

The Influence of Context in the South African Higher Education System: A Social Realist Critique

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KEYWORDS Higher Education. Context. Structure. Culture. Agency

ABSTRACT Higher education systems, the world over, operate in different contexts. The South African education system is no exception. This concept paper employs a social realist theoretical framework to examine the influence of context on the South African higher education system. In this concept paper the researchers interrogate the influence of context in the pre-democratic era in South Africa. The researchers show how culture in terms of racial discrimination in society then influenced structure in terms of policies and institutions which served to propagate a differential higher education system on racial lines. The researchers also examine the post-apartheid environment which is marked by the need to address past imbalances in higher education. The new political dispensation ushered in after the demise of apartheid, the resultant policies and reorganisation of the higher education system are further examined. In this paper the researchers argue, using a social realist lens, that context has a great influence on the conceptualisation, organisation and implementation of higher education. The researchers conclude that a closer understanding of higher education system operations is made clearer by interrogating the interplay between structure, culture and agency in any given historical period.