Higher Education: System-Level Strategies of a South African University

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Abstract

This case study draws from the macro psychology perspective and intergroup contact theory to identify the system-level strategies employed by the management of a historically White South African University to promote intergroup contact and inclusion between racially and ethnically diverse students. Different sources of data were collected, including N=8 open-ended interviews with purposively selected managers and representatives who played key roles in diversity management and transformation, website documents, shared organizational documents, visual materials (e.g., photos), and the main researcher's field notes. Data analysis followed the methodology of situational analysis, which is an extension of Grounded Theory. The strategies identified displayed dynamic interrelationships across the different levels, namely, system-level (macro level), group-relational (meso level), and intra-individual (micro level). Overall, system-level intergroup contact practices between racially and ethnically diverse groups are the most effective when deliberate, value-driven, and supported by all the departments within the institution. Institutional practices that allocate resources to encourage and support student-led initiatives serve to advance the representation and empowerment of marginalized outgroups. In turn, this allows for active engagement between students and management to be more centered on the students' needs to improve the campus culture. This study endeavors to provide learning points from a post-conflict South African context that remains relatively underexplored in the reimagining of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) from a macro level and intergroup contact perspective. South Africa can offer valuable insights to the Global North regarding best management practices of DEI focused on promoting intercultural contact and social inclusion.

Keywords: case study, diversity, inclusion, intergroup contact, macropsychology, situational analysis

At present, the field of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) research in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is at a critical juncture. This is largely due to the nature and effectiveness of diversity practices being the subject of ongoing political debate and criticism from academics, politicians, and policymakers. Just recently in the United States (US), the new incumbent president, President Trump, signed an executive order number 14151; “Ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs and preferencing”, halting DEI mandates, policies, programs, and activities on the federal level. This order states that existing DEI efforts fuelled illegal reverse discrimination rather than merit-based opportunities, and DEI training was too costly and ineffective (The United States Government, 2025). According to Finn and Kamerlin (2023), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have not been immune, with the decision by the US Supreme Court to outlaw explicit consideration of race in university admissions and many DEI offices and activities on state levels being defunded or banned on campuses. In Europe, findings from the European Universities Association (EUA) revealed that the majority of HEIs are still committed in developing and implementing equity and diversity knowledge, skills training, and management in their overall values and objectives (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). However, as in the US, there has been a surge in White nationalism (Grimm et al., 2016), which has been closely linked to anti-migration, xenophobia (Coenders et al., 2021), and racial entitlement (Reyna et al., 2022). These factors have been strongly linked to negative intergroup attitudes and outcomes against marginalized ethnic-cultural groups and immigrants, with increased risk of dehumanization, discrimination, and racially motivated hate crimes (Endevelt et al., 2020). It remains to be seen how changes to DEI management and White nationalism rhetoric in the Global North will ultimately impact HEIs and their student populations, which are diversifying due to increased social mobility and migration (de Wit & Altbach, 2020).

In HEIs, initiatives such as internationalization and global citizenship are changing the diversity landscape of student communities (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2024). In light of this, DEI efforts remain pivotal in students’ academic journey to be prepared for active citizenship and employment in the future diverse workforce (Smith & Baik, 2021). Not surprisingly, HEIs are the ideal “microcosm of society” to cultivate a campus culture conducive to intercultural exchanges and sharing of diverse individual backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). The benefits of student diversity can be seen at the individual, institutional, and societal levels. On the individual level, several advantages have been well documented in the cognitive (e.g., critical thinking, problem-solving, curiosity, flexibility), affective (e.g., empathy), and socio-interpersonal (e.g., intercultural competencies, cultural capital) domains (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2024; Portera, 2020). Institutionally, HEIs can enhance their financial position and derive economic benefits from initiatives to improve DEI. This is achievable by accessing financial support from funding agencies and diversifying the demographics of their benefactors (Chicas-Mosier et al., 2023). DEI values are also reflected in the global societal context, with access to higher education embedded as a human right and social justice imperative in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Dalton et al., 2019).

Considering the current socio-political context calls for an in-depth scholarly discourse to *re-evaluate and re-imagine, not abandon* DEI efforts in higher education. Even though there has been contradictory evidence on the impact and limitations of DEI in organizational and institutional settings (see Devine & Ash, 2022; Esparza et al., 2022), failed DEI policies and practices usually reflect problems with implementation and leave pervasive social inequalities unaddressed (Iyer, 2022). Ignoring the potential value of DEI will inevitably lead to already disenfranchised and underrepresented students feeling even more unseen and “othered”. To address the above, scholars in the field of DEI research have argued for a pivotal shift from diversity to dignity and inclusion (Craig & Loehwing, 2021). Dignity, which is the inherent worth of all human beings, irrespective of social status, such as race, gender, physical or mental state (Hughes, 2011), can be a vital institutional lever to ensure dignity-affirming experiences for the diverse groups of students. Fostering dignity-affirming experiences for students have been positively related to academic engagement, sense of belonging, and well-being (Menkor et al., 2021).

This paper endeavours to provide insights from a post-conflict South African context that remains relatively underexplored in DEI research. In contemporary DEI research, an opportunity exists to recalibrate the way forward. Thus, a Global South perspective on how a post-Apartheid University had to develop strategies to promote intercultural contact and promote DEI might be welcomed. As the international and migrant student population in higher education is diversifying, examining the strategies from this case study can have transferable points for the Global North.

Given the current issues faced by DEI scholars and practitioners, this study applies a macro psychological framework and intergroup contact theory to a case study. The objective is to identify system-level strategies implemented by the specific institution to promote intergroup contact and inclusivity among racially and ethnically diverse students. In this regard, the primary research question is: *“How does a University’s system-level strategies recognize and promote intercultural contact and inclusion among diverse students?”*, and in the SA context, namely, *“How does a post-Apartheid historically White University promote students’ dignity and inclusion?”*

In the field of intergroup contact research, there have been calls to prioritize integration and inclusion through intergroup contact (Tropp et al., 2025). Indeed, a key aspect in the cultivation of global citizens, both within the general population and among students, is the promotion of intercultural learning and competencies through intergroup contact (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2024; Meleady et al., 2021). Intergroup contact theory, derived from the contact hypothesis of Allport (1954), has been widely supported in diversity literature. This theory suggests that positive contact between ingroup and outgroup members can reduce prejudice, prevent intergroup conflict, and enhance social connections and cooperation (Tropp & Barlow, 2018). However, the manner diverse students interact and how strategies at the system level in HEIs can be implemented between in- and outgroup members are less clear (Tropp et al., 2025).

In addition, moving away from individual-level approaches, DEI institutional research should look at extensive systemic change to combat social inequalities and create meaningful change (Iyer, 2022). Traditional DEI research is largely informed by Westernized Educated Industrialized Rich Developed (WEIRD) countries. Broadening the research to include more non-Western perspectives allows for alternative insights that can be considered by the Global North. Racial segregation, known as Apartheid (“*separateness*”) in South Africa (SA) extended for over 46 years from 1948 to 1994. Now famously known as the “Rainbow Nation”, SA remains one of the most multicultural countries in the world. After the demise of Apartheid, radical transformation had to take place, specifically among the historically White HEIs. Discriminatory laws and practices needed drastic changes to give access, integrate, and include racial/ethnic minority students (Dalton et al., 2019).

In the following paper, we first provide the main theoretical perspectives, namely, macropsychology and intergroup contact theory, that guided our study. Next, a brief historical background and context of the selected SA university follows. The methodology section includes the situational analysis approach used to conduct the case study, the data collection process, and the main findings. Finally, we present a discussion of the findings, identify the limitations, and provide recommendations for future research and practices.

Literature Review

Macropsychology and DEI

Traditional psychology mainly focuses on intrapsychic processes (e.g., cognition, personality, emotions, and motivation) and “understanding down” to determine its influences on human behaviour on an individual level. In turn, individual traits are regarded as the roots of causing social problems (Hodgetts, 2017). Instead, the macro psychological perspective takes a more collectivist approach to emphasize the importance of history, society, culture, and politics as causes of societal problems, and for “understanding up” how psychology can affect and is affected by these sociopolitical structures and systems (MacLachlan & McVeigh, 2021). MacLachlan (2014) defines macropsychology as “the application of psychology to factors that influence the settings and conditions of our lives” (p. 853). More specifically, this perspective sets out to explore the kind of social systems that are likely to promote a sense of worth, inclusion, and participation, and to what degree such social systems must be developed and sustained.

The effects and mechanisms of dominant socio-political systems in the creation and maintenance of individuals and groups to be marginalized and oppressed are of particular interest to the field of macropsychology (MacLachlan & McVeigh, 2021). It has also been applied to different areas (e.g., mental health, personality, educational leadership, disability rights, and work psychology; see MacLachlan & McVeigh, 2021). Through macro-level analyses, new questions about how psychology can influence rather than simply react to certain settings receive priority (MacLachlan, 2014). Building on theoretical influences of the ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), social psychology, and cultural psychology,

macropsychology examines the effects of social structures, institutions, systems, and institutional policies (i.e., *macro level*) on group-relational levels (i.e., *meso level*) and intra-individual (i.e., *micro level*). These levels are seen as embedded to form an open and interconnected loop system, both influencing and informing each other, creating a *meta-system*. On the macro level, factors such as the allocation of resources, implemented policies, and opportunities for collaboration and integration in institutions are investigated (MacLachlan & McVeigh, 2021). Also, the same researchers have situated this approach as integral in challenging and changing social structures to enhance social inclusion by addressing social justice, equity, and human rights (MacLachlan et al., 2019).

In higher education, this perspective is helpful to acknowledge the role of history, socio-political factors, institutional culture, educational policies, and societal norms in the racial integration of Black and White students in historically White universities. It also explores the impact on Black students' lived experiences in a racialized environment (Cornell & Kessi, 2016). Ray (2019) refers to "racialized" organizations that perpetuate systemic and interpersonal racism, as well as racist hierarchies among members, even while striving for race neutrality. According to Ray (2019), racialized organizations consist of four elements, namely, 1) it diminishes the agency of racial groups; (2) it legitimizes the unequal distribution of resources; (3) being White is regarded as a qualification in itself; and (4) formal rules are racialized and separated from organizational practices. Overall, the holistic analysis of the system level can inform interventions and inquiries to enhance equity, inclusion, and well-being in higher education (MacLachlan et al., 2019). In summary, adopting a macropsychology perspective is in alignment with recent appeals by scholars from psychology and education to prioritize system-level practices for more effective and sustainable diversity management (Iyer, 2022; Tropp et al., 2025).

Intergroup Contact Theory and DEI

One of the most effective strategies to reduce prejudice and discrimination is based on intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). Prejudice reduction through intergroup contact has been empirically validated, that is, a meta-analysis (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), an extensive review (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011), and a longitudinal study (Christ et al., 2014). Derived from the contact hypothesis based on a classical study by Allport (1954), it asserts that sustained positive direct contact between individual members of different racial, ethnic, or religious groups reduces prejudice, increases positive interpersonal attitudes, and has positive generalization effects toward the outgroup. This is largely due to the learning of new information about the out-group and is the most effective under certain optimal conditions, specifically, when everyone has equal status, when both groups work together to achieve common goals, and when there is institutional support (Allport, 1954). Other mechanisms through which prejudice is mitigated have been identified as the reduction of inter-group anxiety, the increase of empathy, and perspective-taking (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

Viewing intergroup contact research in HEIs through the lens of DEI, university settings are ideal environments for students to have positive and meaningful intercultural encounters,

develop cross-friendships, and deal with preconceived stereotypes and prejudices around race and ethnicity (Halualani, 2010). Positive intergroup experiences predict better academic achievement for racial minority students by reducing social identity threats and promoting inclusion (Carey et al., 2022). Recently, some HEIs favored adopting a *colorblind ideology* (i.e., a perspective that promotes the idea of treating all individuals equally and focusing on similarities regardless of their racial or ethnic backgrounds) to change the discourse of DEI, with the hope that by ignoring racial and ethnic differences, prejudice, and discrimination would cease to exist (Toraif et al., 2023). However, this approach is widely criticized for denying the experiences of racial and ethnic individuals, a form of microinvalidations that negatively impacts intergroup relations between students (Toraif et al., 2023). Moreover, on an institutional level, it exacerbates systemic racism by minimizing incidents of racism as individual prejudices instead of structural inequalities and power imbalances (Toraif et al., 2023).

International research demonstrates that students from different races and ethnicities in predominantly White institutions do not necessarily engage voluntarily with each other, with reports of less belonging and inclusion among minority groups (Carey et al., 2022; Corno et al., 2022; Hussain & Jones, 2021). This indicates that in a diverse environment, close proximity does not necessarily guarantee direct, frequent, and meaningful interactions, such as cross-friendships (Carey et al., 2022). At a US university, Plant and Devine (2003) demonstrated that a lack of positive interactions with ethnic minority group members (in this case, Black students) caused anxiety in the majority group (i.e., White students). This led to a range of responses among the White students from hostility to avoidance of intergroup interactions. A large-scale study involving 9,000 students at colleges reported greater benefits of positive direct contact with their racially diverse peers, as opposed to casual and superficial interactions (Espenshade & Radford, 2009).

By way of example, in SA Universities, the majority of Black students perceive no true racial integration (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017) and report high levels of racial discrimination and distrust (Selowa & Motileng, 2024). Bazana and Mogotsi (2017) raised the main challenge of Black students having to assimilate their social identities to that of the dominant White group of students and institutions. For White Afrikaans students, a strong identification with their ethnic identity coupled with perceived symbolic threats (i.e., the introduction of new values, culture, and expectations), reduced their willingness to seek out intergroup interactions with other racial groups (Nel et al., 2015). In contrast, sharing living spaces in residences on campus reduced negative stereotypes of White students toward Black students and fostered interracial friendships (Corno et al., 2022). The mental health burden on Black students due to negative intergroup experiences at predominantly White universities (Jochman et al., 2019) reflects a need for systemic changes to address these alienating interpersonal encounters.

Overall, extant research highlights the need for HEIs to better understand racial relations and how positive interactions can reduce racial inequalities and promote inclusion for all racial groups (Carey et al., 2022; Johnston-Guerrero & Tran, 2018). As demonstrated in the relevant literature, positive direct encounters between ingroups and outgroups also generalize to larger

outgroups, yielding societal benefits. This provides HEIs with a unique opportunity to enhance these interactions among students in preparation for the future diverse workforce. Consequently, HEIs are central to providing institutional support and strategies to facilitate interracial and intercultural exchanges (Carey et al., 2022; Selowa & Motileng, 2024).

The application of a macropsychological perspective in parallel with intergroup theory will enable HEIs to move beyond focusing only on individual- and group-level strategies to address systemic factors that influence intergroup dynamics. Thus, by critically examining the historical context, power relations, and institutional norms affecting intergroup contact and inclusion, HEIs can anchor diversity and inclusion in their strategic frameworks to create a more equitable academic community.

Context of the Case Study: A Post-Apartheid South African University

SA is home to about 63.1 million people and is categorized into one of four major ethnocultural groups¹ namely: Black African people (81.8%), Mixed Racial Heritage people (called “Coloured” in the SA nomenclature; 8.5%), Indian/Asian people (2.6%), and White people (7.1%) (StatsSA, 2024). These four major groups are further divided into several distinct cultural groups and 11 official languages (Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Pedi, Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu). Although White Afrikaners are in the minority, this group exerted dominance through laws during the Apartheid years and identified as the ingroup with majority status. In contrast, Black people who are in the majority were politically and socio-economically segregated, oppressed, and treated as the non-dominant outgroup with minority status (Chetty, 2019).

As for Higher Education, 1.3 million students are attending Universities in SA, of whom Black students constitute 76.4%, White students (11.4%), 5.7% Indian/Asian students, and 6.5% Coloured students (Statista, 2023). There are a total of 26 Public Universities, of which a few focus on vocational training. Even with a steady increase of Black students (5.5%) over the past years, participation remains higher among Indian/Asian students (19.6%), followed by White students (17.7%), and Coloured students (5.2%) (Statista, 2023). Socioeconomic inequalities, such as poverty and high unemployment, in conjunction with limited access to quality primary and secondary education (Muyambi & Ahiauku, 2025), remain ongoing challenges for the majority of disadvantaged Black communities. These factors not only affect their access to Universities but also lead to higher dropout rates and lower achievement of academic success compared to their counterparts (Dalton et al., 2019).

The specific University was chosen as a case study for several reasons. Firstly, established in the early 1900s, it was historically a White institution, frequented by a large proportion of

¹ The usage of these racial/ ethnic categories in the South African context is based on national-level statistics. The authors and their affiliation acknowledge that these terms still incorrectly maintain the discrimination, oppression, and inequality that took place during Apartheid. However, as this study is based in South Africa, we decided to use these categories as it is empirically supported in intergroup contact and diversity research to acknowledge ingroups/outgroups with minority or majority status.

White Afrikaans males from the surrounding farming areas (referred to as “*Boere*”- farmers). Secondly, during the post-apartheid years from 1994, this University needed to transform and integrate the different ethnocultural groups in the campus environment, educational activities, and live-in residences. Unfortunately, this was met with resistance from mostly the White male students, perceiving it as “forced racial integration”, resulting in racially charged white-on-black incidents and violent clashes. Thirdly, national and local student-led protests and the *#FeesMustFall* movement in 2015-2017 were motivated due to an increase in tuition fees, highlighting the economic inequalities for access to this University for Black underprivileged communities (Griffiths, 2019). Another challenge for this specific University was to address the growing demand to decolonize education as the majority of students still perceived higher education in post-Apartheid SA to be influenced by the legacy of White supremacy, with economic privileges only benefiting and being protected by the White minority (Griffiths, 2019). This also formed part of a larger national movement starting already in 2015 at the University of Cape Town (UCT), for example, *#RhodesMustFall* (originally directed to the statue of Cecil Rhodes as being a symbol of oppression), to decolonize higher education. This movement aimed to expose, amongst others, systemic racism, lack of racial transformation, limited access to higher education, and inadequate student accommodation for the previously disenfranchised Black South Africans (Chantiluke et al., 2018). To address the economic burden among low-income students and families, the government launched the sliding-scale payment policy, ending the protest in December 2017 (Griffiths, 2019). In summary, all of the abovementioned events compelled the leadership of this specific University to address integration and transformation more swiftly and intentionally. Presently, the University has around 40.000 students with the majority Black African (91%), Indian/Asian (4%), White (3%), and Coloured (2%) with over 20 residences providing accommodation for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Methodology

This case study entailed a situational analysis of a SA University using grounded theory as a framework (Clarke et al., 2022). Firstly, using case study qualitative research allows the researcher to select on purpose, that is, through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013) a single case or multiple cases, with the main goal to provide a holistic in-depth description and analysis of the selected case (Ylikoski & Zahle, 2019). Secondly, situational analysis as an extension of grounded theory is the most suitable form of interpretive analysis in the social sciences and humanities for mapping the complexity of situations (Clarke et al., 2022). Through analysis, the researcher defines the situation of inquiry empirically and identifies key elements that are in the situation of inquiry. A main strength of this approach is the alignment of the method with concepts of complex systems by “locating the research process and product in historical, social and situational conditions and excavating the structural contexts, power arrangements and collective ideologies” in the study focus (Charmaz, 2016, pp. 34–35).

The first author collected data from January to February 2024, consisting of qualitative open-ended interviews, analysis of the website and related documents, visual materials (e.g., photos), and field notes. Data collection adhered to the ethical guidelines as set out in the Declaration

of Helsinki (World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, 2013). In situation analysis, all data available is not case sensitive and is collected with respect to the rights of privacy of people and organizations. For example, public advertisements of the University initiatives and records that are publicly accessible. As the University's name chosen are anonymous and confidential, all related documents will be de-identified and referred to in general terms in the findings section.

$N = 8$ open-ended interviews were conducted with six senior personnel having key roles in diversity management and transformation within various departments dealing with aspects such as; student learning, development, residences, mental health services, human rights, and social justice. Two students were involved in the interviews, having previously been student representatives in leadership roles. The interviewees formed part of a multi-cultural group [$n = 3$ males, ($n = 1$ Black, $n = 2$ White), $n = 3$ females ($n = 1$ Black, $n = 2$ White), $n = 2$ student leaders (1 Black female, 1 Black male)] that ensured in-depth and representative viewpoints. The interviewees gave consent to share strategies, policies, and procedures of their department's collective practices to achieve integration, promotion of intergroup contact, and inclusion among the racial/ethnic groups. No personal information was obtained from the interviewees and all information shared was confidential. Furthermore, taking together all the different sources of data and informed by our specific research inquiry, the process allowed for recursive reflexivity to uncover the main findings.

Positionality Statement

Although the entire team played a role in shaping the direction of the research, the following reflection is from the perspectives of the main and the last author. The main researcher is a white heterosexual woman from South Africa and acknowledges that systems and structures allowed her privileges and opportunities compared to the other ethnic groups in South Africa. Through clinical experiences in diverse communities, she has seen firsthand the effects of structural- and socioeconomic inequalities on minority groups. As such, in this paper, she is dedicated to improving her macro-level understanding and practice around the presence of structural inequalities within HEIs that occur in both the developing and developed countries in the context of the increasing global diversity of student communities and a broadening concern for social justice. In the present study, the main researcher was aware of the risk and bias to focus on a narrative portraying only the success of the single case University. However, this was counterbalanced by following a formal, data-driven, and analytical discussion of these findings with the other researchers to maintain objectivity and a critical stance. The last author is a white heterosexual man from Italy and he acknowledges that systems and structures allowed his privileges and opportunities of being a Western White. He is expert in critical psychology, community psychology and critical work and organizational psychology. As such, he believes that studying the individual experience by considering the socio-political context promises a broad socially conscious domain of inquiry. He believes that the academic work is inseparable from the engagement in activism, maintaining that research in psychology can confront with social injustices. As such, he dedicated to understanding which conditions can

facilitate or hinder inclusion and dignity in the HEIs context. While maintaining this position, he has also worked with the first author to follow a data-driven understanding.

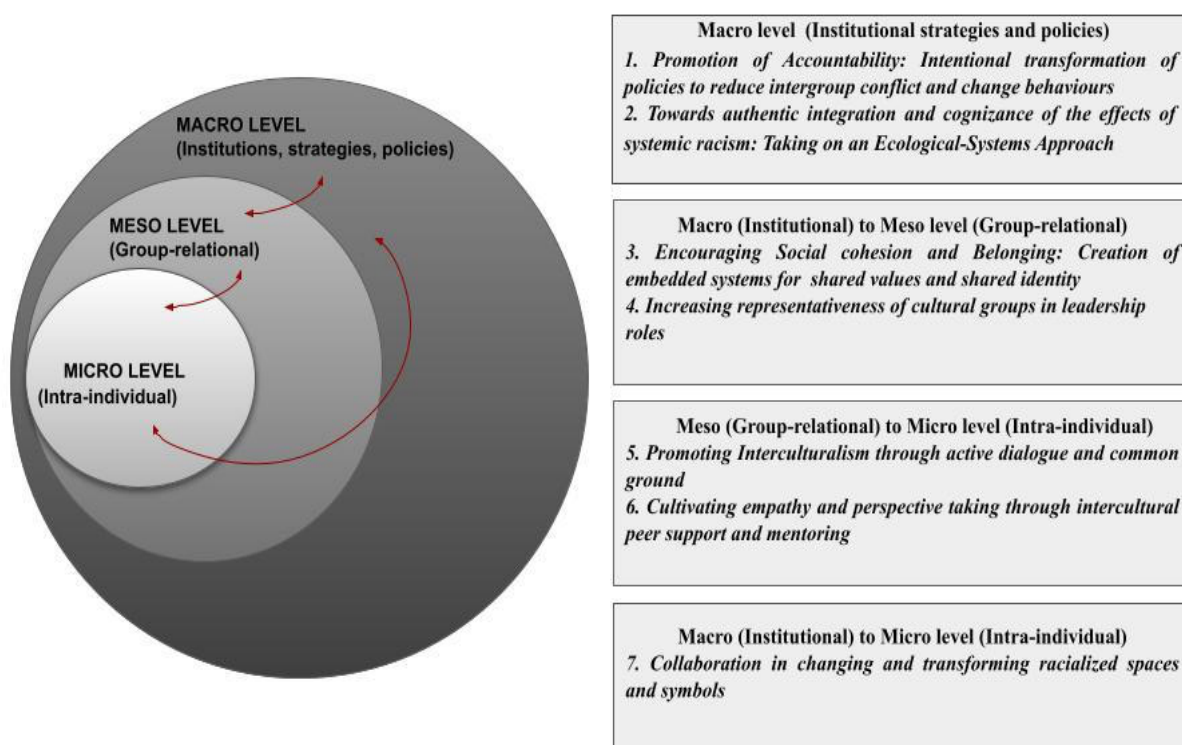
Findings

The analysis of all the data available and the key informant interviews revealed the following seven (7) strategies driven from an institutional level to enhance intergroup contact and inclusion. These strategies could be allocated across the different levels as described from a macropsychology perspective (MacLachlan & McVeigh, 2021), namely, the macro level (system), meso level (group-relational), and micro level (intra-individual) (See Figure 1). The macro level refers to the departments, units, strategies, and policies within the University. The meso level comprises students in groups as well as the larger student community, while the micro level focuses primarily on intra-individual factors (i.e., occurring within a person).

The following strategies will be briefly described, followed by a discussion of how these findings fit within the existing DEI literature.

Figure 1

Multiple-Level Strategies Aimed to Enhance Intergroup Contact and Inclusion among University Students



Macro Level – Institutional Strategies and Policies

Promotion of Accountability: Intentional Transformation of Policies to Reduce Intergroup Conflict and Change Behaviours

“From 1994, a process of re-humanization at the University had to take place by allowing each student a voice.” Interviewee #2

At the institutional level, management responded to racially charged incidents between students to establish a unit for institutional change and social justice, a centre for human rights, and a dedicated unit for gender equality and anti-discrimination. These units are important to support and enforce institutional policies against racism and sexism and to promote accountability under guidance of the University’s anti-discrimination, promotion of equality, and social justice policy and procedures published in 2017). Additionally, it allows for more specific-oriented research to better inform policies and practices for example, the centre of human rights through research uncovered that students did not initially know their human rights and what it was.

To this effect, one of the interviewees of this centre stated that:

“We had to start asking, “Do you feel someone’s dignity is violated?” Only when breaking human rights down to dignity, inclusion, respect, value, fairness and values did the students become part of this discourse.” (Interviewee #6)

Ultimately, the objectives of the abovementioned centre are to create a more socially just campus by reducing intergroup conflict and to change behaviours (such as violence, stereotypes, and hostility) in that the centre felt that they needed students on the ground to promote, educate and protect human rights of other students. To achieve this regular contact sessions, and workshops are conducted with students regarding their identity, inclusion, and student awareness of human rights.

Towards Authentic Racial Integration and Cognizance of the Effects of Systemic Racism: Taking on an Ecological-Systems Approach

The University on all levels (management and departments) strongly underscores the ecological-systems approach of Bronfenbrenner (2005) to be aware of the various influences on the different ethnocultural groups and individuals. Most key informants during the interviews mentioned that taking cognizance of the socio-historical backgrounds and context of the diverse students allows for better attunement to their needs (i.e., a student-centred perspective), therefore assisting with more authentic racial integration. On the institutional level, the awareness and opportunities to constantly challenge systemic racism form an integral part of intentional transformation strategies to counter racial inequalities and is also clearly stated in the new institutional transformation and strategic plan of the University. More specifically, in its internationalisation strategy for the period 2023-2028, it refers to

africanisation and decolonization as important processes to prioritize previously disregarded knowledge paradigms.

Macro Level to Meso Level – Institutional to Group-Relational

Encouraging Social Cohesion and Belonging: Creation of Embedded Systems for Shared Values and Shared Identity

“To create shared values and a shared identity in residences changed the behaviour and interactions between the different students.” Interviewee #5

One other advantage of the ecological-systems approach is that it allows for the creation of strong embedded systems across the ecological levels connecting the individual student to multicultural groups (i.e., friends and peers). One of the main challenges facing this University was the integration of Black students during the post-apartheid years in residences that were predominantly White. Initially, there was extreme resistance among the White male students in residences, calling it “forced integration”, and with the polarization of races still very much attached to the past of apartheid, initial attempts at racial integration were not successful. However, based on the University’s renewed transformation of the institutional culture committed to non-racialism and more effective management support to the students, it has developed more effective strategies for sustainable racial integration and increasing diversity in residences since 2007. The most important strategy is establishing platforms where, in each residence, the Black and White students were given the opportunity to develop shared values and residence identities, that is, “corridor identities”, with a new name, philosophy, and traditions. This has been built on and further driven by the student affairs and residence components in their newest strategic plan of 2023-2028, to realize this by fostering of communities by establishing different groups, nested into one another, starting from the smallest group consecutively to the largest entity. Through this strategy the objectives are to promote respect, cooperation, social cohesion, and inclusion among the diverse student groups.

Increasing Representativeness of Cultural Groups in Leadership Roles

“Student representatives must be inclusive of all voices.” Interviewee#1

“The concept of representativeness among staff to include diversity and among student leadership is needed to be representative of the student community at large.” Interviewee #4

On an institutional level, the University realized the importance and value of cultural representation in management and leadership roles. One important student led initiative namely the Student Representative Council (SRC), allows student leaders to provide a balanced perspective on ethnic-cultural influences on diversity-related issues while simultaneously creating trust among the students of the same racial groups that their voices and needs are being represented on their behalf. Through regular contact sessions between student groups and their

representatives, these student leaders can have a platform to communicate any concerns or needs to management on an institutional level.

Meso Level to Micro Level – Group-Relational to Intra-Individual

Promoting Interculturalism through Active Dialogue and Common Ground

“To talk, to give a voice to someone is the most powerful tool for change.” Interviewee #5

The present University in its transformation-and strategic plan describes interculturalism as “the dynamic process of interaction and communication between different cultures that aims to create community, foster dialogue, and negotiate power dynamics”. This is a stance away from the term multiculturalism, which only refers to the co-existence of multiple cultures together. All the interviewees described that encouraging active dialogue between the different student groups, as well as management, allows for improved understanding and solution-focused strategies to improve intergroup contact and successful diversity management. Establishing common ground, that is, reaching a mutual understanding among the different cultural groups, provides the ideal foundation for communication, problem-solving, and cooperation. Creating an environment where it is supported that cultural differences can be openly shared in pursuit of finding common ground lies in the interculturalism approach that the University is following, for example, the student residence affairs designation arranges several cultural diversity workshops and interculturalism days annually. Through the internationalisation strategy of 2023-2028, the university promotes and organises interdivisional celebrations of cultural diversity, including the celebration of Africa Day, Heritage Day, and national independence days relevant to university community members. In addition, the University adopted a language policy in 2023 and established an academy for multilingualism to recognize the linguistic diversity of students and staff as social assets and social justice and inclusivity. This language policy includes the languages representative of the culturally diverse students.

Cultivating Empathy and Perspective-Taking through Intercultural Peer Support and Mentoring

Institutionally supported initiatives from the various departments identified a need among students for sustainable peer support and mentoring services for example, the student affairs department offers a dialogues programme and peer mentor programmes, and the mental health services have aimed to create and promote opportunities for intercultural contact through specifically tailored workshops. Collectively, these departments aim to develop empathy and perspective-taking among the students to improve intergroup attitudes and reduce implicit biases. Other student led initiatives, such as student associations for LGBTQ+ and students with disabilities allow for intersectionalities of identities to exist and for students to express their needs to leadership.

Macro Level to Micro Level – Institutional to Intra-Individual

Collaboration in Changing and Transforming Racialized Spaces and Symbols

“Certain racial groups have been removed from history. The question is how to reclaim their history knowing that it is not a clean stream.” Interviewee#2

Part of the primary objective on the institutional level was to be aware of how physical spaces and symbols in a historically White University campus can perpetuate the legacies of racism, social injustice, exclusion, and inequality among Black minority groups. The majority of the University’s infrastructure, such as buildings and streets, was named after White “Afrikaners” associated with the Apartheid government.

A new institutional transformation and strategic plan of the University publicized in 2022 strives to reflect social justice and multilingual objectives by transforming and renaming these spaces and symbols to balance the history of the University and be more representative of the current multicultural and democratic society. Starting already from 2018, this was done through the active engagement of multiple stakeholders (students, academic staff, management, and community) to dismantle “racialized” spaces and symbols and create a more inclusive environment for all under the direction of a social justice unit. This engagement led to the removal and relocation of a prominent Apartheid figure in 2020, and in 2022, five residences were renamed. On an individual level, this system-level strategy aims to instill a sense of belonging and to re-create new spaces not associated with the historical legacies of racial segregation, oppression, and the power of one racial group over another.

Discussion

The main objective of this present paper was to identify the system-level strategies of a South African University that recognizes and promotes intercultural contact and inclusion among Black and White students. Drawing upon the perspectives of macropsychology and intergroup contact theory allows for the recognition of the systemic barriers and the role of history, socio-political factors, institutional culture, educational policies, and societal norms. These factors continue to challenge HEIs in post-Apartheid in their attempts to integrate students within historically White universities, where most Black students still experience racial integration not being authentic, which negatively impacts their sense of belonging (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017). Extant literature also indicates a mismatch between HEIs in principle being committed to embracing DEI and actionable sustainable practices to create and promote opportunities for structured intergroup contact and inclusion (Tropp et al., 2025).

In the interpretation of the findings, the strategies identified displayed dynamic interrelationships across the different levels, namely, system-level (macro level), group-relational (meso level), and intra-individual (micro level). The advantage of the identified interrelationships across the various levels is an important aspect of the macropsychology perspective, where interventions or strategies are not isolated to a specific level but are

transverse, meaning each level influences and informs the other (MacLachlan & McVeigh, 2021). On the macro level, intergroup contact practices between racially and ethnically diverse groups are the most effective when they are deliberate, value-driven, and supported by all the departments within the institution. System-level changes have the most potential to eliminate systemic barriers and address issues of discrimination, stereotypes, and implicit bias through policies that do not condone this behaviour (i.e., to enforce accountability). This confirms Ray's (2019) view that institutions that are inherently racist should actively promote the agency of racially minority groups to reach effective transformation towards equity.

On the group relational and intra-individual levels, it is integral that differences are welcomed, to promote active dialogue and find common ground to enhance intergroup relations. Through providing opportunities for mentoring and peer support across racial groups, the fundamental skills of empathy and perspective-taking assist students to improve intergroup attitudes and challenge their own implicit biases. The stance of the University not to follow a color-blind approach is in line with research indicating the negative effects of this ideology as it leads to microinvalidations, negative intergroup relations, and perpetuates systemic racism (Toraif et al., 2023). Moving beyond multiculturalism, which acknowledges the existence of multiple ethnic and racial groups within a society, the concept of interculturalism captures the dynamic process of interactions between diverse groups necessary to build a socially just society (Portera, 2020).

University spaces and symbols that are reminders of oppression, violence, exclusion, and internalized inferiority, and therefore removed or renamed, indicate the institutional accountability and commitment to redress and use the opportunity to reinterpret such spaces to be more inclusive for all students (Cornell & Kessi, 2016; Van Marle, 2022).

The findings show that institutional-level changes are vital for transformation related to DEI on group-relational and individual levels. However, it also illustrates that the institution should be dedicated to this process and be willing to constantly evaluate its progress in effecting systemic change. Freyd (2022) refers to this as “change through institutional courage”. Institutional courage requires institutions to commit to seeking the truth, engaging in action, protecting marginalized groups, and holding themselves and others accountable when racial inequalities and systemic racism persist (Gómez et al., 2023).

Practical Implications

This study provides several implications for future research and practice. More empirical and specifically, longitudinal studies and studies in real contexts are needed to understand how students experience institutional policies and strategies that promote aspects such as dignity, inclusion, and intergroup contact. Intercultural competencies as an outcome of intergroup contact are relatively unexplored in social psychology research and could provide valuable outcomes for institutions to develop strategies (Meleady et al., 2021). Intergroup contact may include several types of interactions, both direct and indirect, and can range from one-off, casual encounters with other groups to intimate relationships (i.e., cross-group friendships and

romantic relationships) (Marinucci et al., 2021; Tropp, 2007). More research on the development of cross-race friendships among students can shed light on specific predictive factors that play a role. Lastly, our paper highlighted ethnic and racial differences related to intergroup contact in a post-conflict South African University. In the context of DEI, the significance of intersectionality can be extended to other student groups who vary in terms of sexual orientation, religion, and socio-economic status.

In terms of implications for practice, this study might be of relevance to institutional leaders and managers in other HEIs. Using evidence-based theory, the findings in this study show the integral role at the level of the institution for sustainable change towards DEI. The identification of these central system-level strategies can inform policies addressing DEI from a multi-level perspective and demonstrate the importance of actionable and measurable practices. Furthermore, our findings suggest that institutional practices should allocate resources to a) encourage and support student-led initiatives, b) advance marginalized outgroups' representation and c) focus on improving a sense of inclusion and meaningful intergroup interaction between diverse racial and ethnic students. These aspects seem pivotal to allow for active engagement between students and management, as well as to be more centered on the students' needs to improve the campus culture.

Limitations

Although this study shows promise to contribute to the relevant discourse across the world about current DEI challenges in HEIs and how this could be reimaged, the use of a case study does pose certain limitations. As it is very context-specific and based on a single site, the most prominent limitations of this study were generalizability, the small sample of key informant interviews (i.e., $N = 8$), time-bound change (i.e., challenging to repeat over time), and the potential of social desirability in management accounts. Despite these limitations, the main strength lies in the opportunity it presents to include a non-Western perspective by obtaining a more in-depth description and understanding of the phenomenon. Broadening research to include more non-Western perspectives on aspects related to DEI, as well as social justice, can provide alternative insights to scholars from the Global North. The specific multi-level strategies identified can be transferable to other HEIs in the Global North under similar conditions of dealing with increasingly resources constraints and diverse student populations that require adaptive decision-making, proactive actions, coordination and collaboration across the different departments and management levels.

Conclusion

In this paper, we endeavoured to make a point that diversity, in its truest ideal and purpose (i.e., to rectify and restore access and equity to historically underrepresented minorities), should remain a discourse worthy of exploring and reimagining, by placing more emphasis on dignity-affirming and socially inclusive practices moving forward. This means that the diversity discourse within the research community should continue to focus on collaboration and collective reconstruction to define what diversity and inclusivity should signify. Taking on a

macropsychology approach emphasizes the vital role of system-level policies and practices geared towards socially relevant principles such as social justice and human rights. A South African case study shows how a historically White university is proactively addressing change to create a positive, inclusive campus culture for all students. While contexts in the Global North and South might reveal different trajectories to diversity, the promotion of social inclusion and intergroup contact between multicultural groups can serve as a valuable example for the Global North.

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Appendix

Practitioner Takeaway Box

Objective

- This case study aims to identify system-level strategies that promotes intergroup contact and inclusion between diverse students at a historically White South African University.

Key Findings

- Importance of implementing value-driven, deliberate, and institution-wide strategies to enhance intergroup contact and social inclusion.
- Allocation of resources to encourage student-led initiatives and actively engage with students to understand and address their needs.

Core Institutional Levers

- Policy and Accountability: Develop and enforce clear anti-discrimination and transformation policies to ensure accountability across the institution.
- Residence Culture: Create inclusive residential environments that promote shared values and identity among the diverse students.
- Representative student leadership: Support diverse student leadership to represent and empower marginalized outgroups.
- Interculturalism: Encouraging intercultural connections through active dialogue and common experiences.
- Socio-emotional skills: Developing empathy and perspective-taking through cross-cultural peer support and mentoring.
- Renaming of places and spaces: Review and revise campus symbols, names, and places to promote inclusivity.
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Contributions

This study offers valuable insights for practitioners and leadership in HEIs aiming to reimagine DEI practices from a macro perspective to focus on dignity-affirming and inclusivity practices. Drawing on the unique experiences of a post-conflict South African context this study hopes to contribute to the global conversation on promoting intercultural contact and social inclusion in higher education.