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Reevaluating the relevance of undergraduate theology degrees in South African universities

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Background: The development of theological education in South Africa was influenced by its colonial past and apartheid era. Despite its rich heritage, the discipline faces struggles in public higher education and raises questions about its ongoing relevance.

Aim: This article builds on Oberhelman's critique of the 'irrelevant degree' narrative to reevaluate the relevance of undergraduate theology degrees in South African universities, examining historical context, current state and future prospects.

Setting: This study is situated within the context of South African universities that offer undergraduate theology degrees. The context is shaped by the country's colonial and apartheid past, which operates within a post-apartheid era transforming theological education within the higher education system.

Methods: This article contends that through theology degrees, students and graduates gain new opportunities and a wealth of transferable skills. The study employed a qualitative approach, analysing literature from scholarly articles on theological education in South Africa, Africa, and globally.

Results: This execution aimed to deliver a complete and nuanced exploration of the subject. The study further argues that, despite challenges, theology remains a valuable field of study, with nine South African universities offering programmes that prepare students for careers in sectors such as counselling, social work and community development.

Conclusion: Theology degrees remain relevant for addressing social needs in South African society. Their broad scope prepares graduates for multiple career options, contributing to the field's development.

Contribution: Therefore, this article highlights theology's inherent worth and practicality in addressing contemporary challenges and informing curriculum development. It argues for theology's enduring relevance in South African universities. By reevaluating the undergraduate theology degree, this study seeks to inform universities, theology departments, career advisers, students and graduates on how to promote a more nuanced understanding of theology's role in South African society and dissipate the irrelevance of these degrees.

Keywords: re-evaluation; relevance; theology degrees; South African; universities; graduates.

Introduction

For ages, Arts and Humanities degrees have long been ridiculed. The common perception is that these degrees are no longer relevant and offer limited career prospects. In the United States, politicians are downplaying humanities while pushing Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and trade schools. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, Arts and Humanities programmes are struggling, dismissed as irrelevant, as the government invests heavily in STEM programmes (Oberhelman 2024:355). This means that in a world where STEM fields dominate the narrative, Arts and Humanities Degrees often get sidelined as impractical. But what if we are misjudging them? This study highlights the value of Arts and Humanities degrees in public higher education. It focuses on undergraduate theology degrees within the Arts and Humanities to explore their relevance in South African universities.

Theology, the study of religious faith and practice, has long been a respected discipline. Despite its rich history, in recent years, some people have questioned the value of pursuing a theology degree, emphasising its lack of job-market relevance and perceived lack of practical application. To a certain extent, it is argued that it has 'become voiceless' (Amanze 2012:189). This article seeks to address these concerns and demonstrate the worth of this field of study in South African universities. The study contends that the claim of theology degrees being

'irrelevant' derives from a narrow perspective of the field's scope and applications and thus warrants examination. This article aims to address these concerns by showcasing the field's inherent value and practicality.

An overview of undergraduate theology degrees

Theology offers three undergraduate degrees: Bachelor of Theology (B.Th.), Bachelor of Arts in Theology (B.A. in Theology), and Bachelor of Divinity (B.Div). These undergraduate degrees explore Theology. Citing the UoA Academic Bulletin (2018–2019:139), Ngussa and Mpwani (2020:43) state that the main objective of these theology programmes is to equip students with resources for theological, pastoral and religious education, teaching students to study and interpret scriptures using historical–grammatical hermeneutical methodology, to provide consultancy services to the church and community, to instil Christ-Centred moral values in students, to develop students' pastoral, evangelistic and teaching skills for effective ministry, to foster spiritual, academic, and professional growth in students and to create a supportive learning environment between faculty and students.

The programmes are typically a 3–4-year undergraduate degree, National Qualification Framework (NQF) level 7, requiring a minimum of 360 credits. They generally consist of 120 credits per year. At several South African universities, the theological curriculum encompasses disciplines such as Old Testament, New Testament, systematic theology, practical theology, and missiology. Some institutions often opt for an interdisciplinary approach, with practical theology and missiology intersecting in their studies (Kgatle 2024:1–2). However, it should be emphasised that these programmes are not limited to clerical roles; they also prepare students for chaplaincy, education, counselling and non-profit roles.

Review findings

Historical context of theological education in South Africa

According to Knoetze et al. (2021:22–23), theological education in South Africa has its roots in the country's colonial past, dating back to the 17th century. When the Dutch established a trading post in the Cape in 1652, they brought the reformed church in the Netherlands with them. Efforts were made to establish a seminary in Stellenbosch (now Stellenbosch University) in 1859. This institution was the only provider of theological education until 1938, when the Faculty of Theology was introduced at the University of Pretoria. During this period (late 19th to early 20th century), theological education in Southern Africa lacked sophistication (Msomi 1988:196). However, things changed during the apartheid era when structural racism started to impact theological education.

During the apartheid era

During apartheid, theological education was strictly influenced by the government's discriminatory rules. According to Resane (2019:1), some South African universities were linked to apartheid ideology. The *Bantu Education Act of 1954*, a cornerstone of apartheid policy, restricted black children's access to quality education, limiting their access to basic and higher education. This meant that for a black child, education was neither a right nor a privilege. It was a right brutally taken away and an opportunity denied. As per Banda (2024:30), black people were also excluded from theological education, receiving low-quality education. As a result, this era witnessed the emergence of critical responses, such as the Kairos document (1985). A group of theologians, pastors and activists issued this document as a critique of the church's complicity with apartheid, calling for a prophetic challenge to structural oppression. This document was a typically liberal response to South Africa's deepening political crisis because township communities were subjected to extreme suffering and oppression (Mujinga 2025:4). This highlights theology's capacity for critical engagement with societal issues, proving that theology has always been relevant. For example, Musya (2012:165) states that the Kairos document called for a society grounded in Christian values, with social justice, equality and mutual respect. The relevance of theology in engaging with societal issues also extended to the post-apartheid era.

Post-apartheid era

Post-apartheid, there has been a paradigm shift in theological education in South Africa. The discriminatory practices and systems were dismantled to build a just system. South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training had a huge reform agenda ahead. The university now brings together citizens from a previously divided society, reflecting the complexities of South Africa's history (Resane 2019:3). Some reforms include faculty reconfigurations, expanded access and curriculum updates. Theological education evolved from a narrow, traditional focus to a more liberated ecumenical approach, embracing diverse perspectives on gender, race and belief (Venter 2016:2). This shift underscores the importance of adapting theology to diverse contexts, a recurring theme in literature. However, this led to a decline in theological education in the country. Banda (2024:30) notes that this decline was due to the democratic government's emphasis on STEM subjects. Citing Farisani (2010), Banda further notes that the focus on STEM fields, with their strong job markets, discouraged students from pursuing theology and philosophy, which are seen as less practical. This calls for a comparative perspective of theological education locally, continentally and globally.

Marginalisation of theological education: Local, continental and global perspectives

Theological education is facing challenges in South Africa, Africa, and globally. One persistent challenge is marginalisation. In local, continental and global contexts, theological education faces challenges of credibility, acceptance and inclusion in academic conversations. While its value and relevance are debated, others see it as necessary for addressing contemporary issues. Therefore, theological education must prove its relevance by addressing these challenges and leveraging these opportunities. To avoid marginalisation, theological education must demonstrate its relevance by addressing issues such as this. As Porter

(2025:91) notes, this is possible because theological education has shown remarkable resilience despite the various challenges it has faced throughout its history. This will be discussed below from South African, African, and global perspectives.

South African context

In South Africa, theology is often seen as lacking a legitimate place in academia. Critics argue that it is less rigorous than the sciences, implying that it is somehow less credible. It is also portrayed as illogical, rooted in old stories and irrelevant to contemporary issues. Currently, the very existence of theology in universities is being challenged (Pillay 2017:3). Others are even asking whether it has a place in universities. However, Kgatle (2024:1) contends that debating about Theology's inclusion in public universities is pointless. According to Kgatle, the debate should revolve around the long-term viability of theology in public universities. Kgatle furthermore labels the weakening of theology's status 'dearth and death of theology in public universities'. He believes that for theology to avoid death and to exist without influence, it should become relevant. To support Kgatle's view, Beyers (2016:8) underlines that the actual question should not be based on Theology's place in South African universities but rather what type of theology will an African faculty produce? Such a theology should yield positive results, contributing to both theological education and society. This will help avoid further marginalisation.

African perspectives

In reference to some of the challenges faced by theological education in Africa, Tokunbo and Peter (2025:28) mention that a significant challenge is often discrimination and exclusion. Theological education is often regarded as relevant to clergy or church members, rather than as a valuable subject for everyone to study as an educational pursuit. This perception limits its recognition and attention, contributing to its further neglect. However, despite marginalisation, the study of Chitando, Taringa and Mapuranga (2014) highlighted ways theologians and scholars of religion have addressed the Zimbabwean crisis. This highlights theology's relevance in communities, allowing it to meet stakeholder expectations. To become more contextually relevant, Amanze (2012:202) asserts that African theologies should be included in theological discussions. On the other hand, Ngussa and Mpwani (2020:47) suggest that theology lecturers should incorporate a balanced mix of theoretical knowledge, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, practical task skills, hands-on activities and logical thinking into their teaching approaches.

Global perspectives

Global theological education finds itself tackling the same challenges faced by South Africa and Africa. Referencing Gonzalez (2015:131), Porter (2025:90–93) states that modern observers agree that North American theological education is struggling, aligning with its historical trends. Porter further exemplifies that in the 20th century, theological education in North America shifted to a modern approach, creating a curriculum that balanced academic and practical training. Later, theological education broadened its scope to tackle contemporary issues alongside theological issues. This approach was the way to go for most of the second half of the 21st century. Despite all these efforts, theological education in North America is still struggling. The question of the future of theology in higher institutions cannot be evaded. According to Buitendag and Simut (2017:2), other regions, such as South America and eastern Asia, show similar patterns. Despite these tendencies, these authors argue that theology has a future in universities because it must support the rapid growth of the Christian religion. While theological education suffers from ongoing marginalisation, it is essential to examine some misconceptions about theology degrees.

Misconceptions surrounding theology degrees

There are several misconceptions surrounding theology degrees. However, this study only focuses on these two: (1) theology degree 'Is only for Pastors', and (2) theology degrees are valueless.

The degree 'Is only for Pastors'

The most common misconception is that a theology degree 'Is only for Pastors'. This is understandable because theology is often tied to ordained ministry, but this link does not reflect the field's full scope. This is one way to relegate theological education. As per Tokunbo and Peter (2025:28), there is an ongoing discrimination against theological education as 'it is seen as exclusive only for the clergy and church people, and not a worthwhile subject for all to study as an educational course'. However, we contend that this misconception stems from a narrow perspective of the field's scope and applications. Theology degrees have a broad applicability; the skills and knowledge gained from this programme are transferable to various sectors. Theology degrees are not limited to pastoral vocations; according to the University of Pretoria (2026:6) the degree also qualifies graduates for various career opportunities, such as a youth worker, journalist or broadcaster on religious topics, project leader in community development, pastoral counsellor, researcher and lifestyle coach. Framing theology degrees as only clerical can hinder students' potential, hinder institutional innovation and misinform stakeholders about the degree's heterogeneous practical applications and social relevance.

Theology degrees are valueless

In addition to the misconception that theology is only for pastors, others consider theology degrees to be valueless. This is a provocative claim and will likely spark disagreement. But is the claim legit? While some see Theology degrees as a path to nowhere, others find them highly valuable. Farisani (2010), Banda (2024:30) noted former President Thabo Mbeki's comment when he publicly said that studying Theology has little economic value by telling people that: 'If

you qualify and come out of teacher training, for instance, with Biblical Studies, you are not going to get very many jobs for that'. According to Banda, this remark implied that theology's value is limited to teaching with slight economic impact. We dispute that theology degrees offer diverse career paths and economic relevance beyond teaching.

As stated above, theology degrees offer non-academic careers such as Non-Government Organisation (NGO) leadership and counselling. For example, the scarcity of qualified pastoral counsellors noted by Awasthi and Achar (2025:214) highlights the value of theology degrees beyond teaching. With a theology degree, one can pursue a career in pastoral counselling. Theology graduates can leverage their knowledge to provide counselling services in faith-based organisations or in private practice to address the shortage of pastoral counsellors in the country. Graduates can even establish their own counselling practices or work as consultants. Graduates can also be employed in the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), the South African Police Services (SAPS), the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), and government institutions, including departments of social development and health. This shows that theology degrees have a significant economic and social impact, contradicting the notion that they're only valuable for teaching. These misconceptions can impact the status of theological education in South African universities, limiting its appeal and perceived value.

The status of theological education in public universities

The current status of theological education in South Africa is rather shocking. The latest data reveal a concerning picture. Citing Higher Education and Training (2023:10–179), Ntseno and Dames (2025:10) state that out of 67 institutions, only 19 are accredited, with four provisionally accredited. Eight have lost accreditation, and 36 are deemed bogus and illegal. By 2025, the numbers have dropped further, with only 16 institutions registered and four provisionally accredited. This points to a substantial decrease in accredited institutions, raising concerns about the future of theological education and the sector's long-term viability. With 26 universities in South Africa, Kgatle (2024:1) mentioned about eight that offered theological education. It was the University of South Africa, the University of Pretoria, the University of Free State, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the University of Fort Hare, the University of North-West, Stellenbosch University, and the University of the Western Cape. However, Banda (2024:29) posits that University of Venda should be added to Kgatle's list, as it offers theology programmes from Bachelor's to PhD level. This brings the total number of public South African universities to at least nine (as of July 2024). Other scholars such as Banda (2024) and Knoetze (2021) have also highlighted a decline in theological education. Similarly, Amanze (2012:189) points out that theology is becoming less attractive to students and the broader community. So the question is, can the case of students who enrol in theology as a fallback before switching to another field be a contributing factor to this decline?

'I didn't choose this degree, it chose me!'

The Bachelor of Arts in Theology programme is struggling to find its footing. Some students genuinely pursue this degree as their first choice of study, passionate about theological studies and eager to make a positive impact in their communities. On the other hand, others end up there by circumstances because other courses are full, so they settle for theology to avoid a gap year. When you ask such students why they chose this degree, they'll say things like 'I didn't choose this degree, it chose me!' Such students may also be facing low entry points or inadequate finances. As revealed by Gore's (2021:272) interviews, many low-income students ended up in their degree programmes because they did not meet the entry requirements for other courses. Furthermore, a lack of funds means low-income students often settle for less desirable options. These students usually end up wanting to transfer to different degrees.

Denny & Wepener (2021:4–5) refer to such students as `ship jumpers'. Furthermore, they contend that the presence of students using theology as a stepping stone for another academic career creates tension in the lecture space, hindering effective teaching. These students, who often get rejected by their preferred faculty, lack commitment and engagement, treating theology as mere credit fillers. What this attitude does is to make an inclusive learning space irrelevant. Denny & Wepener (2021) also point out that some students are stuck, not really wanting to be there, and it creates issues. In all honesty, this creates a challenging environment for both students and educators.

This situation is further complicated by the promise of a 'change of degree' in the upcoming year. When that fails, students are left with regrets, trapped with a qualification that they never wanted in the first place. To exacerbate this matter, these students are led to believe they'll never be financially unstable or unsuccessful (Lao et al. 2023:139). Consequently, this can negatively impact their academic experience and outcome. The worst-case scenario is when such students drop out of university, as found in Gore's (2021:271) study. So to answer the question posed earlier, the answer is yes. 'Ship jumpers' can also lead to a decline in theological education. This issue must be addressed because if students use Theology merely as a stepping stone, it might weaken the faculty's credibility and the field as a whole. In the long run, this also affects students' academics and future. It also gives the impression that theology isn't a serious field. However, the relevance of this degree will be discussed below to showcase the skills it develops and the diverse career opportunities it offers.

Implications and recommendations

The relevance of undergraduate theology degrees in South African universities

Undergraduate theology degrees remain relevant in South Africa's academic landscape. This interdisciplinary

qualification is designed to produce graduates who can easily apply their critical knowledge within the South African context. This discussion demonstrates the relevance of theology degrees in South African universities, focusing on skills acquisition for theology students and graduates, Career prospects for theology students and graduates, curriculum relevance, and contributions of theological education in higher education in South Africa.

Skills acquisition for theology students and graduates

An undergraduate theology degree, as one of the arts and humanities degrees, equips students with versatile skills, preparing them for diverse careers and not just one specific job. The acquisition of these skills should be tied to the notion that one's future is shaped by one's own creativity, interests and drive (Oberhelman 2024:358). Based on the critiques of the arts and humanities degree, acquiring these skills alone is not sufficient to prove the relevance of one's qualification. Without the application of these skills, theological education can't prove its worth and practicality in South African contexts. Therefore, theology students and graduates are expected to apply these skills beyond their learning environment. These skills include critical thinking, problem-solving, research and writing, public speaking and communication, and leadership and teamwork. These diverse skills are valuable in ministry, education and academia, community development, writing and publishing, and advocacy. These are the skills that stay relevant forever; they never go out of style. Here are some of the skills acquired through a theology degree:

Critical thinking skills

Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and make smart decisions by asking questions, examining facts and considering various perspectives. In accordance with Mashabela (2024:2), the goal of theological education is to foster critical thinking in students, enabling them to make a meaningful impact in South Africa's contexts. Theological education is not just about passing on knowledge; it also involves research as an integral part. Critical thinking allows theology students and graduates to study multidimensional theological concepts, examine diverse viewpoints and build strong, logical arguments. It helps them to evaluate the relevance of theology in contemporary contexts. As Koske (2024:16) specifies, through theological education, graduates are prepared to engage with and address critical societal and church issues thoroughly. Odei et al. (2025:36) make a related point, saying that theological education enables students to critically engage with issues such as poverty, inequality, racism and environmental care. We wholeheartedly agree with this assertion because fostering critical thinking shapes students and graduates to become effective leaders and drivers of positive change in their communities.

Problem-solving skills

Arts and humanities students are trained to think outside the box and seek out solutions. This is because many roles require people who can think deeply and find solutions that are not just straightforward. (Oberhelman 2024:357, 358). Theology degrees prepare students for such skills. These qualifications encourage students to think creatively and to develop solutions to complex issues. For example, recent theological academic writings revolve around addressing theological problems, societal concerns such as social justice and the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in ecclesial settings.

Leadership skills

Leadership has always been an integral part of theology. For years, leadership has been understood and practised within religious traditions, particularly in Christianity. One is reminded of biblical figures (such as Moses, David and Jesus Christ), early church fathers (such as Tertullian, Origen of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo) and reformation leaders (such as Luther and Calvin). Citing Northouse (2013:5), Du Plessis and Nkambule (2020:6) define leadership as a process of motivating others in a group to work collectively to achieve a shared vision. For someone studying theology, this skill is often reframed as servitude, drawing on Jesus' teachings on servant leadership. Theology students learn to lead through service, which means prioritising the needs of others, empowering them and serving them with humility. It entails leading with example, putting others first, and understanding and valuing their perspectives. Furthermore, Du Plessis and Nkambule (2020:8) state that servant leadership cultivates spiritual growth in theology students, allowing them to follow Jesus Christ's example and serve others unselfishly.

Research and writing skills

Research is inherent to theological education. If you are not involved in research, you're missing out on the core part of theological learning. If your research feeds back into teaching, then it's pointless (Knoetze 2023:2). Through research and writing skills, students develop a nuanced understanding of theological concepts and can critically evaluate existing scholarship. These skills enable theology students to meaningfully contribute to theological discussions and debates, as well as to address complex societal issues. Additionally, these skills allow students to clarify their thoughts and to find their own unique expression. This enables them to become actively engaged in the ongoing dialogue of faith and practice. These skills prepare students for postgraduate studies or careers in research. Overall, the above-mentioned skills prepare students for the following career opportunities.

Career opportunities for theology students and graduates

As stated above, theology degrees are not limited to clerical roles. These qualifications have diverse career opportunities. Theology graduates can be employed in diverse sectors, including education and ministry, showcasing the versatility of these degrees. These degrees prepare students for the following career opportunities:

Chaplain

The word 'chaplain' comes from the Latin '*cappa*', meaning a hooded cloak. It evolved into '*capallanis*' [chaplains], referring to clergy who cared for people and sacred items in a chapel setting (Carey et al. 2016:1222). What chaplains do is offer support, counselling, education and rituals to ensure comprehensive care for those in their care students who have mastered the academic and practical skills should be employable as chaplains in the military (SANDF), police (SAPS), prisons (DCS), healthcare facilities (hospitals), and other governmental departments.

Pastoral counsellor

A pastoral counsellor is usually trained in both theology and counselling to provide spiritual guidance, support and counselling grounded in faith. A pastoral counsellor helps people navigate their life's challenges, grief, relationships and spiritual struggles. As per Abidogun (2022:7–8), pastoral counsellors are trusted by their communities to bring Christian values to counselling, blending faith and therapeutic techniques to help people strengthen their relationship with God. Graduates with a theology degree can work as pastoral counsellors in schools, rehabilitation centres and hospitals. Given the limited availability of competent pastoral counsellors in the country (Awasthi & Achar 2025:214), theology students and graduates should strike while the iron is still hot.

Lecturer

Educators play a huge role in shaping the current higher education system. In this context, a lecturer is a person who leads educational activities within a particular discipline (Denny 2020:188). So a degree in theology also offers academic options, such as research and teaching in theology. Graduates can become lecturers in one of the nine universities that provide theological education. Graduates can lead the learning process in the following disciplines: church history, the Old Testament, the New Testament, systematic theology, practical theology, and missiology.

Teachers in schools and Sunday schools

As noted above, educators are major contributors to the current educational system (Denny 2020:188). Many Christian schools used to offer Christian Religious Education, but this changed with a rise in private schools tied to specific churches (Weber 2022:227). So, theology graduates should be employable in these schools, whether public or private. Others can opt to be teachers in Sunday schools.

Other possible opportunities

Theology graduates should also be employable as community organisers, non-profit coordinator, social worker, advocacy manager, fundraiser, author, journalist, pastor, minister, youth pastor, or missionary. All these careers showcase the scope of a theology degrees in terms of job opportunities. The degrees' diversity makes it highly relevant. Their value is also reinforced by its relevance in the curriculum.

Curriculum relevance through reimagination of theological education

Theological education in South Africa is undergoing a significant transformation. One key aspect of this transformation is that theology shifted from transmitting traditional theological knowledge (content) to engaging with contemporary issues (context). Porter (2025:92) supports the view that theological education broadened its scope to address modern problems alongside theological matters. For example, the practical theology module enables students to apply theological insights to real-life situations. Through Osmer's (2008) practical theological interpretation with four Tasks, students can interpret contemporary situations, identify their root causes, reflect on them and provide guidance. This proves that theological education in South Africa prioritises practical application and is highly relevant.

Another key aspect is the decolonisation of theological education. Naidoo (2024:228) mentions that the key focus of theological education is to decolonise harmful relational patterns in individuals, communities, and institutions. This means that theological education is challenging Western views and assumptions in traditional theology curricula and empowering African voices and theologies. Furthermore, theological education has updated its curriculum to include interdisciplinary approaches. A multidisciplinary approach refers to theology's interaction with other fields. This integration makes theological education more applicable and impactful in various contexts. Kgatle (2024:2) maintains that this approach can be used to increase the number of undergraduate studies, to maximise research and postgraduate studies, and to attract students from other fields.

Contributions of theological education in higher education in South Africa

Theological education has made significant contributions in South Africa, Africa, and worldwide (Mashabela 2024:2). Beyers (2016:1) shows that there's extensive research on higher education, particularly theological training. This shows how impactful theological education has been, with research underscoring its significance. This is totally in line with expectations because a recent article by Buitendag (2016:6–7) highlighted the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria, showcasing its high rankings through graphs and statistics (Womack & Pillay 2019:4). Currently, the top theological institution is the University of Pretoria, ranking number 1 in religious studies. Another thing is that according to Scientific Journal Research (SJR) 2016, *HTS Theological Studies* is the top theological journal in Africa. It is South Africa's oldest and largest journal, associated with the University of Pretoria (Buitendag 2016:7). This shows that South Africa's theological education is making a significant global impact. It also indicates that theological education in South Africa is producing high-quality research and graduates. *HTS Theological Studies*' age and impact showcase a rich history of theological heritage. This speaks volumes about the country's theological institutions and journals, making a significant contribution to global theological discourse.

Furthermore, in the South African context, practical theology has played an imperative role in community development by addressing issues such as poverty, gender-based violence, inequality, education, skills development, unemployment, digital divide, violence and crimes, among other things (Mokoena 2025:3). On the other hand, Kgatle (2024:6) specifies that theologians such as David Bosch, Simon Maimela, and Christinah Landman were instrumental in maintaining the University of South Africa's theology influence through their quality work, prolific output, and active engagement in Christian communities and public discourse. This accentuates that theological education in South Africa is not just about academic excellence, but also about practical application, community involvement, and thought leadership. The work of a theology student or graduate should speak volumes about their expertise. Scholars like Naidoo (2015, 2016, 2024), Akatukunda and De Beer (2026), and Denny and Wepener (2021) have prioritised decolonisation, African perspectives and fostering transformative learning in theological education. Some scholars, such as Kgatle (2019), have advocated for social justice. In this work, Kgatle highlights the importance of missiology in addressing poverty, captivity, oppression and bondage among people experiencing homelessness in the city of Tshwane, South Africa. This shows some of the contributions made by theological education in South Africa. The following are the key findings revealed in the study.

Key findings

This study explored the relevance of undergraduate theology degrees in South African universities. Through a qualitative approach, this study analysed literature from scholarly articles on theological education in South Africa. Key findings indicate that people don't understand the worth and practicality of theology degrees because they have narrowed their scope. On the other hand, some students are 'ship jumpers' who enrolled in theology because their preferred faculty rejected them, face high entry requirements, or lack adequate finances. In contrast to the two misconceptions, this study shows that theology degrees are not limited to clerical roles and that they offer transferable skills. These degrees are so diverse that they offer opportunities for students and graduates to be employable as chaplains, pastoral counsellors, lecturers, teachers in schools and Sunday schools, community organisers, non-profit coordinators, advocacy managers, fundraisers, authors and journalists. Through these programmes, students and graduates acquire skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, and research and writing. The study further demonstrates a strong emphasis on the reimagination of theological curriculum, highlighting the need for decolonisation and an interdisciplinary approach. It also shows that theological education has broadened its scope to address contemporary issues, resulting in significant contributions in South Africa. These findings showcase the relevance of theology degrees in South African universities and lay the groundwork for the following recommendations.

Recommendations

From all the facts and figures, this study hereby recommends universities that offer theological education to:

- Emphasise diverse opportunities in theological studies.
- Collaborate with SANDF, SAPS, DCS, health facilities (such as hospitals), rehabilitation centres and Schools, particularly Christian schools.
- Encourage inclusive dialogue – Hosting joint seminars with other universities.
- Share student success stories, showcasing alumni who have excelled in the field.
- Encourage more work-integrated learning.
- Put more emphasis on decolonisation and interdisciplinary approaches.

Conclusion

This article examined the relevance of undergraduate theology degrees (Bachelor of Theology, Bachelor of Arts in Theology, and Bachelor of Divinity) in South African universities. It argued that the common perception of these degrees as irrelevant and overly clerical lacks depth and undermines their practical value. Graduates can be employed in various roles as chaplain, pastoral counsellor, lecturer, teacher at schools and Sunday schools, community organiser, non-profit coordinator, social worker, advocacy manager, fundraiser, author and journalist. Through these programmes, students acquire crucial skills including critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, and research and writing. The programmes equip students with these abilities to address contemporary issues in South Africa. To demonstrate their relevance, theological education has extended its scope to engage modern societal issues. Moreover, theological education in South Africa is undergoing a significant transformation, focusing on decolonisation and an interdisciplinary approach. These shifts help theology address power imbalances in theological education, making it more applicable and impactful across various contexts.

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Competing interests

The author, Lufuluvhi M. Mudimeli, serves as an editorial board member of this journal. The peer review process for this submission was handled independently, and the author had no involvement in the editorial decision-making process for this article. The authors, Mamongatane L. Monyepao and Lufuluvhi M. Mudimeli, have no other competing interests to declare.

CRediT authorship contribution

Mamongatane L. Monyepao: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – review & editing. Lufuluvhi M. Mudimeli: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the

article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

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