



## UNIVERSITIES SOUTH AFRICA

### THE SECOND USAf NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE 2021 6 - 8 October 2021

#### *'The Engaged University'*

#### **BACKGROUND**

Societies globally have experienced unprecedented disruption as a consequence of COVID-19. This unplanned historical break from what we may consider our previous normal has raised a myriad of questions related to uncertainty, disruption and complexity. The Second USAf Higher Education Conference takes place in this context. The conference comes at an opportune time for us to reflect on our higher education system's state and purpose. Following consultations within our strategy groups and other structures, it has emerged that there appears to be excitement to critically engage with the notion of 'The Engaged University'. It is a much-needed moment to stop and reflect on and learn from the past year characterised by unprecedented challenges due to COVID-19. The conference will provide a platform for collective reflection, deliberation and shared thinking.

#### **CONTEXT**

Three decades have passed in post-apartheid higher education in South Africa. We remain perplexed by the question of the university's role and its importance in serving society and its publics. In this vein, we may ask, "what are universities good for and what are universities good at?" "What are the purposes of universities as social institutions?" This requires that universities and the society in which they are embedded grapple with these questions. Crises present a moment of opportunity often characterised by a return to the most fundamental questions.

We have the role of the pandemic in aggravating the systemic inequalities within the political economy. At the same time, It has, in a powerful manner, reminded humanity that all eventualities cannot be predicted, that we are fragile, and that we may be drawn closer together through collaboration and partnerships. It has fundamentally compelled us to reconsider foundational questions regarding what our universities are as social institutions and who they are meant to serve.

This conference will provide an opportunity for robust and authentic contemplation of *'The Engaged University'*. It will entail in-depth examination and honest deliberation on the nature of such universities and the fundamental transformation required for them to optimally participate in addressing the grand challenges facing South Africa and the global community. It involves stretching our thinking into the past and present while contemplating the university of the future.

## **SUB-THEMES**

The Conference theme will be organised around sub-themes such as:

1. What is the conceptual orientation of an 'Engaged University' and what are the contextual realities of inclusive institutional cultures and the normative frames of an 'Engaged University'?
2. To what extent is the long-term sustainability of our universities dependent on their reorientation as engaged institutions?
3. To what extent would the knowledge project of universities be (re-)shaped?
4. What is the 'Engaged University's' systemic role concerning societal fractures and discordance, exclusivity, inequality and discrimination? How will this role contribute to building a socially just democracy and economy?
5. What will the world of work look like in the future, and what are its implications for the labour market and employment?
6. How does science, research and innovation in an 'Engaged University' promote economic and societal development?
7. What are the challenges and resource strategies required for the sustainability of an 'Engaged University'?
8. How does digital transformation and technology-enhanced teaching/learning and research/innovation promote the mission and objectives of the 'Engaged University'?

## **AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

The Second USAf Higher Education Conference aims to provide a space for reflection and vigorous, evidence-based, robust debate. It offers a platform for diverse voices and to be heard and to inform and shape our future imaginations of the place of universities as social institutions.

In this way, the conference draws together our current contextual realities while allowing the opening of unchartered territory for our desired future.

### **The objectives of the conference are as follows:**

- i. To provide a national platform for rigorous academic debate and deliberation on pertinent higher education issues informed by the work of USAf's strategic structures and programmes;
- ii. To encourage and support solution building through facilitated dialogue and inquiry, as key stakeholders and role-players;
- iii. To provide an opportunity for information sharing and networking across a broad spectrum within the public higher education sector and with other sectors and stakeholders;
- iv. To identify and agree on a set of goals for the sector and concrete actions towards the advancement and achievement of the 'Engaged University'.

## **FORMAT**

The conference is structured into a diverse set of sessions, for example, plenary sessions, parallel sessions and panel discussions aimed at igniting conversations that contribute to reflexivity. The first day of the conference commences with an Opening Address by the Chair of the Board of USAf, Professor Sibongile Muthwa and a Keynote Address by the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, the Honourable Dr Blade Nzimande. The design of the USAf Strategy Group sessions which are arranged as parallel sessions allow for critical reflection, knowledge and experiential sharing and professional learning and development.

The CEO (Professor Ahmed Bawa) and Conference Leader (Dr Linda Meyer) and their support team have worked with the USAf Strategy Groups to enrich the programme structure and content. Briefing notes will be prepared for Conference chairpersons, moderators and presenters.

## **DATE AND VENUE**

- The conference will take place from 6-8 October 2021.
- The venue will be Future Africa, located at the University of Pretoria.

## **STRATEGIC PARTNERS**

Public universities, the Department of Higher Education and Training and the Council on Higher Education have been identified as strategic partners.

Other stakeholders include identified Government Departments, Science Councils, SAQA other Quality Assurance Bodies.

## **DELEGATES**

It is estimated that the hybrid format will draw 1500 delegates, with a maximum of 250 delegates being physically present at the venue, depending on prevailing COVID-19 regulations. All protocols will be observed which include the wearing of face masks, social distancing and sanitising.

## **IDENTIFIED PARTNERING JOURNALS**

1. Journal of Decolonising Disciplines
2. Journal of Student Affairs in Africa
3. South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE)

## **BUDGET AND COSTS**

The conference will be funded from three primary sources, namely, (i) USAf budget, (ii) HELM and Kresge grants since it involves and will benefit HE executives, senior managers and middle managers. If time permits, USAf may request sponsorships for some private sector events and its service providers. All costs for the conference will be covered from these sources and the registration fee will be subsidised. Participants will be required to fund their travel and accommodation costs if required.

## **PLANNING TEAM**

- Dr Linda Meyer (Leader)
- Dr Oliver Seale (Advisor)
- Dr Bernadette Johnson (Advisor)
- Prof Denise Zinn (Advisor)
- Ms 'Mateboho Green (Communications)
- Mr Patrick Fish (Communications)

The Conference Leader will work with the planning team and prepare an activity and implementation schedule in consultation with the USAf CEO, Professor Ahmed Bawa.