

## INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CONFERENCE

5-7 MAY 2026

# *Higher Education Community Engagement: Reparative Futures For The Cultivation Of Humanity*

### Preamble

Drawing on the interrelated ideas of the reparative university, Ubuntu, universal human values and the cultivation of humanity through community engagement, this conference offers a reflective space to participants to interrogate the role of higher education in shaping just and humane futures. Among the questions to be explored are: ***What is the purpose of higher education institutions, and the knowledge communities they nurture, in the twenty-first century? How can higher education community engagement promote the cultivation of humanity?***

There have been many efforts in recent years to reimagine the relevance of universities. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed our shared vulnerability. The concern for humanity during that period heightened because of the uncertainty about life itself. Yet in the years that followed, higher education and related systems, quickly resumed their old rhythms. The pandemics of violence, corruption, socioeconomic injustice and inequality, among other dehumanising activities, outside of but also within our universities, continue to prevail. The shallow changes made are inadequate to dislodge the structural inequities and deep dehumanisation that persist in and through the academy. Still, questions of university meaning and purpose persist, posed by students seeking relevance, educators reconsidering their roles, and communities challenging the academy's distance from lived realities.

Universities may learn from and be guided by our surrounding communities, which hold knowledge, values, histories, and relational practices essential to shaping humane futures. Whilst we are careful not to romanticise a homogenous notion of 'community', community practices of care, mutual aid, informal learning, Ubuntu-driven action, and grassroots organising are longstanding forms of cultivating humanity. We therefore hope that community voices will shape not only the conference conversation, but how we understand the humane universities of the future. We aim for the conference to become a space for reflection about universities, but also for us to shape our commitments to actionable outcomes for more humane societies.

### Ubuntu and the Reparative University

The moral lens of the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, of interconnectedness, provides a useful reference point to reimagine the relationship between universities and communities. It offers a powerful starting point from which to reimagine the relationship between universities and surrounding communities. *Ubuntu*, defined as African humanism comprising the intricate relationship between people, country, environment and spirituality, offers a framework for understanding this broader purpose. *Ubuntu* affirms that "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am" (Mbiti, 1969). It

underscores a broader social purpose in relation to others; our lives draw meaning from collective membership and our interconnectedness with those around us who recognise us and who we recognise in turn (Willmore et al., 2023). Our humanity is thus dependent on our entering more deeply into community and depends on our relationships with others. As universities draw on this concept to reimagine themselves, they may learn from community knowledges and the ways in which communities themselves may already have examples and lived experiences of the enactment of Ubuntu in pursuit of social change. Shared humanising practices, such as reflexivity, cultural sensitivity and compassion, capacities derived from the convergence of Ubuntu and Nussbaum's (1997) ideas on the cultivation of humanity serve to counter dehumanisation and connect diverse, often historically divided, communities.

Colonialism was a dispossession not only of territory but also of knowledge (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). The denial of the humanity of individuals through the process of racist dehumanisation produces a *coloniality of knowledge*, encompassing the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledges and the dominance of Western modes of understanding. In South Africa, racism continues to shape both material realities and individuals' status as knowledge authorities. It is often reproduced through the discursive construction of racial difference: the subtle yet persistent ways in which some bodies, languages, and knowledges are rendered more legitimate than others.

Accordingly, universities have, amongst others, two critical roles to play: first, acknowledging their historical complicity directly or indirectly, in promoting injustice and, second, facilitating processes of healing in contemporary society. Understanding our interconnectedness requires that we interrogate the notion of race itself and recognise it as a social construct that has and continues to manifest in the form of racism. Equally, it requires critical engagement with, and integration of the knowledges marginalised and diminished by the colonial project.

The notion of the *reparative university* provides one framework for us to reimagine the purpose of higher education institutions in this way. A *reparative univer-*

*sity* calls on universities to acknowledge and address historical and ongoing oppression and dehumanisation; interrogate the social construction of race and the consequential dehumanisation through racism; and most importantly, to imagine and enact more just futures (Sriprakash et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2023), that mitigate epistemic and social injustices. Part of this enactment involves decentring universities themselves, so that communities can be increasingly recognised as co-creators of knowledge. These approaches require both reflecting inward and shifting power outward in pursuit of justice.

Such an approach calls on universities to attend to erasures and silences in the production and legitimisation of knowledge. A *reparative university* becomes a space that grapples with injustice, explores erased voices, and creates possibilities for humanisation grounded in histories of lived experience. Social responsibility, under the reparative framework, therefore, takes on new meaning, connected to universities' historical complicity, directly or indirectly, in oppression. *Social responsibility is also historical accountability* (González Stokas, 2023).

## Community Engagement and the Cultivation of Humanity

**How can we understand community engagement through a reparative lens?** In South Africa, the Education White Paper 3 (DoE, 1997, p. 4) charges the higher education sector to do much more within its own institutions and in the broader community “to strengthen the democratic ethos, the sense of common citizenship and commitment to a common good”. Community engagement was subsequently identified as an integral and core part of higher education, exhorting universities to “demonstrate social responsibility [...] and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes” (DoE, 1997, p. 11). Explicit in “common citizenship” “commitment to a common good” and “social responsibility” is the conception of humanity because the collective understanding of these terms suggests compassion, empathy, and kindness, all of which evoke caring.

A university underpinned by the cultivation of humanity requires acknowledgement of the ways of knowing beyond university walls, in surrounding communities. As we recognise this reality, we begin to move away from the dominance of the idea of the *knowledge economy* towards the concept of a *knowledge democracy* focused not only on building individuals' marketable skills but on cultivating capabilities to build, transform and apply knowledge for inclusive human development (Hall & Tandon, 2017). The concept of knowledge democracy advanced by Hall and Tandon (2017), seeks to affirm multiple epistemologies, knowledge created and represented in multiple forms (e.g., storytelling, art and drama), knowledge embedded in social movements, and the knowledge of those historically marginalised and excluded. It calls for research *with* communities rather than *on* communities and requires researchers and academics to approach their work with humility. By embracing knowledge democracy, the relational ethics of Ubuntu and universal human values, universities may move beyond the instrumentalism of the knowledge economy. In doing so, they may begin to arc themselves, gently but deliberately, towards the cultivation of humanity.

A shift towards education for the cultivation of humanity entails an inclusion of social, political, and ethical responsiveness together with economic responsiveness. The purpose of higher education institutions is, after all, multifaceted, spanning economic, civic, cultural, and ethical dimensions. Their legitimacy and impact therefore depend on how well they balance academic excellence with moral and civic responsibility. When we recognise that universities have multiple purposes, we need to reimagine our higher education institutions not as self-contained units, but as deeply embedded in and accountable to its local and national context in the first instance, followed by the global context.

Higher education institutions are 'anchor institutions' with responsibilities to promote equity, inclusion, and social transformation. These institutions foster identity formation, cultural expression, and critical reflection. In practical terms, an anchor institution stance asks universities to turn their everyday choices, how they hire, buy, research, teach and partner into deliber-

ate strategies for local wellbeing. Read through an Ubuntu lens, anchoring is not about supporting a place from the outside, it is about belonging to and being constituted by that place (Johnson & Hlatshwayo, 2025). It is about designing teaching and scholarship with (not on) communities to enhance human flourishing/development.

Strong, healthy community-university partnerships are key to effective community engagement. To have humanity is to be humane, to care, to notice and respond to others thoughtfully and with kindness. Thus, the critical component of humanity in community-university relationships necessarily precludes the patronage implied in providing a service or charity to those less fortunate, as a sort of gift, in a transactional relationship. Instead, community engagement involves partnerships with communities to collectively and equally meet the needs, hopes, and desires of both parties. Through dialogue, this mutual exchange results in the revelation of new knowledge, the promotion and application of learning and further knowledge of self. A recognition of the interconnectedness of universities and communities enables a powerful perspective: communities and universities may serve one another in mutually empowering ways. Yet community engagement practices do not always look like this. Within community engagement relationships, power imbalances, bureaucratic delays, institutional slowness, funding cycles and demands, community fatigue and extractive research practices may prevent community engagement's reparative promise.

Several questions emerge as we demand more of higher education community engagement: How does the history of universities and knowledge construction influence community engagement practice today? How has coloniality shaped harmful engagement models (charity, extraction, saviourism)? How does coloniality and apartheid continue to influence university-community power dynamics? How have communities resisted, survived, and built knowledge systems outside the academy.

The idea of reparative universities requires concrete, relational practice. The practical expression of moving closer to reparative futures include sitting with people,



listening, sharing food, acknowledging pain, building long-term relationships, co-creating programme content, being present in crisis, staying consistent, telling stories, being trustworthy, and redistributing power.

In our vision, community engagement is not merely an institutional function or strategy; it is an ethical relationship grounded in recognition, reciprocity, and repair, thereby providing contextual relevance and humane meaning to the notion of the 'developmental role of universities'. It requires the university to turn toward communities not as beneficiaries or sites of intervention, but as co-creators of knowledge and meaning. ***Reparative engagement repositions the university as a participant in collective acts of remembering, healing, and humanisation.*** Our ways of being are interdependent and relational and connects strongly to the philosophy of *Ubuntu*: that my humanity is bound up with the humanity of those around me. The cultivation of humanity is inseparable from the struggle for justice. Love, in this case, is deeply connected to the politics of resistance. Love and resistance are not opposites but mutually sustaining forces. 'Loving perception' is simultaneously a humanising and decolonial act: to see the other lovingly is to resist the colonial logics of domination, fragmentation, division and objectification (Lugones, 1987).

## CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the conference and themes are:

- 1. Reparative Engagement in Practice:** Examine the extent to which community engagement practices, through its various forms, function as reparative engagement-positioning universities as participants in collective acts of remembering, healing, and humanisation.
- 2. Knowledge Creation for the Cultivation of Humanity:** Contribute to theoretical, and practice-based insights into reparative engagement for the cultivation of humanity, grounded in Ubuntu and universal human values.
- 3. Dialogues Across Spaces and Geographies:** Promote meaningful dialogue on the cultivation of humanity through engagement between communities and higher education institutions in South Africa; between South-South partnership relationships and between the global South and global North partnership relationships.

## CONFERENCE THEMES

The conference welcomes contributions aligned with the following themes:

- 1. Dialogic Partnerships:** Community engagement may begin with *dialogic partnerships* that create spaces for shared inquiry, spaces where academic and community knowledge systems meet in mutual respect.
- 2. Engaged Research:** Co-production of knowledge through *engaged research* practices becomes an acknowledgement that universities have much to learn from communities who have long practised resilience, creativity, and care in the face of structural and epistemic injustice.
- 3. Critical Service Learning:** is a pedagogical approach orientated towards nurturing both *students and community members as agents of social change* (Mitchell, 2008). Its goal is to 'avoid the cultural safari' which may lead to dehumanising and patronising forms of engagement, and nurture 'agents capable of acting together with others to [...] create social change' (Forbes et al., 1991, p. 67). Through reflection, dialogue, and shared action, students and communities learn to see themselves not only as individuals in pursuit of success, but as participants in a collective human project.
- 4. Volunteering / Engaged Citizenry:** Too often conceived as charity or service to the 'other', volunteering can risk reproducing paternalistic and hierarchical relations. Instead, we may shift from 'helping' to 'being with', from acts of benevolence to practices of relationship-building that honour community agency and dignity and *deepen students' awareness of inter-connectedness and shared responsibility*.
- 5. Social Innovation** in higher education centres the voices and priorities of communities and works collaboratively to *design creative responses to persistent social challenges*. This may include community-based enterprises, co-operatives, or technologies developed to enhance wellbeing and social cohesion.
- 6. Universities as Anchor Institutions:** As anchor institutions universities have the responsibilities to promote equity, inclusion, and social transformation. More than on the practical level of how they hire, buy, research and teach through deliberate strategies for local wellbeing, anchoring, read through an Ubuntu

lens, is about belonging to, and being constituted by that place (Johnson & Hlatshwayo, 2025). It is about designing teaching and scholarship with (not on) communities to enhance human flourishing/development.

**7. Structural Introspection and Transformation:** To be genuinely reparative, community engagement must also entail *structural introspection within the university itself*. This means confronting the colonial legacies that shape curricula, hierarchies of knowledge, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion. This engagement operates inwardly as much as outwardly: it is about transforming institutional cultures and reimagining the university as a space of human and societal development.

Ultimately, community engagement of this orientation gestures toward a university that remembers and restores, that learns to be accountable for its history, that contributes to the healing of our collective humanity and contributes to the cultivation of humanity. In doing so, we are reminded of Desmond Tutu's call to recognise our shared humanity and interdependence, and James Yoonil Auh's (2019) powerful question: *What do we truly value in society, and what kind of world do we wish to build?*

## KEYNOTE SPEAKERS: TBA

(watch this space)

## TARGETED PARTICIPANTS

- South African universities, students, academics, civil society organisations, community members and community partner organisations. We encourage universities to consider bringing a community partner to the conference.
- Academics and post graduate students from universities of other African countries involved in community engagement; and
- Academics and post graduate students from the global South and global North who engage with the notion of and committed to promoting the cultivation of humanity through community engagement.

An outcome of this conference is the selection of papers for the online open access African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement (AJHECE) 2026 publication to maximise knowledge dissemination.

## PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOP

A pre-conference workshop will be held on 4 May 2026 to initiate discussions on a short course in Community Engagement and a Monitoring and Evaluation System for Community Engagement in South Africa.

## SUBMISSION OF ABSTRACTS

**Abstract Format:** title, name of contributor/s, presentation format, selected theme and objective/s that the paper contributes to

**Word Limit:** Maximum of 350 words

## PRESENTATION FORMATS

- Research Papers
- Posters
- Storytelling

## LANGUAGE: English

## IMPORTANT DATES

**Abstract submitted by:** 16 February 2026

**Communication to Participants:** 4 March 2026

**NOTE:** All abstracts must be uploaded directly on the website using the abstract registration form and should not be sent by email.

## CONFERENCE FEES

**Face to face:** R3,900 for University Staff and R1,500 for Students and Partners (includes conference pack, Gala dinner, teas, lunches).

Bursaries are available for students and Rhodes Staff, contact 046 603 7229 for more information.

## VENUE

**National Arts Festival Monument**  
Makhanda/Grahamstown, South Africa