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UCT puts Africa at the centre of global debate on universities and AI

Vice-Chancellor Professor Mosa Moshabela Photo: Je'nine May.

The Times Higher Education (THE) World Academic Summit, hosted by the University of Cape Town (UCT) at the Cape Town International Convention Centre, got under way on Tuesday, 29 September 2026 – bringing around 600 higher education leaders, academics, policymakers and stakeholders from more than 60 countries to Africa for the first time to debate the future of universities in an age of artificial intelligence (AI).

Taking place until 1 October 2026 under the theme "Knowledge, justice and futures: Universities in the age of intelligence", the summit is hosted by UCT in partnership with THE and co-hosted by the University of Bristol.

The gathering is examining how universities can respond to rapid technological, social and environmental change, with discussions focused on AI, research, innovation, international collaboration, inclusion and the public role of higher education.

Opening the summit, UCT Vice-Chancellor Professor Mosa Moshabela said bringing the global gathering to Africa offered an opportunity to broaden the higher education conversation and bring African experiences and perspectives into debates shaping universities worldwide.

"This important summit being on African soil for the first time is an opportunity to shift the centre of the conversation," said Moshabela.

He said Africa's young populations, intellectual traditions and capacity for creativity and innovation offered important perspectives as universities grapple with inequality, technological disruption and changing expectations of higher education.

"These realities are not simply challenges to be overcome. They are also sources of insight," he said. "They compel us to think differently about resilience, innovation, inclusion and the relationship between knowledge and development."

AI featured prominently in the opening discussions, with speakers examining its implications for knowledge production, teaching, research and the future of work.

Moshabela said universities' response to AI should extend beyond adopting new technology. "The future of the university cannot be reduced to the adoption of a technology," he said. "It is our responsibility as leaders in higher education to ensure that universities continue to cultivate curiosity, ethical reasoning, imagination, intellectual independence and the capacity to ask difficult questions."

He said universities must prepare students not simply to work alongside AI, but to help shape the societies in which these technologies operate. "We are not gathering here merely to discuss Africa but to think with Africa and the world."

Rethinking how universities teach

The question of inclusive education was explored by UCT Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning Professor Brandon Collier-Reed, who addressed the session "People and Pedagogy: Inclusive Education and Innovation in Contexts of Disruption and Inequality".

Collier-Reed said some of UCT's significant educational innovations had emerged from confronting the limitations of inherited curricula and teaching practices. "At UCT, and I suspect at many institutions across the Global South and elsewhere, some of our most significant educational developments have emerged directly from necessity," he said.

He challenged approaches that primarily frame student outcomes as a problem of student preparedness or ability, arguing that universities also need to examine their own institutional design, including curricula, assessment practices and academic support. "What the work of the past five years has taught us is that these are not problems of student deficit. They are, in very significant measure, problems of institutional design," he said.

Collier-Reed highlighted curriculum reform at UCT, where the Teaching and Learning office has funded curriculum change projects across faculties since 2021. The work includes

reducing curriculum overload, simplifying degree structures and creating opportunities for interdisciplinary and project-based learning.

"You cannot scaffold your way out of a structurally overloaded programme," he said.
He also highlighted initiatives aimed at connecting learning to local contexts, including an isiXhosa glossary of Mechanical Engineering terminology, community-embedded learning through the Hasso Plattner d-school Afrika, locally authored African business cases and redesigned assessments incorporating professional ethics, sustainability and other graduate attributes.

Collier-Reed said inclusive education also required universities to look beyond digitalisation. "Digitalisation is a means to that democratic end, not an end in itself," he said.

UCT's digital learning initiatives include its Amathuba learning management platform, early-alert systems to identify patterns of student disengagement, captioning of lecture videos and the Learning Store, which provides short-course and professional development opportunities.

He said genuine access also required universities to consider what they teach, whose knowledge is represented, the languages used in learning and how students are assessed.

"The deepest forms of democratic access to higher education require changes to what is taught, in whose language it is taught, how students are assessed, and whether the curriculum acknowledges that knowledge is produced in many contexts," he added.

Students as co-creators of knowledge
The student perspective was also central to discussions on how universities can rethink teaching, technology and knowledge production. Kolosa Ntombini, a PhD candidate and assistant lecturer in UCT's Department of Environmental & Geographical Sciences, shared her experience of moving from student activism during the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements between 2015 and 2017 to becoming a postgraduate student, tutor, mentor and academic contributing to curriculum transformation.

Ntombini spoke about how students can meaningfully co-create curricula and research agendas with academics, even in institutions facing structural inequality and limited resources. She highlighted the Black Geographies Collective (BGC), which she co-founded with postgraduate students and early-career researchers at UCT and the University of the Western Cape, as an example of students and emerging academics working together to develop curricula that are more African and rooted in Black experiences.

Through seminars and a workshop involving Black postgraduate students from across South Africa, the collective has created spaces for students to contribute to conversations about curriculum and research. Ntombini said this work had also shaped her own teaching practice since she took up her role as an assistant lecturer at UCT in April 2025.

She also reflected on belonging as a condition for meaningful participation in the university's knowledge economy, drawing on the BGC's work to challenge what she described as the enduring whiteness of her academic discipline and to create greater opportunities for students to exercise agency and shape their learning environments.

Building partnerships beyond Cape Town
For THE, the summit provides an opportunity to connect institutions worldwide with universities and other higher education stakeholders from Africa. THE Director of Global Events, Charlotte Coles, said the value of the gathering would extend beyond the three-day programme through partnerships and collaborations developed between institutions.

"For us, we want to see the legacy of it being partnerships that afford collaborations, new research ideas, opportunities to co-create or collaborate with students," she said.

University of Bristol President and Vice-Chancellor Professor Evelyn Welch said the summit also reflected the depth of the partnership between Bristol and UCT, which has developed over almost a decade through student and staff exchanges, shared PhD studentships and collaborative research.

The two universities have collaborated on issues including water scarcity, public health, inclusive innovation and the implications of AI for higher education.

"Coming together at this summit gives us a chance both to present the work that we've done together, but also to learn from colleagues around the world about how they, too, are responding to a common challenge," said Welch.

South Africa's Minister of Higher Education and Training, Buti Manamela, highlighted the role of universities in national development through research, innovation, skills development and international collaboration.

He pointed to collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic, including efforts to localise vaccine production, as an example of what can be achieved when universities and researchers work across institutional and national boundaries.

Manamela also called for stronger links between universities, TVET colleges and industry to connect education more directly with employment and entrepreneurship.

He said AI should be used to expand access to education rather than deepen existing inequalities, with broader AI literacy and access to technology needed as societies adapt to technological change.

A global conversation with Africa at the centre
The summit comes as universities worldwide consider the implications of AI for teaching, research, employment and institutional governance.

For UCT, hosting the summit places African knowledge and experience within this global conversation while creating opportunities to strengthen partnerships between institutions across regions.

Professor Moshabela said challenges facing universities, including climate change, inequality, technological disruption and public health, crossed national borders and could not be addressed by individual institutions working alone. "Our responsibility is therefore both local and global: to produce knowledge that matters, to educate graduates who can navigate complexity, to advance discovery, and to contribute meaningfully to the societies around us," he said.

The summit continues until Thursday, 1 October, with discussions covering international partnerships, research leadership, academic freedom, innovation, sustainability and the changing role of universities in society. The programme also includes the unveiling of the THE World University Rankings 2027 and analysis of the rankings data.

As the first THE World Academic Summit held in Africa, the gathering provides an opportunity to place African institutions and perspectives at the centre of a global conversation about the future of higher education.

Professor Moshabela said he hoped the discussions would result in partnerships that continue beyond the summit.

ENDS

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