

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CONFERENCE

5-7 MAY



**RHODES UNIVERSITY, MAKHANDA, SOUTH AFRICA**

*Educating for life and a living*

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

### **PREAMBLE**

Higher education institutions across the world are facing renewed calls to rethink their identities, responsibilities, and social purposes. This conference invites academics, practitioners, students, community partners and policy-makers who are keen to move community engagement from the margins to the centre, to explore how universities, particularly in the South African and broader Global South contexts, can contribute to humane, just, and reparative futures.

Drawing on Ubuntu, the reparative university, universal human values, and the idea of cultivating humanity, the conference provides a reflective and dialogic space to re-examine what it means for universities to serve society. Participants will critically consider how community engagement can become a site of humanisation, repair, reciprocity, and co-creation.

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.

The conference also provides the space for us to shape our commitments to actionable outcomes for more humane societies. We invite scholarly papers, practice-based reflections, community-led presentations, and creative contributions that engage with the themes outlined below. And among the questions to be explored at this conference are: *What is the purpose of higher education institutions, and the knowledge communities they nurture, in the twenty-first century? How can we understand community engagement through a reparative lens? How can higher education community engagement promote the cultivation of humanity?*

## CONFERENCE RATIONALE

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility and inter-connectedness of human life. Yet, despite many global moments of reflection, universities quickly returned to pre-pandemic routines, leaving structural inequities and deep dehumanisation largely unchallenged. At the same time, students, communities, and educators continue to question the meaning, role, and social purpose of higher education.

Universities remain deeply shaped by colonial and apartheid epistemologies, hierarchies, and exclusions. A reparative orientation asks universities to confront these histories, acknowledge their direct or indirect complicities, and imagine more just futures grounded in accountability, reciprocity, and healing. Central to these futures is the wisdom, knowledge, cultural practices, and relational ethics of communities.

Community knowledge – including practices of care, mutuality, solidarity, and Ubuntu – offers powerful resources for rethinking the university. Through relationships of trust, shared inquiry, and co-creation, universities may cultivate humanity in ways that extend beyond economic instrumentalism and toward inclusive, ethical, and socially responsible development.

This conference therefore positions community engagement not as charity or service but as a **reparative, ethical, and humanising relationship** that reshapes both the university and society.

## 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 interconnectedness 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

## WEB LINKS

[Conference concept paper](#)

[Link for submission of abstracts](#)