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1 October 2026

Indigenous people view and approach the world distinctively, UCT summit hears

How do indigenous and ancestral knowledge systems conceptualise the future differently from dominant Western models?

This is the question Professor Elelwani Ramugondo, the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Deputy Vice-Chancellor for People, Culture and Society, asked during the second day of the Times Higher Education (THE) World Academic Summit, hosted by UCT at the Cape Town International Convention Centre on Wednesday, 30 September 2026.

Ramugondo was moderating a session titled "Indigenous and ancestral knowledge systems as critical innovation levers for future preparedness". The session reframed indigenous and ancestral knowledge not as supplementary or symbolic but as critical levers for innovation in addressing contemporary global challenges.

Indigenous and ancestral knowledge systems

Ramugondo said indigenous people are distinct in how they view and approach the world.

The session explored how universities can engage these knowledge systems responsibly and meaningfully across research, teaching and entrepreneurship ecosystems while safeguarding their integrity and avoiding extractive or instrumentalised approaches.

Emeritus Professor Gubela Mji of Stellenbosch University said indigenous people have a different worldview from Western ways of being. "They have got a different way of addressing the daily challenges as well as conceptualising the future because they are such a group of people who really haven't lost touch with nature, with vegetation, with the land, and also the manner they conceptualise time."

"They see time not in a divided mannerism minutes and hours, they see it as a process. And they also are connected to the fact that the past, the present and the future are all operating in one," she said.

"You can swing into the past to be able to handle what is in the present and you can also swing into the future to be able to bring yourself back into the present so that when you are ultimately in the future you are more prepared to actually handle what is in the future," said Mji.

Building equitable, reciprocal and impactful international collaborations

Earlier in the day, the summit heard that in a globalised world where challenges like pandemics, climate change, inequality, migration, social and political polarisation are transnational in character, the ability of institutions of higher learning across the world to address these challenges is dependent on them acting as a collective human community.

"It is critical to our survival as a species. We must learn to swim together, or we will collectively sink," said Professor Adam Habib, Vice-Chancellor of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, addressing a session on "Building equitable, reciprocal and impactful international collaborations".

Habib said that to address these transnational challenges, institutions need to bring knowledge systems from around the world into conversation with one another.

"How we address inequality in Kenya will be fundamentally different to how we address it in the UK. How we address climate change in Korea will be different to how we do it in Germany. We could not have stemmed the Ebola outbreak in West Africa with a purely clinical approach, we needed a multidisciplinary lens to understand Muslim burial practices and how to adapt them to prevent the spread of the virus," he said.

He said such global solutions are dependent on local knowledge.

"Any intervention needs to be rooted in the cultural, social and political realities of its local context. This will require academics, scientists, professionals and other stakeholders to continuously engage and innovate across national and disciplinary boundaries, and in the process to adapt global solutions to local contexts," Habib said.

Habib's talk was inspired by his experience in the last decade in building partnerships from two distinct experiences, in his capacity as Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor at two South African universities and as Vice-Chancellor at SOAS.

Resilience and research leadership in an unpredictable future

A session titled "Preparedness, resilience and research leadership in an unpredictable future", moderated by the Times Higher Education editor Chris Havergal, explored how research leaders, particularly in Africa, are designing resilient systems that connect research excellence with innovation, entrepreneurship and societal impact.

Speakers highlighted the growing geopolitical rivalry affecting the world, leading to instability.

Havergal alluded to the impact of the loss of national institutes of health funding and how universities have had to reposition themselves following that.

"We've heard also about the funding models that we see in many of our big anglophile sectors where research has traditionally been funded by international students and how that model is now collapsing," said Havergal.

"So it's clear that we're all operating in a more volatile research environment."

Professor Manuel Guilherme Júnior, Rector of Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique, stressed the importance of scientific preparedness to address pressing societal needs and risks such as climate change, food and water security. He highlighted the importance of public health and engineering in solving social issues.

"But also, financial preparedness, which is resilience, means funding and diversification of funding. Partnership preparedness for establishing new collaboration when the geopolitical, technological and scientific environment changes," he concluded.

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