



CONCEPT THEME FOR THE 2026 USAF HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE

1. PURPOSE

To present the proposed theme and concept for the 2026 USAf Higher Education Conference for EXCO's consideration and guidance.

2. BACKGROUND

At the Conference Advisory Committee's recent brainstorming session, two themes for the 2026 USAf Higher Education Conference were proposed and considered. The proposed themes are:

- i. *The Innovative University*
- ii. *Resilience and Renewal*

The Committee noted that:

- *Innovation* remains central to advancing teaching, learning, research, and engagement.
- *Resilience and renewal* highlight the sector's need and ability to adapt to systemic and societal pressures, ensuring sustainability and relevance.
- A unifying theme is required to convey a strong and forward-looking message to internal and external stakeholders.

Following robust discussions, the Committee agreed on the overarching theme:

“Co-creating a Resilient Future.”

This theme integrates resilience, innovation, and renewal, reflecting the need for South African universities to adapt to evolving challenges while contributing meaningfully to societal transformation. Importantly, *co-creation* signals that universities cannot achieve resilience in isolation; rather, they must actively collaborate with government, communities, industry, and international partners to shape a sustainable and inclusive future.

3. PROPOSED THEME AND SUB-THEMES

Theme: *Co-creating a Resilient Future*

Conceptualising Co-creation

In the context of higher education, *co-creation* refers to the shared responsibility of multiple actors in shaping resilient systems. It encompasses:

- *Universities* (leaders, academics, students, staff).
- *Government* (DHET, Treasury, Presidency, Parliament, and provincial/local authorities).
- *Communities and Civil Society* (local communities, NGOs, advocacy groups, citizens).
- *Industry and Employers* (to ensure alignment between graduate attributes, research outputs, and economic needs).
- *International Partners* (collaborations that bolster resilience in an interconnected, but uncertain world).

By grounding resilience in co-creation, the theme recognises that systemic challenges such as financial instability, policy shifts, global crises, and social inequities demand collective solutions. It frames higher education as both a *leader* and a *partner* in advancing transformation.

Over and above strengthening resilience within the existing higher education system, the conference will additionally focus on critically examining and reimagining the future role of universities. The selected sub-themes reflect a commitment to exploring new forms of governance, knowledge production, student success, societal engagement, and institutional sustainability required for universities to thrive in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing and uncertain world.

Sub-themes:

The conference theme, "**Co-creating a Resilient Future**", will be explored through a series of interconnected sub-themes that challenge participants to rethink the purpose, legitimacy, structures, and future trajectories of higher education in South Africa and globally. The sub-themes move beyond sharing best practices and invite critical reflection on how universities can be reimagined to remain relevant, equitable, sustainable, and responsive in a rapidly changing world.

(i) Co-creating a Resilient Future: Understanding the Present

This sub-theme provides the contextual foundation for the conference by examining the current realities shaping higher education. It focuses on governance, legitimacy, leadership, institutional trust, and the role of universities as societal anchors in a period marked by uncertainty, disruption, and growing public expectations.

(ii) Reimagining and Challenging the Idea of the University in South Africa and Globally

This sub-theme explores the evolving purpose and legitimacy of universities in contemporary society. It interrogates traditional assumptions about success, governance, funding, and knowledge production, while exploring how universities can become laboratories of transformation that co-create equitable, inclusive, and globally engaged futures.

(iii) Governance, Accountability and Renewal

- *Visionary Leadership*: Nurturing leadership that can co-create pathways through uncertainty while fostering inclusivity.
- *Collaborative Networks*: Building stronger partnerships between universities, government, industry, and international stakeholders.
- *Strategic Foresight*: Co-developing policies and governance approaches that promote equity and long-term sustainability.

Sustainable and legitimate higher education systems depend on effective governance. This sub-theme examines ethical leadership, institutional accountability, participatory governance models, policy coherence, and the governance reforms needed to support renewal, transformation, and long-term sustainability across diverse institutional contexts.

(iv) Academic Innovation for a Changing World

- *Innovation in Teaching and Learning*: Co-creating pedagogical models (digital, blended, flexible) with educators, students, and technology partners.
- *Research Continuity*: Safeguarding knowledge production through collaborations that withstand funding and global uncertainties.
- *Interdisciplinary Solutions*: Co-developing research agendas that address climate change, inequality, health crises, and technological disruption.

This sub-theme focuses on innovation in teaching, learning, and research as universities respond to local and global challenges. It includes pedagogical transformation, interdisciplinary research, open science, inclusive learning environments, and the role of universities in addressing climate change, inequality, and technological disruption.

(v) Research and Societal Impact

Research must contribute meaningfully to societal development and transformation. This sub-theme explores how universities can strengthen the societal impact of research through collaboration with communities, government, industry, and civil society, while aligning research efforts with national development priorities and global sustainable development agendas.

(vi) Reimagining Student Success for a Resilient Future

- *Mental Health and Well-being*: Co-creating holistic support systems with student bodies, staff associations, and professional networks.
- *Skill Development*: Partnering with industry to co-design curricula that prepare graduates for unpredictable labour markets.
- *Equity and Inclusion*: Working with communities and advocacy groups to ensure access and success for historically disadvantaged groups.

Student success remains central to the future of higher education. This sub-theme examines how universities can redefine and co-create student success through innovative approaches to teaching and learning, work-integrated learning, entrepreneurship, graduate employability, student well-being, and inclusive participation.

(vii) People, Equity and the Public Good

- *Community Engagement*: Universities as anchor institutions co-creating local development initiatives.
- *Policy Influence*: Collaborating with government and civil society to shape education policy aligned with national priorities.
- *Global Competitiveness*: Building international networks that co-create opportunities for South African universities on the continent and globally.

Universities play a critical role in advancing social justice, equity, and societal well-being. This sub-theme explores the public value of higher education, universities as civic institutions, inclusive participation, community engagement, and the contribution of internationalisation to equitable and sustainable development.

(viii) Building Institutional Resilience, Strategy and Agility

Resilient institutions require adaptability, strategic foresight, and strong leadership. This sub-theme examines crisis preparedness, institutional agility, sustainability, competitiveness, and the leadership practices required to navigate complexity while maintaining public trust and relevance.

(ix) Data and Digital Resilience

- *Digital Transformation*: Co-creating technological innovations that enhance teaching, research, and institutional management.
- *Cybersecurity and Data Management*: Partnering with experts to safeguard digital ecosystems.
- *Future-readiness*: Co-developing strategies to navigate automation, AI, and other disruptive technological shifts.

Data and digital technologies increasingly shape institutional decision-making and performance. This sub-theme examines digital transformation, data governance, analytics, artificial intelligence, smart campus initiatives, ethical data use, and evidence-based approaches to strengthening institutional resilience and effectiveness.

(x) Academic Futures: Credibility, Disruption and Continuity in an AI-mediated World

Technological advances, particularly artificial intelligence, are reshaping knowledge production and higher education systems globally. This sub-theme considers the future of academic work, knowledge creation, curriculum responsiveness, digital trust, cybersecurity, ethics, and the implications of AI for teaching, learning, research, and institutional credibility.

(xi) Resourcing Universities: Sustainable and Equitable Funding Models

The long-term sustainability of universities requires innovative and equitable approaches to resourcing. This sub-theme explores public funding futures, diversified revenue streams, philanthropy, partnerships, commercialisation, and funding approaches that address historical inequalities and support institutional resilience.

4. RATIONALE

At its core, *Co-creating a Resilient Future* underscores that resilience is not the product of isolated efforts but of collective innovation and shared responsibility. In an era marked by precarity—from volatile funding streams and geopolitical risks to social inequality and climate crises—universities must act in concert with partners to thrive and remain relevant.

The theme acknowledges higher education as a critical actor in shaping inclusive and sustainable futures, while recognising that it must do so collaboratively, leveraging partnerships at local, national, continental, and global levels. Through co-creation, the sector can:

- Build adaptable and sustainable institutions.
- Drive innovation in teaching, research, and community engagement.

- Support the well-being, equity, and success of students and staff.
- Contribute to broader societal renewal and transformation.

From inclusive leadership to digital innovation, this conference will showcase co-created strategies that prepare higher education for today's challenges and tomorrow's opportunities.

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