USAf's 3rd Higher Education Conference

The Future Of The University

Concept Note

Conference highlights:

Welcoming Event
Engaging Plenaries
Interactive Parallel Sessions
Enriching Workshops
Exhibitions
Networking Dinner
Special Guest Speakers

You're invited!

Date: 9-11 October 2024
Venue: CSIR International Convention Centre, Pretoria.
Follow us for details and registration:

UNIVERSITIES
SOUTH AFRICA

Table of Contents

1.   Context

Universities South Africa will be hosting its 3rd Higher Education conference from 9 to 11 October 2024. The conference provides an exhilarating opportunity to build on the work of the 1st USAf conference in 2019 that focused on: *Re-inventing South African Universities for the Future* and the second conference hosted in hybrid mode in 2021, in partnership with the Council of Higher Education (CHE) which focused on: *The Engaged University*.

The 2024 conference will be taking place post yet another major disruption to the higher education system and even social life, in a relatively short space of time. The nationwide #FeesMustFall student protests of 2015 and 2016 induced major changes to the higher education system. Then, the global disaster of the Covid-19 crisis accompanied by lockdown and highly restricted national and international movements all contributed to a different reality on our campuses. The Covid-19 experience led to a dramatic online turn within universities and rapid ongoing technology developments especially in Artificial Intelligence.

Globally humanity is confronted with multiple and intersecting social, economic, climate, technological and political crises of catastrophic and imploding proportions and disasters including the wars in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine. The integration of big tech and AI has been dramatic. The eight United Nations Millenium Development Goals[1] (MDGs) and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals[2] (SDGs) provide a framework that offers sustainable responses to persistent global challenges. Though these frameworks have been accepted into the way higher education think of itself, it is important for universities, as critic and conscience of society, to continue engaging them critically.

This is the context which has revolutionised aspects of the academic enterprise and in which this conference will take place. We invite you to consider with us this critical discussion within the higher education sector like the kind of university South Africa could strive towards.

2.   Background and Introduction

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[1] The Millenium Development Goals are: (a) Eradiate extreme poverty and hunger; (b) Achieve universal primary education; (c) Promote gender equality and empower women; (d) Reduce child mortality; (e) Improve maternal health; (f) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; (g) Ensure environmental sustainability; and (h) Develop a global partnership for development.

[2] The Sustainable Development Goals are: No poverty (SDG 1); Zero hunger (SDG 2); Good health and well-being (SDG 3); Quality education (SDG 4); Gender equality (SDG 5); Clean water and sanitation (SDG 6); Affordable and clean energy (SDG 7); Decent work and economic growth (SDG 8); Industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9); Reduced inequalities (SDG 10); Sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11); Responsible consumption and production (SDG 12); Climate action (SDG 13); Life below water (SDG 14); Life on land (SDG 15); Peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16); and Partnerships for the goals (SDG 17).

South African universities, as microcosms of society, have been impacted by the global crisis while, too, still confronting their apartheid legacy of structural inequalities. Added to that, there are evolving new challenges relating to rapid and revolutionary technological advancements and divides in a developing country; corruption; governance and leadership failures and deepening financial and sustainability crises.

As knowledge producing and critical citizenship development institutions, universities have a special role to play, as beacons of hope, and as one of the social institutions for human progress and development.

The question facing South African universities is: **What is the Future of the University?** The question is related to the sustainability of the university globally and specifically the South African university and its sustainable and impactful contribution in anchoring itself and its global and local multiple publics. We also ask: *What is the Future Making University?* How do we contribute to the future of society and university? In which ways are universities **morphing?** What are the changes we are seeing in universities across the globe?

The theme builds from the past two themes of *Reinventing SA's Universities for the Future (2019)* and *The Engaged University (2021)* and thereby incorporate their recommendations into the discussions and for taking them forward in the form of resulting actions. It derives from the running themes in the *USAf Strategic Framework 2021-2026* and samples from the 2024 to 2026 *Strategic Objectives*, of being responsive to national and global contexts; improvement of the sustainability of the higher education sector; advancement of transformation and building a fit-for-purpose USAf.

Revisiting this theme over years is important because education systems are not static and neither do they exist in static societies. Context evolves and so do demands on the education system brought about by the evolving context. Thus, the future of the university is a 'stock-taking' exercise for keeping its relevance and that of the education system to its context.

The vision for higher education in South Africa, among others, is of a transformed higher education that will, through its mandate of teaching, learning and research, meet "national development needs, including the high-skilled employment needs presented by a growing economy operating in a global environment". It is of a higher education system that will "contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship" and address the diverse problems and demands of the local, national, Southern African, and African contexts, whilst upholding rigorous standards of academic quality. Moreover, the vision is understood to be located within government's broader vision of a future 'where all South Africans will enjoy an improved and sustainable quality of life; participate in a growing economy; and share in a democratic culture' (White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education, 1997).

Higher education and particularly universities, therefore, carry aspirations of development of individuals and the nation. Thus, the future of the university impacts on the development needs of society. In this regard, it is worth re-examining the future of the university in South Africa to ascertain its continued worth and relevance to the development needs of the

country whilst simultaneously addressing itself to the high-end skills needed for the advancement of society. The university, therefore, is central for end-to-end advancement of all sectors of society. It is central to scientific advancement as it is to the economic development, and equally so to social mobility and intellectual advancement of individuals and a nation alike.

As it can be deduced from the above background, the university has a significant impact on the advancement of society. It shapes the education system; produces and hones the skills needed for the economy; makes scientific discoveries, advancements and innovations and shapes the overall progress of society. Thus, the university, and within the context of education broadly, provides a compass for intellectual, technological, and social advancement of a nation.

From time to time, therefore, it is necessary and worth assessing the path the university has taken with a view to determine challenges it faces; opportunities to which it is exposed and those that lie ahead; and determine its direction and identify elements that would guarantee its thriving and sustainability into the future.

We have no way of being certain about the future or predicting it with precision what we can draw on are current trends, expectations, models, fears and hope of the likelihood and possibilities of a future university. The future university will be within a larger context of global multiple publics and forces which already come into play in its influences and engagements with the university. In looking into the future, we will bring this into play to consider different scenarios of the future university including its undoing and abolishment.

3.   The Aims and Objectives of the conference

The third USAf Higher Education Conference aims to bring the university sector in South Africa together with its multiple publics to engage in conversations related to sustaining the future of universities globally and the South African university. This platform will provide the opportunity for reflexivity and rigorous, evidence-based, robust debates that seek to shape the future of university in South Africa. It offers a space for multiple and diverse voices to be heard and inform and shape our collective imaginations of the future of our national assets such as universities and their place in developing society, its people, and its institutions.

The *objectives* of the conference are:
a.   To provide a platform for rigorous debate and robust deliberation on pertinent higher education issues informed by the work of USAf's strategic structures and programmes.
b.   To encourage and support solution building through facilitated dialogue and inquiry as key stakeholders and role-players in the university and society.
c.   To provide an opportunity for information sharing and networking across the sector and its multiple publics.
d.   To identify and agree on a set of goals, concrete recommendations and actions for the sector and its strategic working groups towards a sustainable future of the university in South Africa.

e. To identify ways and platforms in which universities can meaningfully and practically build its relationships regionally and nationally with its multiple publics.

4. Conference Mode

The conference will provide an exciting opportunity for the 26 universities in South Africa to interact in person for the first time in five years. The conference will be in person at the CSIR. Additionally, it will be live-streamed. Only participants who have registered to be physically present at the conference will be able to participate interactively in the sessions they have elected to attend. While plenary sessions will stimulate conversations, more emphasis is placed on parallel and smaller group discussions to ignite participants' imaginations of the future university.

5. Structure of the Conference

The conference structure will be a combination of plenary and parallel sessions composed of dedicated strategy group sessions and thematic/interest group clusters from which meaningful conversations will inform the outcomes and recommendations of the strategy groups. Sessions will also be hosted by USAf Flagship programmes: Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) and the Entrepreneurship Development in Higher Education (EDHE). The conference will be live streamed with only in person attendees able to participate in the interactive proceedings.

We are only able to gain deeper insight into what may present in future through dialogic engagement with the multiple publics of the university. The conference will create opportunities for robust, disruptive, reflexive, and honest engagement on realities and future possibilities. The plenary discussions will enable the setting out of key ideas, frameworks, trends, possibilities, and challenges globally and locally which will be distilled and further engaged with thematically from the vantage point of the different Strategy Groups whether from a Research and Innovation, Teaching and Learning, Transformation, Nature of Work or Leadership and Management gaze.

The USAf six strategy group's sub-themes will relate to the Future of the University in teaching and learning, transformation, funding, changing nature of work, research and innovation and leadership and management. USAf Strategy Groups are:

- Teaching and Learning Strategy Group (TLSG)
- Transformation Strategy Group (TSG)
- Funding Strategy Group (FSG)
- World of Work Strategy Group (WSG)
- Research and Innovation Strategy Group (RISG)
- Leadership and Management Strategy Group (LMSG)

While the conference is focused on South African universities and their multiple publics, the conference has distinct points of global interest and speaker participation.

If we want universities to remain relevant, we must make sure that everyone participates such as through being engaged within their communities. This is about communities viewing universities as places that can solve their problems.

6.   The Conference Themes and Sub-themes

The conference theme is **the Future of the University**. Plenary Sessions are to be focused on broad societal questions related to the future sustainability of the university. The opening session will be an international speakers' session focusing on the Future of the University globally. The broad thematic areas will be aimed to ignite thinking around critical higher education areas and issues related to the future of humanity.

The parallel sessions will consider the following broad areas related to:

- Current and future trends,
- Future shifts and uncertainties,
- Multiple futures given these realities and
- Challenges and possibilities.

Space in the parallel sessions will be created to explore, investigate, consider, and reconsider assumptions to develop deepening insights into the possibilities of the future. The conversation will be creative, inspirational, forward looking, and innovative in the methods of engagement. Strategy Groups may where appropriate, have facilitators assigned to enable this critical engaged, disruptive, generative, and reflexive dialogue.

The USAf Strategy Groups have thoughtfully crafted the themes and sub-themes of their sessions in line with the strategy plan of each strategy group and drawing a nexus to the conference theme of the Future of the University. The details regarding the sub-themes of each Strategy Group have been developed in consultation with the Strategy Groups.

6.1.   The Teaching and Learning Strategy Group

The TLSG Sessions will focus on the following sub-themes:

- How could available technologies be used to disrupt teaching and learning for the better?
- What does the multivariate nature of disruption mean for universities in terms of teaching and learning?
- How can the teaching and learning systems in universities be changed to remain relevant to the future making and future university?

Similar debates from the past will not be simply rehashed. For example, artificial intelligence (AI) has stimulated a paradigmatic shift about teaching and learning in universities. The impact of large language models in classrooms is already evident, and it is important to stay abreast of changes as they occur. The importance of dealing with the global crises and how they could affect sustainability, as well as the ranking of universities on the global system,

programme quality or de-accreditation and development links to employability and mobility must be considered. Students need to be equipped to engage with this disruptive, uncertain, and implosive world in crisis.

6.2. The Transformation Strategy Group

The TSG sessions focus on the following sub-themes:

- The Future of Transformation in South African Higher Education: Looking back, Going Forward
- Advancing Transdisciplinarity through Decolonising Digital Transformation

From a transformation perspective, the conference aims to explore the multifaceted dimensions of digital transformation and the evolution of social change within our universities and the higher education system.

The first theme focuses on the landscape of higher education in relation to transformation, shaped by evolving societal dynamics, technological advancements, and shifting paradigms of knowledge production. As universities navigate this complex terrain, it becomes imperative to critically reflect on past practices while charting multiple pathways towards a more inclusive, equitable, and responsive system.

The second theme is a critical treatment of the impact of digital technologies on the future of higher education and seek to foster dialogue that goes beyond surface-level discussions and delves into the underlying socio-cultural implications of technological integration.

These themes are aimed to provide a reflective scope on the progress of higher education transformation, considering social justice in the digital transformation discourse. It will be important to consider our understanding and discourses of transformation in relation to the future university and the contributions of transformation to the future in not only addressing the past.

6.3. The Funding Strategy Group

The FSG Sessions focus on the following sub-themes:

- Sustainability of higher education institutions
- Sustainability in higher education institutions
- Sustainable financial support for students
- Funding for student accommodation
- Benefits of a shared services platform for public higher education institutions in South Africa

The university as we know it would not continue without sustainable funding into the future. The discussions will include the funding intensity required of universities and especially research; the state subsidy model; the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) model, its sustainability and university fee regulation.

The broader societal environmental concerns of climate change, waste management, water crisis and electricity/energy crises effects on the daily lives of our staff and students, operations, and the sustainability of the university must be considered with regards to future sustainable funding. This includes considering ways that knowledge production contributes to greater sustainability of the university and society.

6.4. The World of Work Strategy Group

The WSG sessions will focus on the following sub-themes

- Entrepreneurial work-integrated learning and the responsibility of universities in nurturing student entrepreneurs from their first year.
- Establishing comprehensive mentorship and coaching structures for students and academics, starting from the day they register.
- Formalising relationships with external partners through initiatives like AIMday (Academia-Industry Meeting Day) events and other collaboration platforms to bridge the skills gap and create joint ventures that are directly aligned with the needs of both universities and industry stakeholders.
- Adapting to changing fiscal realities and the evolving nature of academic identity, including consultancies and board positions, to leverage their expertise in practical industry applications.

Globally universities are confronted with whether they are adequately preparing their students to be agile and adaptive in the world of work. Universities must explore and strengthen ways in which it prepares its graduates for the world of work through involving its multiple publics including industry in preparing graduates better for their future reality. The overarching goal of the WSG sessions is to enhance the alignment between educational programs and industry requirements, thereby fostering a more adaptive and responsive higher education ecosystem.

6.5. The Research and Innovation Strategy Group

The RISG sessions will focus on the following sub-themes:

- The future of knowledge production in relation to decreasing resources
- The Impact of the university
- Collaborations to attract resource sustainability and development.

Research and Innovation for and about the future must include how communities and governments are lifted through research and innovation by the universities for example in loadshedding for new technologies that can be produced. The question is how our system can be more responsive to these issues to industry, society, and our students in society. This is important for the sustainability of the university and building resources that are shared and not duplicated.

6.6. The Leadership and Management Strategy Group

The LMSG sessions will focus on the following sub-themes:

- Emboldening governance, leadership and management for change, complexity, and continuity in the University of the future.

- Towards an innovative institutional strategy, appropriate financial resources, and dynamic people planning, for a sustainable and successful future, in the University.

- Enabling leaders to inspire positive change and foster inclusivity in diverse organizational settings, drawing upon South Africa's history of transformation and reconciliation.

Building leadership capacity to manage the increasing change, disruption and complexity in higher education must entail the inclusion of multiple voices internally and externally. The future is already here with us as for example, AI impacts on teaching and learning and social inequality continues to rise. The leadership in universities must be capacitated for this new reality and the unfolding future. Governance, leadership, and management development programmes are critical in a more complex and rapidly changing environment, especially in relation to sustainability and resource management in higher education institutions, in the university of the future.

The LMSG sessions will comprise, a facilitated roundtable, panel discussions and inputs from international and local thought leaders in the abovementioned areas. Chairpersons of the USAf Strategy Groups will draw the conference to a close with the CEO and the Chair of the Board of USAf. The focus of the presentations of the last day is to critically reflect on the core issues raised during the Strategy Group Sessions to inform the work of USAf in collaboration with its partners.

Thematic or Interest groups will be focused on the following:

- Artificial Intelligence,
- Climate Change,
- Sustainable Development Goals

Details regarding the following will be developed in the Briefing Notes for the Conference. This includes information regarding:

- Programme participant roles.
- Keynote/Plenary Speakers
- Session Chairs
- Session Facilitators
- Speakers
- Presentations
- Session Respondents

- A Summary of your preparation
- Technical Support
- Conference Organisers and Contact Details

7. Publications

7.1. Conference Report

A report of the conference will be published for accessing as a Pdf copy electronically. A few physical copies may also be produced.

7.2. Academic Journal

The South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE) has been approached regarding a special journal dedicated to the conference. Other journals may also be approached in specialised areas such as Transformation, The Journal for Decolonising Disciplines, and the Journal for Student Affairs in Africa. This can be guided by the Strategy Group discussions.

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