COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION

SECOND ANNOUNCEMENT

HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE 2027

CONFERENCE THEME

Reflecting on the National Imperative of Expanding Equitable Access to Higher Education Amidst Constraints

SCAN TO REGISTER

02–04 March 2027

Birchwood Hotel & OR Tambo Conference Centre

Johannesburg, Gauteng

In-person only

Our Keynote Speakers



Prof. Aslam Fataar



Dr Esther Venter



Prof. ‘Mabokang Monnapula-Mapesela



Prof. Fulufhelo Nemavhola

Convened by the Council on Higher Education in fulfilment of its mandate to coordinate conferences on higher education.

Second Announcement

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) is a statutory body established in terms of the provision of section 4 of the Higher Education Act (Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended), and its mandate as stipulated in section 5 of the same Act, includes arranging and coordinating conferences on themes germane to higher education. It is in fulfilment of this mandate that the CHE has regularly organised conferences on topical issues on higher education since 1999.

The CHE hereby announces that its next Higher Education Conference will take place from **02 to 04 March 2027** at **Birchwood Hotel & OR Tambo Conference Centre** in Johannesburg, Gauteng. The conference will be in-person only.
The theme of the conference is:
Reflecting on the National Imperative of Expanding Equitable Access to Higher Education Amidst Constraints

Background and Context

Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa, higher education is recognised as one of the key factors that influence the distribution of opportunity among the country's citizens.[1] Therefore, expanding access to higher education, particularly for previously disadvantaged and marginalised demographic and social groups, is a key policy imperative in the post-apartheid dispensation.[2,3] The preamble to the Higher Education Act (Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended) lists the redress of past discrimination and the promotion of equal access to higher education as one of the desired outcomes; and in section 37(3) it mandates councils of public higher education institutions to determine and implement admission policies that provide appropriate measures for promoting access to higher education and redressing past inequalities. It further mandates the CHE to promote the access of students to higher education [section 5(1)(e)]. Similarly, the National Qualifications Framework Act (Act No. 67 of 2008 as amended) lists the facilitation of access to, and mobility and progression within education as one of the seven objectives of the National Qualification Framework (NQF).

[1] National Commission on Higher Education 1996. A Framework for the Transformation of Higher Education. NCHE: Pretoria.
[2] Department of Education. 1997. Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education. Pretoria: DoE
[3] Department of Higher Education and Training. 2013. White Paper for the Post School and Training: Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated and Integrated System. Pretoria: DHET.

The country faces some constraints that appear to affect the national imperative of expanding access to higher education, particularly for previously disadvantaged and marginalised demographic and social groups. One example of such constraints is that public higher education institutions have limited carrying capacities, in terms of the number of students that they can admit and support. They admit only a small percentage of the number of matriculants eligible for admission to higher education, which has been increasing significantly every year over the last decade.[4] On average, public higher education institutions receive thirty (30) times more applications for admission than available spaces.[5] Another example is that, despite significant increases in enrolments in private higher education institutions over the last decade, the total number of students enrolled in private higher education institutions constitutes a small proportion of the total higher education enrolments. A key factor in this regard is the lack of student funding opportunities since the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) does not extend to private higher education.[6]

As a result of the constraints, the opportunity of accessing higher education is being denied to many matriculants, and the number of such matriculants is increasing significantly yearly. It is possible that different demographic and social groups are affected differently by this situation, which necessitates reflecting the national imperative of expanding equitable access to higher education amidst the constraints. This is what has informed the selection of the theme for the March 2027 Higher Education Conference.

Structure of the Conference

The conference is planned to comprise:

- Plenary sessions with keynote speakers
- Panel discussions
- Parallel paper presentations
- Symposia and/or workshops

[4] Universities South Africa. 2026. The hard facts informing enrolment planning and admissibility at public universities. https://usaf.ac.za/the-hard-facts-informing-enrolment-planning-and-admissibility-at-public-universities/ (accessed on 14 July 2026)
[5] Khanyile, G. 2025. South African universities receive 30 times for applications than available spaces. https://thepost.co.za/news/education/2025-01-16-south-african-universities-receive-30-times-more-applications-than-available-spaces/ (accessed on 14 July 2026)
[6] National Student Financial Aid Scheme. 2025. NSFAS Eligibility Criteria and Conditions for Financial Aid: Policy Standard for the 2025 Academic Year. NSFAS: Cape Town

MEET OUR KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



PROF. ASLAM FATAAR

Prof. Aslam Fataar

Title of keynote address: Access, Articulation and Mobility: Knowledge, Pathways and Development in South Africa's Changing Higher Education System

Prof. Aslam Fataar is a research professor in Higher Education Transformation at Stellenbosch University. His research and writing focus on higher education transformation, curriculum and knowledge, educational inequality, student pathways, decoloniality, and the changing educational implications of artificial intelligence (AI) on higher education. His work engages particularly with questions of access, epistemic inclusion, institutional change and the public purposes of higher education in South Africa. He has published extensively in these areas and regularly contributes to conversations on higher education policy, teaching, curriculum, and transformation.



DR ESTHER VENTER

Dr Esther Venter

Title of keynote address: Room for More: Widening Access through Partnership, Flexibility and Quality

Dr Esther Venter is the Dean: Teaching, Learning and Student Success at STADIO Higher Education. She leads the institution's academic strategy across all of its schools, from programme design and curriculum, to teaching, learning and student success. With over 20 years of experience in higher education, she has led the design and implementation of teaching and learning models at different scales, and across disciplines and delivery modes. Central to her work, and to her interest in student engagement and blended learning, is a question at the heart of widening access: how institutions can grow access and quality together for an increasingly diverse student body?



PROF. 'MABOKANG MONNAPULA-MAPESELA

Prof. 'Mabokang Monnapula-Mapesela

Title of keynote address: *(Im)Perfections of a Transforming Higher Education (HE) System: Enablers, Constraints and Contradictions for access.*

Prof. 'Mabokang Monnapula-Mapesela is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic and Student Affairs at Rhodes University, a position she has held since July 2019. She is the institution's first Black woman to serve in this role. She is an accomplished teacher, researcher, academic, and transformative leader who has nearly four decades of experience in education, of which over two decades have been in higher education. Her work is grounded in a strong commitment to policy and transformation, access, social justice, academic excellence as well as student development and success.

Throughout her career, Prof. Monnapula-Mapesela has made significant contributions to teaching, research, academic development, and institutional leadership. She has supervised and mentored numerous postgraduate students (all from previously disadvantaged backgrounds), supported the development of emerging scholars and contributed to the growth of higher education scholarship. Her research has been published widely in national and international journals, and she has contributed chapters to books on higher education. She has presented her research and keynote addresses at conferences and academic forums in South Africa and internationally. Her recent scholarship draws attention to important dimensions of transformation affecting Black women academics in South Africa.

Prof. Monnapula-Mapesela continues to contribute to the advancement of quality and policy in higher education beyond her institution, serving on two key South African Quality Councils, Umalusi and the Council on Higher Education (CHE). She currently serves on the 7th Umalusi Assessment Standards Committee (ASC) of Council and the CHE Research, Monitoring and Advice Committee (RMAC). Through these roles, she brings her expertise and leadership to strengthening quality, advancing transformation, and shaping thoughtful approaches to education, including higher education.



PROF. FULUFHELO NEMAVHOLA

Prof. Fulufhelo Nemavhola

Title of keynote address: The Plenitude Within Scarcity: Excavating the Latent Capacity of South Africa's Universities

Prof. Fulufhelo Nemavhola is a professor of Mechanical Engineering and currently serves as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Engagement at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). He previously held the position of Executive Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment at DUT. An NRF-rated scholar, Prof. Nemavhola has held several academic leadership positions, including Director of the School of Engineering at the University of South Africa (UNISA), where he previously served as Head of Department and Associate Chair in the Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering.

His research focuses on mechanobiology, soft tissue mechanics, computational biomechanics, and engineering education, particularly e-learning. He has authored and co-authored over 100 peer-reviewed papers presented at national and international conferences, contributing significantly to this field.

In recognition of his professional standing, he is registered as a Professional Engineer (PrEng) with the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA) and as a Chartered Engineer (CEng) with the Engineering Council of the United Kingdom (ECUK).

Categories of People that are Encouraged to Attend the Conference

People involved in higher education as students, academics, researchers, or managers; people who work in organisations or bodies that regulate higher education; and people who have interest in expanding access to higher education, would be welcomed to attend and participate in the conference. People who fall in the categories listed below are particularly encouraged to attend and participate in the conference.

- Students from public and private higher education institutions;
- Academics from public and private higher education institutions;
- Researchers from public and private higher education institutions, science councils, civil societies, and independent research institutions and think tanks;
- Leaders and executive managers of public and private higher education institutions;
- Members of governance structures in public and private higher education institutions;
- Representatives of academic staff and other higher education staff associations;
- Institutional planning managers and practitioners;
- Institutional research managers and institutional research specialists;
- Student support service managers and/or practitioners;
- Policy developers and/or analysts;
- Officials in the Department of Higher Education and Training;
- Members of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training;
- Officials from education and training regulatory bodies, including professional bodies and boards; and
- Other higher education stakeholders that might be interested in or are affected by matters related to the national imperative of expanding access to higher education.

Call for abstracts

Researchers, academics, students, programme managers, institutional planning managers, institutional planners, institutional research managers, institutional research specialists, policy developers, policy analysts, data analysts, data and information managers, and other interested individuals or groups of individuals are invited to submit abstracts to be considered for any of the following modes of presentation at the conference:

a) Platform presentations;
b) Symposia and/or workshops; and
c) Panel discussions

The abstracts should be on topics that speak to the following conference subthemes:

1. Data/statistics on applications for admission and enrolments in various fields of study.
2. Impact of institutional capacity, funding and other constraints on access for specific demographic and social groups.
3. Leveraging on development in technology to expand equitable access without increasing the physical carrying capacities of institutions.
4. Potential of micro-credentials and other novel conceptions of learning programme design and delivery with respect to expanding equitable access.
5. The role of professional bodies and boards in expanding equitable access to professional higher education programmes.
6. Integrated planning at the macro level, incorporating basic education, higher education and the broader post-school education and training; and the prospects such integrated planning offers regarding addressing challenges of expanding equitable access.
7. The potential that the initial conceptualisation of the central application service holds towards addressing some of the equitable access challenges, if implemented fully.
8. The potential that private higher education holds with respect to increasing equitable access beyond the current levels.
9. Student funding challenges, with particular focus on private higher education, and their implications with respect to expanding equitable access.
10. Global and/or regional trends with respect to expanding equitable access to higher education.

Each abstract to be submitted should adhere to the following requirements:

- Not exceed four hundred (400) words in length;
- Reflect title, name of author (or names of authors) and institutional or organisational affiliation or affiliations;
- Bear email address of the author, or of the corresponding author, in case of multiple authors;
- Specify the conference subtheme that the abstract relates to;
- Written in United Kingdom (UK) English;
- List five (5) keywords;
- Typed using 11-point Arial font type; and
- Text lines justified and spaced consistently at one-and-half line spacing.

The abstracts should be sent to the Conference Organising Committee through the following email address: research@che.ac.za (cc Moremi.H@che.ac.za). The deadline for the submission of abstracts is **18 December 2026**, and the Conference Organising Committee will communicate back to authors by no later than **22 January 2027**. It is recommended that authors register for the conference by the time they submit their abstracts.

Publication of conference papers

The CHE will explore the possibility of entering into agreements with two of the journals recognised by the Department of Higher Education and Training to publish papers developed from presentations at the conference. Details of this will be provided at the time of the conference.

Registration for the conference

Any person who wishes to be part of the conference should complete and submit a formal registration form which can be accessed by clicking here (**Registration**). Please follow the submission instructions on the form after completing it in full. Registration for the conference will close on **05 February 2027**.

Registration Fees

Early Registration: up to 18 December 2026.

- Persons based in South Africa: R4 800 per head
- Persons based outside South Africa: 360 US Dollars per head

Registration after 18 December 2026

- Persons based in South Africa: R5 600 per head
- Persons based outside South Africa: 415 US Dollars per head

Please note that those whose abstracts are accepted for presentation will receive 50% discount on their registration fees. However, in the event that there are two or more presenters for the same paper, the 50% discount will apply only to the lead authors/presenters. The other presenters will be required to pay full amounts of their respective registration fees.
Details of payment methods will appear on the invoices.

Cancellation of registration and refund of registration fees

Registered participants who cancel their registration after having paid their registration fees would be refunded their registration fees according to the following schedule:

- Cancellation on or before 18 December 2026: full amount of the registration fees paid will be refunded
- Cancellation between 19 December 2026 and 31 January 2027: 75% of the amount of the registration fees paid will be refunded
- Cancellation between 1 February to 14 February 2027: 50% of the amount of the registration fees paid will be refunded
- Cancellation after 14 February 2027: no amount of the registration fees paid will be refunded

Further Information

Further information about the conference, including registration and payment queries, should be addressed to research@che.ac.za (cc Moremi.H@che.ac.za). Interested individuals may also obtain more information about the conference by calling +27 (0) 83 319 9170 or 012 349 3887.