

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE, SOUTH AFRICA
THE DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS, SPORT, ARTS AND CULTURE

GLOBAL STUDENT WELL-BEING SUMMIT 2026

**LEAVING NO
STUDENT BEHIND:**

**TOWARDS
INCLUSIVE
PATHWAYS
TO STUDENT
WELL-BEING**



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UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
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YUNIVESITHI YA FREISTATA



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INTRODUCTION

Student well-being is a cornerstone of student development and success. Beyond academic success, it shapes their overall university experience by anticipating barriers, creating supportive environments, reducing stress, anxiety, and burnout, and, more importantly, building student resilience in the face of academic, personal, and other challenges (deJager, 2023).

The 2026 Student Well-being Summit is the third edition of a summit originally conceptualised by the University of the Free State (UFS), Stellenbosch University (SUN), and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) in 2024. As an offshoot of the 2024 and 2025 summits, the 2026 summit continues to broaden the scope and reach of the summit by inviting international, continental, and local higher education institutions (HEIs), including universities, private colleges, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, to participate.

This year's theme, titled *Leaving No Student Behind: Towards Inclusive Pathways to Student Well-being*, resonates with the global context where systemic inequalities are prevalent. The histories and legacies of exclusion continue to impact student access to education, mental health resources, and ultimately, socio-economic upward mobility (Julius, Putteeraj, & Somanah, 2024). The theme of the summit thus creates avenues for students to be empowered to become active agents in their own well-being, while inviting institutions and communities to support students by dismantling the barriers related to race, gender, socio-economic status, disability, and rural-urban divides.

Overall, it is envisaged that this year's summit will inspire actionable change by integrating mental and physical health, skills development, building resilience, and initiating dialogue aimed at pathways to removing barriers to inclusion.



BACKGROUND

HEIs have long been more than just places of academic learning; they are dynamic spaces where individuals and communities engage in deep reflection and transformative growth. As microcosms of society, HEIs challenge students to question, explore, and redefine their identities, values, and roles in the world (Nyamupangedengu, 2017). This reflective environment nurtures critical thinking and personal development, making HEIs unique catalysts for social change and innovation. Recognising this role is essential when considering student well-being, as it frames HEIs as active agents in shaping holistic student experiences.

In South Africa and many other parts of the developing world, student empowerment extends beyond the personal level. It is concerned with addressing socio-economic challenges such as high youth unemployment, limited livelihood opportunities, social and economic injustices, inequality, mental health crises, financial stress, and gender-based vulnerabilities (Marwala, 2025). Organisations such as Higher Health – the implementing arm of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) – exemplify this by promoting psychosocial well-being and holistic development across universities and TVET colleges. Their partnership with UNESCO on programmes such as Transforming MEN'talities focuses on positive gender norms, mental health, and life skills, aligning perfectly with this theme's emphasis on inclusive empowerment. The University of the Free State Men's Legotla/Imbizo is one example of how HEIs strive to create an empowering environment that inculcates inclusion, dialogue, and diverse worldviews into daily campus discourse.

In today's rapidly changing university environment, student well-being has become a central pillar for academic achievement, personal growth, and long-term success. Yet, the student body is increasingly diverse – encompassing different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, physical and mental abilities, and learning styles (UNESCO, 2017). This diversity enriches campus life but also brings varied challenges that can hinder some students from fully engaging with university resources and opportunities. *Leaving No Student Behind: Towards Inclusive Pathways to Student Well-being* reflects a commitment to equity and inclusion, recognising that well-being is not a one-size-fits-all concept.

It calls for a holistic approach that integrates mental health, physical health, social connection, and academic support, tailored to meet the unique needs of every student. Inclusive pathways mean designing policies, programmes, and services that are accessible, culturally responsive, and actively remove barriers to participation.

The spin-offs of inclusive student well-being are students feeling safe, valued, and supported. By promoting inclusive student well-being, all HEIs can reduce dropout rates, improve academic performance, and nurture resilient, well-rounded graduates. This theme also acknowledges that student well-being extends beyond individual health – it impacts campus culture, community cohesion, and society at large. Therefore, fostering inclusive well-being pathways is not only a moral imperative but a strategic priority for HEIs aiming to thrive in a diverse world.



PURPOSE

The purpose of this summit is to empower students from diverse backgrounds by promoting inclusive strategies for overall well-being. Using principles such as Ubuntu and national initiatives such as Higher Health and Youth Month programmes, the 2026 edition of the Global Student Well-being Summit aims to give participants tools for personal resilience, advocate for systemic fairness in higher education, and encourage collaborative efforts to build supportive environments where every student can thrive mentally, physically, and economically in a constantly changing world.

The summit further contributes actionable pathways to realising the *University of the Free State's Vision 130*, which reflects the University of the Free State's ambition to "... be a university with a consistent outward focus, and to be profound in what we deliver – building on past achievements, while constantly transforming ourselves in order to stay relevant within the dynamic and ever-changing international higher education sphere" (University of the Free State, 2022).



OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the summit are to

- promote student agency in the co-creation of inclusive HEIs, communities, and the world;
- address intersectional barriers to well-being (gender, race, socioeconomic status, disability, rural-urban divide);
- build skills for economic, social, and economic resilience;
- foster inclusive community networks and peer support; and
- drive measurable systemic change in universities, communities, and the wider society.



LOGISTICAL DETAILS

The summit will be hosted at the University of the Free State, in accordance with the details below:

Venue: University of the Free State South Campus – Madiba Arena

- Dates: 7–10 July 2026
- Time: 08:00–16:00 every day

PARTICIPANTS

Echoing the summit's focus on 'Leaving no one behind: inclusive paths to student well-being,' participants will include a diverse mix of stakeholders. This ensures representation of stakeholders and experts in efforts to create an environment that fosters student well-being. The goal is to foster collaboration, share insights, and drive actionable outcomes for holistic student well-being. Participants will thus be

- students (universities, TVET colleges, and private colleges);
- student representatives;
- mental health researchers and professionals;
- disability researchers and practitioners; and
- government departments and policymakers.

PARTNERS

- Higher Health
- Higher Education Disability Services Association (HEDSA)
- South African Association of Campus Health Services (SAACHS)
- Southern African Association for Counselling and Development in Higher Education (SAACDHE)
- BRICS Student Commission
- National Association for Student Development Professionals (NASDEV)
- South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP)
- Association of College and University Housing Officers – South Africa Chapter (ACUHO-i-SAC)
- National Association for Student Development Professionals (NASDEV)
- The National Youth Development Agency (NYDA)

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THEORY OF CHANGE

The theory of change on which the 2026 Summit is premised is presented diagrammatically below:

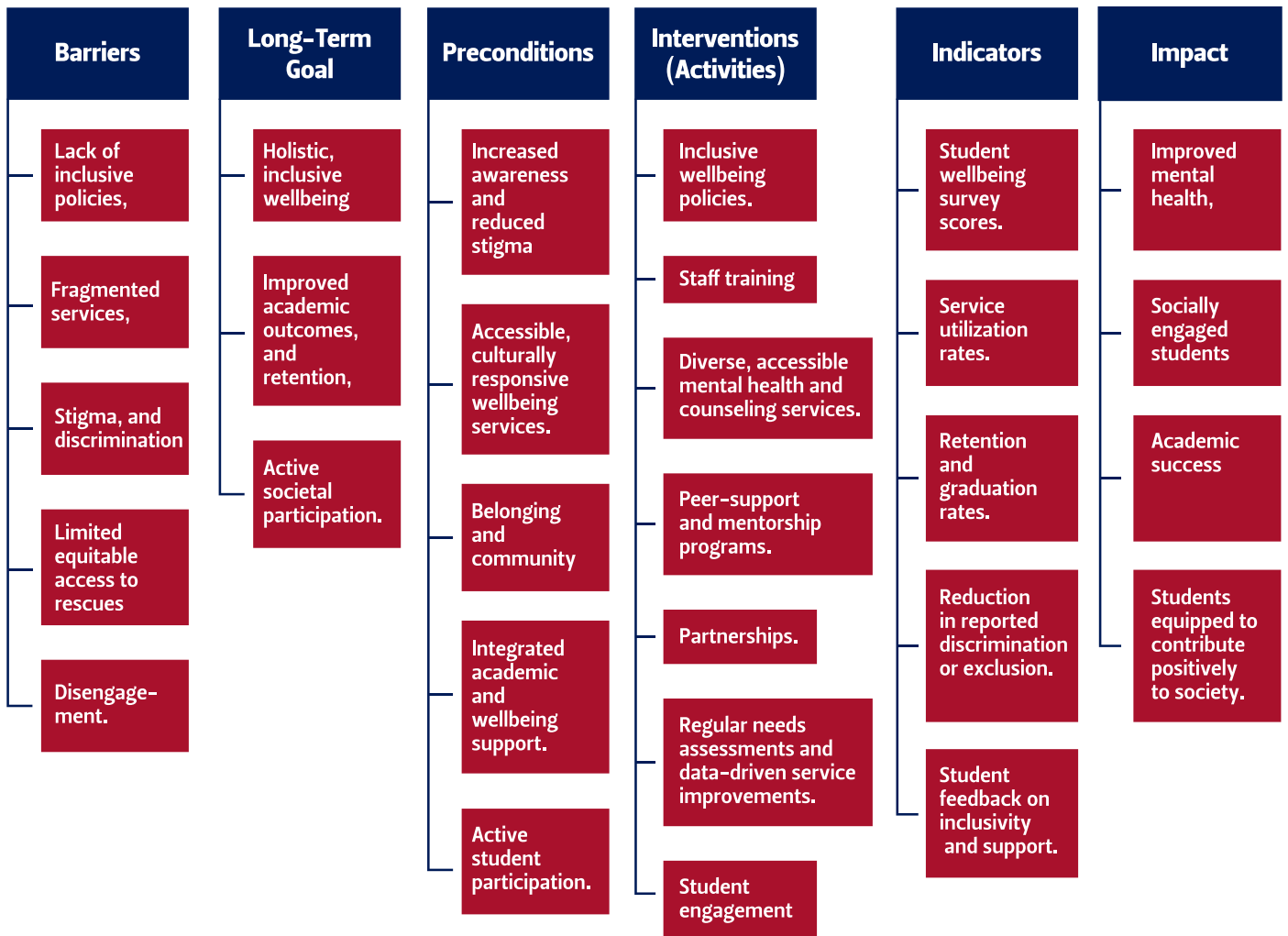


Figure 1: The Theory of Change for the 2026 Student Well-being Summit

VALUE PROPOSITIONS

Participating institutions will join a network of HEIs, government, NGOs, and private sector partners. This collaboration supports shared learning and helps design culturally responsive, evidence-based services that meet national and international standards, contributing to higher student satisfaction and retention.

Participating institutions will receive a concise post-summit report outlining key issues and recommendations. The report will be instrumental in providing practical evidence to strengthen student support services and well-being programme design.

DIMENSIONS OF INCLUSIVE STUDENT WELL-BEING

The summit will be framed around the dimensions in Figure 2 below:



Figure 2: Dimensions of Student Well-being

CONCLUSION

The summit on Leaving no one behind: towards inclusive pathways to student well-being will bring together higher education leaders, policymakers, student representatives, and cross-sector partners to co-create actionable strategies that embed inclusion across all dimensions of well-being.

By aligning policy, practice, and partnership around mental, physical, social, academic, cultural, environmental, financial, and spiritual well-being, the event will generate a shared roadmap and post-summit report that will equip institutions with evidence-based tools to design and sustain student support services to reach every learner. Ultimately, the summit aims to catalyse a collaborative, equity-driven movement that ensures no student is left behind on their journey to thrive academically and personally.



REFERENCES

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STAFF – ARRIVAL AND WELCOMING

7 July 2026

Time	Item	Person
16:30–17:00	Arrival	
17:00–17:10	Opening address	Dr Temba Hlasho, Executive Director: Student Affairs, Sport, Arts and Culture
17:10–17:40	Welcome address	Prof Hester C. Kloppe, Vice-Chancellor and Principal
17:40–18:00	Delegation photo	
18:00–19:00	Refreshments	

STAFF – CONFERENCE DAY 1

8 July 2026

Time	Item	Person
07:45–08:30	Registration	
08:30–08:40	The National Anthem	Odeion School of Music
08:40–08:45	Recap of the Official Welcoming	Desiree Motsele
08:45–08:50	Message of support	Esona Radebe, UFS ISRC President General
08:50–09:00	Message of support: SAASSAP	Jerome September, President: SAASSAP
09:00–09:05	Introduction of the speakers	Dr Molapo Qhobela Deputy Vice Chancellor: Strategic Initiatives, International And Institutional Affairs
09:05–09:25	Message of support	Max Boqwana, CEO Thabo Mbeki Foundation
09:25–09:35	Musical item	Odeion School of Music
09:35–09:55	Breakaway session	Mooketsi 'Pop' Motsisi, Chair: Board of Trustees of the Sishen Iron Ore Community Development Trust and Director on the Board of Airlink
09:55–10:00	Musical item – Poetry	Odeion School of Music
10:00–10:20	Keynote Address: Deputy Minister in the Presidency	Honourable Mmapaseka Steve Letsike Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities.
10:20–10:30	Comfort break	
10:30–14:30	City tour: Bloemfontein Historical Sites	
14:30–15:30	Lunch and networking	

STAFF - CONFERENCE DAY 1

8 July 2026 (Cocktail Evening for Staff)

Time	Item	Person
18:30-19:00	Arrival	Odeion School of Music
19:00-19:10	Musical item	Odeion School of Music
19:10-19:20	Welcome address	Khwezi Madlala, Chairperson of RiseOn TV Student Association
19:20-19:40	Introduction	Zoleka Dotwana, Director: Student Affairs, Sport, Arts and Culture
19:40-20:00	Message of support	Prof Bulelwa Nguza-Mduba, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: People and Operations
20:00-20:10	Musical item	Odeion School of Music
20:10-20:20	Vote of thanks	Jerry Laka, Director of Koviesport, Arts, and Culture

STAFF - CONFERENCE DAY 2

9 July 2026

Time	Item	Person
08:00-08:25	Registration	
08:25-08:30	Welcome address	Malefetsane Motsoeneng
08:30-09:30	Plenary session	Dr Nontombi Velelo, Lecturer – Faculty of The Humanities
09:30-11:15	Art therapy session	Martie Miranda, Deputy Director, Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support
11:15-11:30	Comfort break	
11:30-13:00	Drama performance	Ugood!? Group
13:00-14:00	Lunch	
14:00-15:00	Plenary session	Dr Eugene Buthelezi, Lecturer – Economics and Finance
15:00-20:00	Vrystaat Arts Festival	

Time	Item	Person
08:00-09:00	Registration	
09:00-09:10	Welcome address	Malefetsane Motsoeneng
09:10-10:30	Plenary session	Cindy Dickens - Kramer Weihmann Inc.
10:30-12:00	Plenary session	Mr Pura Mgolombane, Executive Director: Student Affairs, University of Cape Town
12:00-13:00	Lunch	
13:00-16:00	Physical well-being session	Mosa Thetsane, Judo South Africa
16:00	Closure and departure	

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STUDENT - ARRIVAL AND WELCOMING 7 July 2026

Time	Item	Person
16:30-17:00	Musical item	Odeion School of Music
17:00-17:10	Opening address	Dr Temba Hlasho, Executive Director: Student Affairs, Sport, Arts, and Culture
17:10-17:40	Welcome address	Prof Hester C. Klopper, Vice-Chancellor and Principal
17:40-18:00	Delegation photo	
18:00-19:00	Refreshments	

STUDENT - CONFERENCE DAY 1 8 July 2026

Time	Item	Person
07:45-08:30	Registration	
08:30-08:40	Musical item	Odeion School of Music
08:40-08:45	Recap of the Official Welcoming	Desiree Motsele
08:45-08:50	Message of support: ISRC	Esona Radebe, UFS ISRC President General
08:50-09:00	Message of support: SAASSAP	Jerome September, President: SAASSAP
09:00-09:05	Introduction of the speakers	Dr Molapo Qhobela Deputy Vice Chancellor: Strategic Initiatives, International And Institutional Affairs
09:05-09:25	Message of support	Max Boqwana: CEO Thabo Mbeki Foundation
09:25-09:35	Musical item	Odeion School of Music
09:35-09:55	Breakaway sessions	Mooketsi 'Pop' Motsisi, Chair: Board of Trustees of the Sishen Iron Ore Community Development Trust and Director on the Board of Airlink
09:55-10:00	Music item poetry	Student Association
10:00-10:20	Keynote Address: Deputy Minister in the Presidency	Honourable Mmapaseka Steve Letsike Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities
10:20-10:30	Comfort session	
10:30-11:30	Breakaway session	Dr Gcina Mtengwane, Lecturer – Faculty of The Humanities Student Delegate Likhona Jackson, Chairperson: Faculty Student Council – The Humanities: Co-Facilitator

Time	Item	Person
11:30–12:30	Breakaway session	Maralize Conradie, Mercantile Law Khanya Motshabi, Student Engagement, Faculty of Law Mcintosh Khasembe, Deputy President SAUS Muzomuhle Mhlongo, NASDEV President Co-Facilitator: Pholla Mbalane, Deputy Director – ISGO
12:30–13:30	Lunch	
13:30–16:30	Sports activities	KovsieSport
16:30	Closure and Departure	

STUDENT – CONFERENCE DAY 2 9 July 2026

Time	Item	Person
07:45–08:30	Registration	
08:30–08:40	Welcome address	Desiree Motsele
08:40–09:30	Keynote address	Koketso Ruwana, Attorney of the High Court of South Africa
09:30–10:30	Breakaway session	Prof John Klaasen, Dean: Theology and Religion: Co-Facilitator Dr Yuvan Shunmugan, Lecturer – Religious Studies Siphokazi Khumalo, Manager: Theology and Religion
10:30–11:30	Breakaway session	Dr Pieter du Toit, UFS Council Member: Facilitator Tiana van der Merwe, Director, Centre for Teaching and Learning Ronelle Arumugam, Founder and Director at Arumugam Consulting Hope Motchesane, CSRC: Social Impact Student Council: Co-Facilitator
Comfort Break		
11:30–13:30	Drama Performance	Ugood!? Group
13:30–16:30	UFS Experimental Farm Tour	
16:30–20:00	Vrystaat Arts Festival	

STUDENT - CONFERENCE DAY 3 10 July 2026

Time	Item	Person
07:45-08:30	Registration	
08:30-09:00	Welcome address	Desiree Motsele
09:00-10:00	Breakaway session	Nadia Kganakga, Senior Lecturer, School of Accountancy Lemlem Amhatsion, Lecturer, School Of Accountancy Khwezi Madlala, Chairperson of RiseOn TV Student Association
10:00-11:00	Breakaway session	Willem Ellis, Centre for Gender and Africa Studies: Co-Facilitator Mandla Simelane, United Nations Peace-builder
11:00-12:00	Breakaway session	Pholla Mbalane, Deputy Director: ISGO SRC Presidents
12:00-13:00	Lunch	
13:00-15:00	Art therapy session	Martie Miranda, Deputy Director, Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support
15:00-15:15	Closing address	Zoleka Dotwana, Director: Student Affairs, Sport, Arts and Culture

STUDENT - CONFERENCE DAY 3 10 July 2026 (Closing Dinner for Students)

Time	Item	Person
18:30-19:00	Arrival	
19:00-19:10	Musical item	Student Performance
19:10-19:20	Opening address	Hope Motchesane, CSRC: Social Impact Student Council
19:20-19:30	Introduction of keynote speaker	Thabo Mazibuko
19:30-20:00	Keynote address	Councillor Ntombi Nhlapo, MMC: Human Settlements
20:00-20:10	Musical item	Student Performance
20:10-20:20	Closing remarks	Pulane Malefane: Director of Housing and Residence Affairs



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