

Host Institution

iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu

Call for Contributions

33rd SAAIR Conference 2026

Venue:

Premier Hotel ICC, East London

Date: 13th to 16th October 2026

Main Theme: Towards a Transformative African Higher Education in the Digital Age: Equity, Ethics, and Sustainable Impact

IMPORTANT DATES AND INFORMATION

- The submission deadline for contributions:
 - Opening date: 10th June 2026
 - Closing date: 24th July 2026
 - Portal will open: 1st - 24th July 2026 <https://saair.wsu.ac.za/saair>
 - Feedback date: 14th August 2026

Acceptance/revision or rejection:

Further details will be communicated regarding the contribution submission process.

Registrations are not open yet at this stage.

For any queries related to the Conference, you can contact: Mrs Carin Strydom, at email address:

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OVERVIEW

Since its establishment in 1994, SAAIR has been committed to advancing the understanding, planning, and operational effectiveness of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Southern African region and across Africa. As part of its ongoing mission, the Association supports its members by offering capacity development and networking opportunities. Recognising the ever-changing landscape of HEIs, SAAIR strives to expose its members to diverse perspectives, research methodologies, and best practices from beyond the traditional higher education framework.

The 33rd SAAIR Conference, themed “**Towards a Transformative African Higher Education in the Digital Age: Equity, Ethics, and Sustainable Impact**” serves as a key platform advancing this commitment. The convergence of rapid technological acceleration, the rise of artificial intelligence, and a vibrant youthful demographic presents both unprecedented opportunity and profound responsibility. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the world have transcended their roles as mere repositories of knowledge; they have emerged as data-driven social actors capable of reshaping entire societies. Yet, at the heart of this evolution lie the imperatives of equity, ethics, and financial sustainability. Equity demands more than access; it requires the active redress of structural disadvantages to ensure no group is left behind. Ethics must move beyond mere compliance, interrogating the values embedded in our technology and the moral principles governing our data. Compounded by the urgency of financial sustainability and student readiness, these themes form the cornerstone of our inquiry.

The SAAIR Executive Committee established a unifying theme for all SAAIR events in 2025 and 2026, captured in the **DISCO: Data, Impact, Strategy, Capacity, and Optimisation**. These five pillars are essential for building a sustainable, data-driven future in higher education and will guide the direction of the conference and its sub-themes. The DISCO framework highlights the importance of promoting a data-driven culture where analytics and evidence inform decision-making across the sector. It emphasises impact and sustainability by designing initiatives that deliver measurable, long-term value, ensuring relevance beyond short-term cycles. The theme also focuses on strategy and policy influence, encouraging active participation in shaping institutional strategies and contributing to national and regional policy discussions. Capacity and professional development are key, with targeted initiatives designed to strengthen expertise and leadership, while exploring opportunities for formal qualifications. Lastly, optimisation and innovation are central, leveraging Artificial Intelligence, digital literacy, and emerging technologies to foster innovation and improve higher education systems.

This conference invites researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and students to explore how data-infused transformation, institutional research, management information systems, academic planning, enrolment management, and quality assurance practices can balance equity, ethics, and financial sustainability while building a resilient, inclusive, and forward-looking higher education system for Africa.

SAAIR Statement of Purpose

The SAAIR exist to fulfil the following:

- To advance research and analysis leading to the production of improved management information for understanding, planning, management, and operation of higher educational institutions and agencies.
- To encourage developing and applying appropriate methodologies and techniques from many disciplines to further such research, analysis, and planning.
- To encourage collecting, interpreting, exchanging, and disseminating information concerning higher education and its institutions.
- To further the professional development and training of individuals engaged in institutional research and analysis or interested in its utilisation in planning, management, resource allocation and improving higher education.

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SAAIR invites original, unpublished scholarly and practice-based submissions that engage with the overarching conference theme and its core sub-themes. We welcome traditional research papers as well as contributions or case studies that offer critical reflections on institutional initiatives, innovative projects, and evolving practices. Our goal is to showcase a diverse range of perspectives on how universities are actively navigating and responding to the complexities of the future of the higher education landscape in the Digital Age.

Submissions should demonstrate how data, analytical methods, and institutional research practices are applied to support understanding, planning, management, and the operation of higher education institutions. Contributions that draw on academic planning, enrolment management, quality assurance, student success, and institutional performance monitoring, using management information systems and evidence-informed approaches, are particularly encouraged. The conference further recognises the critical role of Higher Education Management Information Systems (HEMIS), institutional data governance, and operational reporting structures in enabling evidence-based decision-making within higher education institutions.

CONFERENCE SUB-THEMES

The sub-themes reflect key domains of institutional research, academic planning, enrolment management, management information systems, quality assurance, and data-driven decision-making.

Sub-Theme 1: Data for Demographic Dividends

Guiding Question: *How can data-infused systems accelerate equitable development for Africa's growing youth population?*

Africa's youthful population represents a unique opportunity for a demographic dividend, yet realising this potential requires a higher education system that is as agile as it is data informed. This sub-theme explores how data-infused systems can act as the primary engine for accelerating equitable development across the continent. The main idea is to shift from retrospective reporting to proactive, predictive models. Institutions can identify and dismantle the structural barriers, such as digital competency gaps and mismatched skill sets, that hinder student success.

We invite discussions on how data can be leveraged to personalise learning at scale, align curricula with future-of-work demands, and ensure that the digital transition empowers every student, regardless of their background, to become a catalyst for Africa's socio-economic renewal. This includes the use of management information systems and quality assurance data to monitor equity outcomes, inform enrolment planning, and evaluate the effectiveness of student success interventions. Contributions should clearly demonstrate how data is collected, analysed, and used to inform institutional planning, management, or quality assurance processes.

Topics may include:

- Using learner analytics to reduce dropout rates among marginalised youth.
- Data-driven strategies for aligning higher education with youth employment needs.
- Ethical use of demographic data in university planning.
- Enrolment planning, access strategies, and student pipeline analysis
- Leveraging HEMIS data to identify student success risk factors.

Sub-Theme 2: Ethical AI & Curriculum Futures

Guiding Question: *What does a data-infused, ethically grounded curriculum look like for every African graduate?*

As AI and automated systems become integral to the professional landscape, the curriculum must evolve from a static collection of knowledge into a dynamic, data-responsive ecosystem. This sub-theme interrogates the design of learning pathways that integrate advanced digital competencies with a robust ethical compass. A data-infused curriculum goes beyond teaching technical proficiency; it embeds critical inquiry into data sovereignty, algorithmic bias, and the social implications of AI within the African context. We seek contributions that explore how institutions can cultivate graduates who are not only technically adept in data analysis and multimedia creation but are also ethically grounded leaders. The focus is on reimagining a future-ready curriculum that balances global technological trends with local values, ensuring that every African graduate is equipped to navigate and shape a digitally complex world with integrity and social responsibility.

Contributions may include academic planning, programme review, and quality assurance processes that use institutional data to evaluate curriculum effectiveness and ensure alignment with ethical and societal priorities. Contributions should clearly demonstrate how data is collected, analysed, and applied to inform institutional planning, management, or quality assurance processes.

Topics may include:

- Embedding AI ethics across disciplines (not just computer science).
- Curriculum models that balance technical skills with moral reasoning.
- Case studies of “ethics across the curriculum” initiatives in African universities.
- Preparing graduates for an AI-augmented workplace without losing humanistic values.

Sub-Theme 3: The Societal Data Campus

Guiding Question: *When universities become data-driven social actors, how do we ensure impact serves the common good?*

This sub-theme explores the evolution of the “Societal Data Campus,” in which higher education institutions transcend traditional boundaries to become active, data-driven catalysts for public progress. As universities harness the power of big data and predictive analytics, they move beyond internal administration to address external societal challenges, from local economic development to national policymaking. The guiding question challenges us to define the mechanisms of accountability and transparency necessary to ensure that this analytical power is directed toward the common good. We seek contributions that examine how the “responsive university” can leverage its data assets to foster community engagement, promote social justice, and drive evidence-based innovation, all while maintaining the public trust and ensuring that the benefits of data-infused transformation are shared equitably across society.

This includes the development and use of management information and quality assurance frameworks for institutional performance reporting, monitoring societal impact, and supporting evidence-informed policy and planning. Contributions should clearly demonstrate how data is collected, analysed, and used to inform institutional planning, management, or quality assurance processes.

Topics may include:

- University-community partnerships that use data to address local challenges
- Governance frameworks for ethical data sharing and societal impact.
- Measuring social return on investment from data-infused university projects.
- Avoiding data extractivism: protecting student and community data rights.

Sub-Theme 4: Financial Planning & Institutional Data Resilience

Guiding Question: *How can universities use predictive data models to achieve long-term financial health while pursuing transformation?*

This sub-theme addresses the critical tension between the high costs of digital transformation and the imperative of long-term institutional stability. In an era of fluctuating subsidies and rising operational demands, data resilience becomes a foundational requirement for survival and growth. This track explores how universities can shift from reactive budgeting to proactive financial stewardship by leveraging predictive data models. Analysing longitudinal trends in student success, resource allocation, and infrastructure needs, institutions can identify efficiencies that free up capital for transformative projects. We invite research and practical frameworks that demonstrate how data-driven insights can optimise enrolment management, mitigate the financial risks of student attrition, and create sustainable funding models that allow African HEIs to remain globally competitive without compromising their social mission.

This includes the use of HEMIS data, enrolment modelling, academic planning processes, and quality assurance reporting systems to support financial sustainability and institutional decision-making. Contributions should clearly demonstrate how data is collected, analysed, and used to inform institutional planning, management, or quality assurance processes.

Topics may include:

- Predictive analytics for enrolment, retention, and revenue forecasting.
- Balancing financial sustainability with investments in digital transformation.
- Data-driven approaches to resource allocation for equity goals.
- Risk management and scenario planning using institutional data.

Sub-Theme 5: Student Employability & AI Readiness

Guiding Question: *Can data-infused internship systems bridge the gap between youth potential and AI-driven labour markets?*

This sub-theme focuses on the critical transition from the classroom to the modern workforce, examining how the “responsive university” can leverage data and emerging technology to close the persistent gap between academic preparation and industry requirements. As artificial intelligence redefines global labour markets, traditional internship models must be reimaged as data-infused ecosystems that offer more than mere work experience. Making use of data to map student competencies against real-time industry demands, higher education institutions can create personalised, high-impact placement systems that prepare the youth demographic for an AI-augmented economy. We invite explorations into how digital tracking, virtual work-integrated learning, and AI-driven career matching can empower students, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, to navigate shifting job landscapes, ensuring that youth potential is not just recognised but actively translated into sustainable, future-proof careers.

Contributions may include the use of graduate tracking systems, labour market intelligence, and quality assurance mechanisms to evaluate employability outcomes and inform academic planning and curriculum alignment. Contributions should clearly demonstrate how data is collected, analysed, and used to inform institutional planning, management, or quality assurance processes.

Topics may include:

- Platforms that match students to internships using skills and labour market data.

- Internships as spaces for developing AI literacy and ethical judgement.
- Employer-university data partnerships for real-time planning and curriculum alignment.
- Tracking graduate outcomes through longitudinal data systems.

PRESENTATION FORMATS

An invitation is extended to members of the SAAIR, as well as any interested colleagues, to respond to this call for contributions to the 2026 Conference. To assist the organisers in selecting contributions, all interested persons are kindly requested to submit the following:

1. **Register** to submit your proposal: <https://saair.wsu.ac.za/saair/>
Watch this instructional video: https://youtu.be/BGGZnR_sj0k
2. An **abstract** for inclusion in the conference programme if the proposal is successful. The format is provided below.

Submission Details:

1. **Abstract Title**
2. **Conference Sub-theme of Conference**
3. **Presentation Type** (Demonstration, Contributed Paper, Poster)
4. **Affiliation/ Institution**
5. **Keywords** (add up to 5 keywords)
6. **Abstract Content** (Abstract must be between 200-250 words)
7. **Contributors** (Lead author, co-authors, presenters etc)

Format for abstracts: Contributed Paper, Poster Presentation and Demonstration (*for inclusion in Conference booklet if accepted*):

- English language only.
- Not exceeding **250 words** in length.
- No illustrations, graphs or references should be included.

PROPOSAL EVALUATION PROCESS

Proposal evaluation is an important activity in the run-up to the annual conference. The SAAIR Exco remains committed to coordinating the evaluation process fairly, objectively, and rigorously while also considering issues such as the spread of proposals from institutions across Southern Africa and all types of institutions.

In facilitating this, the following should be noted:

1. A panel of experts will assess proposals against a pre-determined **list of quality criteria** (see below).
2. All evaluations are undertaken through a **double-blind review** process.
3. Where proposals are rated at roughly the same quality level, the evaluation committee appointed by the Exco will consider the number of proposals by an individual researcher and the type of institution to which the individual researcher(s) are affiliated to ensure a reasonable spread without neglecting the quality requirements as evaluated by the peer review panel.

4. Contributions that make a scholarly contribution to addressing the theme of the conference will be considered alongside submissions that, while not directly addressing the theme, focus on one or more of the objectives of SAAIR, namely, “to benefit, assist, and advance institutional research leading to improved understanding, planning, and operation of higher education institutions.” Both types of submissions will be equally considered for acceptance, based on their relevance and contribution to the field.

The following criteria will be used to guide the selection of presentations:

General criteria applicable to all proposals:

- Whether the proposal **links to one or more of the SAAIR’s objectives**, namely “to benefit, assist and advance institutional research leading to improved understanding, planning and operation of institutions of higher education”;
- The degree to which the proposal **links to the Conference theme** (Submissions that do not directly address the theme or sub-themes of the conference will also be considered, provided that they have a clear focus on one or more of the objectives of SAAIR);
- The overall **clarity of the proposal** (e.g., quality of writing, organisation of ideas, clarity of assumptions, logic of arguments, etc.);
- The **importance, significance and relevance of the topic and major issue(s)** addressed for institutional research; and
- The potential **significance of the contribution**.

Specific criteria applicable to contributed papers:

- Appropriateness of the theoretical or conceptual framework;
- Soundness of research design;
- Appropriateness of data sources or evidence used;
- Clarity of exposition of ideas, analyses, arguments and conclusions; and
- Evidence that the research is near completion and that the paper will be completed by the time of the conference (e.g., preliminary results).

Specific criteria applicable to posters:

- Timeliness and general interest regarding the topic;
- Appropriateness of the theoretical and methodological approaches pursued;
- Clarity of exposition of ideas, analyses, arguments and conclusions;
- Preliminary findings, conclusions and implications; and
- Quality of organisation and format of the proposed content.

Specific criteria applicable to demonstrations:

- Soundness of design;
- Appropriateness of data sources or evidence used;
- Quality of proposed content;
- Quality of organisation and format of the proposed content.

We look forward to receiving your abstracts and welcoming you to the 2026/33rd SAAIR Conference.

Sincerely,

iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu Organising Team