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World Academic Summit: UCT seeks to strengthen ties with communities

UCT Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning Professor Brandon Collier-Reed at the Times Higher Education World Academic Summit in Cape Town. Photo: Je'nine May

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is working to bridge a historic divide between the university and communities, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) for Teaching and Learning Professor Brandon Collier-Reed told delegates at the Times Higher Education (THE) World Academic Summit (WAS) 2026 at the Cape Town International Convention Centre on Thursday, 1 October 2026.

"The community is something that we take very seriously, and our ability to engage with our community is important to us," Professor Collier-Reed told the summit, which was hosted by UCT in partnership with the University of Bristol.

In a session titled "Higher education in the Intelligent Age: Purpose, people, pedagogy and planet", Collier-Reed formed part of a panel discussion.

The role and purpose of higher education has evolved in the past 20 years. Amid international competition, technological acceleration, geopolitical fragmentation and environmental stress, universities are being called upon to respond not only to innovate, but also with acuity and judgement that ensure legitimacy and engender public trust.

Collier-Reed said that, historically, UCT was viewed by some people in the community as an institution that was inaccessible. "One of the stories that our vice-chancellor likes to tell is how increasingly during his term he's had people talk to him about how the university itself is being seen to be more accessible to the community, the impact that we are having as a community, and the relevance that the community sees for the work of the University of Cape Town to them," he said.

He added: "And I think that's something that we are very committed to engaging with, because just the location of the university does set itself up as a dichotomy, as something that's separate from the community. So, a lot of our work is engaged with trying to lower that gap."

Collier-Reed also discussed the innovation district and the potential risks of gentrification – "a critical concern that we must all have about engaging in an area and developing in an area."

"Our vice-chancellor very regularly refers to this triple helix, whereas the community as well as local governments as well as the university needs to really – and the quadruple helix he now talks about with business as well – we need to all actively work together in a deliberate way to ensure that in the innovation district, there's not the gentrification that takes place, but rather the embracing of community, business, government, local government as well as the university to uplift the whole area and by definition or consequence, the areas and surrounds in the region more broadly," he said.

Executive Mayor of Cape Town Geordin Hill-Lewis, who also participated in the discussion, highlighted gentrification as one of the difficult challenges facing successful cities around the world.

"It is a really tough thing to deal with," said Hill-Lewis. "If cities are succeeding, property values are going to be going up and it's going to be a more desirable place to live. And that's going to happen almost per definition."

He added: "The only places where that's not happening are actually cities that are going backwards."

The programme on the third day of the summit was as enriching and insightful as the first two.

The morning started with a practical masterclass exploring how African universities can use data and institutional intelligence to move beyond measurement and towards strategic action.

Following the publication of the 2027 THE World University Rankings, in the second session participants explored key findings and analysis. The session considered how rankings data

and wider institutional intelligence can contribute to robust academic evaluation and support universities in understanding their performance and priorities.

With Africa's youthful population presenting significant opportunities for higher education, a session titled "From brain drain to knowledge circulation" examined how the continent can shift the narrative around talent mobility towards knowledge circulation and African-led innovation. UCT Chancellor Dr Precious Moloi-Motsepe joined the conversation on strengthening domestic research ecosystems, aligning programmes with local labour-market needs and enabling African institutions to play a greater role in global knowledge production.

The next two sessions discussed the role of universities as anchor institutions in building stronger relationships between academia, government, business and civil society; and the pressures facing academic freedom and institutional autonomy around the world.

In the penultimate session, "Advancing justice, civic engagement and inclusive knowledge practices", UCT DVC for People, Culture and Society Professor Elelwani Ramugondo contributed to a discussion on the evolving civic role of universities. The session explored how higher education institutions can foster freedom of expression, inclusive campus cultures and constructive debate.

In the closing session, UCT DVC for Research and Internationalisation Professor Thokozani Majozi closed reflected on the significance of the discussions over the three days.

"The last few days have presented us with a rare opportunity. It was a convergence of leading minds to deliberate on issues that confront us equally, regardless of our territorial positioning. The overarching theme of this summit underpins all of our aspirations. We deliberated on matters of urgency and survival. They leave us with no option but to face them head-on. And we have to do so to secure the future of those who come after us," he said.

Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bristol Professor Evelyn Welch said the summit had facilitated consequential conversations about the future of higher education and the challenges facing societies worldwide.

"The days have been met with consequential conversations. It (THE WAS) is taking place for the first, but I am sure not for the last, time on African soil. You have all stayed for discussions on AI, existential threats to the very existence of universities, and inequality of access. You have also stayed to hear uplifting discussions about ubuntu. We have spoken about how we can preserve our communities, but above all, how we can serve futures," she said.

Hosted by UCT in partnership with the University of Bristol, the THE WAS 2026 started on Tuesday, 29 September 2026. It brought together university leaders, academics and other stakeholders to examine the role of higher education in addressing global challenges under the theme "Knowledge, justice and futures: Universities in the age of intelligence".

The next THE WAS is scheduled for October 2027 at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden.

ENDS

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