CHEC
Cape Higher Education Consortium

Western Cape Government
FOR YOU

HE ON TRIAL: THE PEOPLE VS HIGHER EDUCATION

Towards a Western Cape Higher Education Transformation Framework (2026–2030)

A joint initiative of The Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) and The Western Cape Government (WCG)

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Executive Summary

The “Higher Education on Trial” summit convened a diverse assembly of stakeholders—representing academia, government, industry, civil society, and international organizations—to critically examine the current state and future trajectory of the post-school education system. Utilizing a courtroom metaphor, the event placed higher education “on trial,” not to condemn it, but to interrogate its relevance, purpose, and capacity for transformation in a rapidly changing world.

The proceedings revealed a sector grappling with profound systemic challenges, from the disruptive force of artificial intelligence to the human cost of academic labor and persistent structural inequalities. The major finding of the summit is clear: higher education is not on trial because it lacks excellence; it is on trial because it has not evolved its excellence at the pace the future demands. Ultimately, the consensus pointed not toward abandonment, but toward an urgent, systemic renewal designed to absorb change and turn it into opportunity. The summit serves as the foundation for a Western Cape Higher Education Transformation Framework for 2026–2030, moving beyond diagnosis towards implementation.

Justification and Strategic Intent

Higher education globally and in South Africa is undergoing profound change. The traditional university model is under pressure from new technologies (especially AI), shifting labor markets, expanded public expectations, funding pressures, and multiplying compliance regulations. The result is a system that often appears burdened, fatigued, and insufficiently responsive to developmental realities.

HE on TRIAL was conceived as a deliberately public and developmental intervention. The courtroom metaphor created a structured space to present evidence, hear testimony, challenge viewpoints, and ask difficult questions without defensiveness. The initiative reflects a recognition that the future of higher education cannot be negotiated by universities alone. The joint leadership of CHEC (bringing academic legitimacy and convening power) and WCG (bringing developmental orientation and public-policy leverage) signals that the next era of higher education in the Western Cape must be shaped through shared stewardship.

The strategic intent is fourfold:

1. **Diagnostic:** Identify structural rather than merely operational problems.
2. **Deliberative:** Create a public space for evidence and experience.
3. **Developmental:** Move beyond critique towards co-created futures.
4. **Institution-building:** Position the Western Cape as a national leader in higher education innovation.

The Prosecution: Eight Systemic Charges

Across multiple national contexts and expert testimonies, higher education faced eight primary charges, indicating a failure to evolve at the pace demanded by the future. These charges served as a structured diagnostic frame for the summit.

Charge	Description
1. Failure to Remain Relevant (Curriculum Negligence)	Graduates leave technically qualified but underprepared for real-world complexity. Essential skills like AI, digital fluency, sustainability, and entrepreneurship are treated as peripheral rather than foundational.
2. Exploitation of Academic Labour (Unsustainable Workload)	The system relies on structural burnout. Expanding teaching, research, and compliance loads overwhelm staff, while invisible labor (mentoring, emotional support, inclusion work) goes entirely unrecognized.
3. Perpetuation of Inequality (Systemic Exclusion)	Higher education often reproduces the inequalities it claims to solve. Rural, working-class, and first-generation students carry disproportionate risk, exacerbated by unstable and opaque financial aid systems.
4. Digital and AI Unpreparedness (Technological Negligence)	Institutions are reactive rather than strategic regarding AI. With only 25% of lecturers using generative AI, the focus remains on policing misconduct rather than redesigning learning and assessment.
5. Weak Accountability to Society (Civic Dereliction)	Universities have withdrawn behind institutional walls. Knowledge production is frequently disconnected from local developmental needs, and civic engagement is treated as optional.
6. Governance Paralysis (Inhibited Innovation)	The system confuses compliance with quality. Slow decision-making, risk aversion, and excessive bureaucracy crowd out innovation, creating frameworks designed for stability rather than adaptation.
7. Misrepresentation of Value (Credential Inflation)	Rising costs do not yield proportional returns, leading to credential inflation. There is limited recognition of alternative pathways, such as micro-credentials and lifelong learning.
8. Failure to Redesign Itself (Institutional Inertia)	The system knows what is broken but fails to act. Pilot projects are rarely scaled, and dialogue occurs without resulting in meaningful redesign.

The Ultimate Charge: The system protects its form more fiercely than its purpose.

Evidence from the Panels

The summit featured four substantive panels that added conceptual depth and practical direction, analyzing the challenges through different lenses.

Panel 1: Governance, Policy, and System Design

This panel expanded the governance debate beyond a simple critique of bureaucracy. Prof. Ramon Torrent insisted that higher education must be judged in relation to context and institutional difference. Bonakele Jacobs highlighted the "two-sector problem" in South Africa, where universities and TVET colleges operate under separate legislation, resulting in fragmented student identities (the "Tintswalo" metaphor) and broken articulation pathways. Dr. Whitfield Green framed governance challenges as "complementary opposites"—tensions between autonomy and accountability, efficiency and effectiveness—arguing that the sector is currently over-regulated and under-trusted.

Panel 2: The Academic Project on Trial

This panel made the academic project visible as a human system. Dr. Delmaine Christian emphasized that institutions do not teach or research; people do. The modern academic is increasingly overloaded, navigating short-term contracts and administrative burdens. This strain is compounded by teaching in deeply unequal societies where students face severe hardships like food insecurity. Dr. Lucy Wakiaga's research underscored the gendered realities of academic work, noting that the burden of inclusion efforts often falls on individual educators without structural support.

Panel 3: Technology, AI, and Skills Mismatch

The advent of AI represents a paradigm shift. Prof. Jonathan Jansen described the AI revolution as larger than the Industrial Revolution. William T. Malik provided an expert perspective: while AI excels at identifying patterns and generating content, it cannot invent genuinely new patterns, empathize, or solve unbounded problems. "AI can't make you smarter than you were before you used it." George Webster highlighted how AI has automated labor-intensive tasks in the visual effects industry, displacing entire sectors. Minister Dr. Sukoon outlined Mauritius's proactive steps, including mandatory AI literacy and legislative amendments to recognize micro-credentials.

Panel 4: Higher Education as a Public Good (The Defence)

Despite the severe indictments, a robust defense was mounted. Prof. Teeroven Soobaryen argued against the neoliberal marketization of universities, articulating three dimensions of higher education as a public good:

- **The Intrinsic Value of Ideas:** The university remains a unique space where ideas are debated for their own sake.
- **Addressing Structural Inequality:** Higher education carries a mandate to address systemic inequalities, including epistemic inequality.
- **The Connected University:** Institutions must actively serve the state, students, employers, and civil society.

Participatory Verdict: Mentimeter Insights

Throughout the day, Mentimeter was used to gather real-time participant views, providing a compelling participatory verdict.

- **Greatest Systemic Risks:** Weak societal and economic alignment scored highest (4.2/5), followed by curriculum irrelevance (4.0) and digital/AI fragility (3.9).
- **Academic Workload:** Only one respondent described the current academic workload model as sustainable; 17 said it was not sustainable at all.
- **AI Preparedness:** Participants identified curriculum redesign cycles and assessment models as the areas where higher education is structurally least prepared for AI.
- **The Final Verdict:** Participants did not exonerate the system, nor did they condemn it as irredeemable. The strongest response was that higher education is **in urgent need of redesign** (4.0/5).
- **Form over Purpose:** When asked whether the system protects its form more than its purpose, 17 said yes, 0 said no, and 2 said maybe.

Participants were clear that transformation must not come at the expense of quality, integrity, critical thinking, and the human core of higher education. The next era should be innovative, responsive, relevant, and agile, but still human and values-based.

Strategic Priorities for a Transformation Framework

The evidence from the summit points toward a set of strategic priorities for the Western Cape Higher Education Transformation Framework (2026–2030):

- **Future Learning and Curriculum Transformation:** Faster, more modular, and interdisciplinary curriculum renewal that integrates AI, sustainability, and entrepreneurial capability. Shift from credentialism to capability.
- **The Academic Project and Workforce Renewal:** Redesign

workload models to balance teaching, research, supervision, student support, and civic work. Recognize invisible labor and support academic identity.

- **AI-Enabled but Human-Centered Learning:** Move beyond policing AI to focus on assessment redesign, staff capability, personalized learning, ethical governance, and strengthening human judgment.
- **Equity, Articulation, and Lifelong Pathways:** Build stronger pathways between universities, TVET colleges, and industry. Expand micro-credentials, stackable learning, and modular progression.
- **Public Value, Partnerships, and Regional Development:** Foster the "connected university" with deeper, more visible engagement with communities, local economies, city systems, SMEs, and provincial development priorities.
- **Governance, Policy, and System Agility:** Reform regulation and quality assurance to become more enabling, better coordinated, and future-oriented, reducing bureaucracy that stifles innovation.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

The jury resists a simple verdict. Higher education is too complex, too varied, and too context-dependent for a single judgment. The recommendation is that **the trial must be permanent and ongoing** — universities and society must continuously hold higher education accountable, but with the intellectual rigour and nuance the subject demands. Simplification is the real enemy of reform. HE on TRIAL has shown that the higher education debate in the Western Cape is ready to move beyond slogans. The sector does not lack critique; it lacks redesign. Higher education remains essential and retains immense public value, but it is under structural strain and increasingly misaligned with the world it now inhabits. The joint role of CHEC and WCG is central to what happens next. Together, they provide the platform, legitimacy, and coordination needed to move from dialogue to a practical agenda for implementation. The future of higher education will not be secured by defending the forms we inherited, but by renewing them in service of the purpose we cannot afford to lose. The verdict is clear: not reaction, but redesign.

Addendum 1: Summary of Keynote Address on South African Higher Education

Summary of Keynote Address on South African Higher Education

This document summarizes a keynote address delivered by **Professor Jonathan Jansen** regarding the current state and future challenges of the higher education sector in South Africa.

Key Themes and Criticisms

Professor Jansen presented a critical view of South African universities, arguing that they are failing to adapt to modern challenges and are "asleep at the wheel." He outlined three primary concerns:

1. The Impact of Artificial Intelligence

Jansen argued that AI represents a revolution larger than the Industrial Revolution, yet universities are failing to integrate it effectively. Instead of embracing AI, institutions initially attempted to ban devices like cell phones to prevent cheating, focusing solely on assessment integrity. He criticized the traditional lecture format (one person talking for 30 minutes) as outdated for the 21st century. Jansen advocated for incorporating AI into the classroom, noting that AI struggles with nuance and deep context, which should be the focus of higher-level academic inquiry.

2. Xenophobia and the Attack on Foreign Talent

A significant portion of the address focused on the hostility towards foreign academics in South Africa. Jansen strongly condemned the attacks on foreign talent, emphasizing that universities thrive on diverse perspectives and international collaboration. He argued that the concept of a "scarce skill" is inappropriate for

academia, which relies on intellectual diversity rather than factory-like metrics. He highlighted the crucial contributions of foreign academics to South African research, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, and warned that xenophobia is "killing the academic enterprise."

3. Violent Protests and the Threat to Public Universities

Jansen expressed deep concern over the "unremitting violence" occurring across South Africa's 26 public universities. While supporting the constitutional right to protest, he strongly condemned the destruction of property and the disruption of classes, labelling such actions as fascism. He warned that the instability caused by violent protests is driving middle-class students (both black and white) towards private higher education options. This migration, he argued, deprives public universities of the financial support needed to maintain infrastructure, potentially leaving them as "empty shells" in the future.

The Rise of Private Higher Education

During the Q&A session, the discussion turned to the rapid expansion of private higher education providers in Africa. It was noted that while 300,000 students qualify for university in South Africa, public institutions can only accommodate 100,000. This massive gap is being filled by private entities, which are highly profitable and boast high employment rates for their graduates (95%), contrasting sharply with the dropout rates at state universities.

Conclusion

Professor Jansen concluded his address with a stark warning that the higher education sector must face its "terrible state" honestly and without excuses. He called for a fundamental shift in how universities operate, urging them to embrace technological change, protect international talent, and ensure campus stability to secure their future relevance and survival.

Addendum 2: Photo Gallery

Nezaam Joseph (left front)
WCG

Members of the Jury

Speakers and panelists

80 in person attendees and 200 online

Prof Eugene Cloete
CEO - CHEC

Mbali Williams

Prof Stan du Plessis
CEO - Stadio

Melissa Parker
WCG

Deidre Samson

John Lawson
CEO - Cape Chamber

Prof R Pellissier
CHEC

Bonakele Jacobs

Prof Pellissier and
Prof J Jansen

Addendum 3: Summary of speaker presentations

Bonakele Jacobs (Director: TVET Curriculum and Institutional Support)

Post-School Education on Trial — Governance, Articulation and the Student Journey

This is a speech delivered in the South African post-school education context, addressing the relationship between **universities** and **TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) colleges**, and the systemic failures that prevent the two sectors from functioning as a coherent national system. The speaker frames the address around three charges — **integrity, competency, and relevance** — and argues that the central challenge binding all three together is **articulation**.

The Two-Sector Problem

South Africa's post-school education system operates under two distinct legislative frameworks:

- **Universities** fall under the Higher Education Act of 1997, enjoying significant institutional autonomy. Councils oversee strategy, finances, and reputation, while Senates protect academic quality.
- **TVET Colleges** operate under the Continuing Education and Training Act of 2006, with far more limited autonomy. Staffing, salary structures, and programme approvals remain largely centralised within the national Department.

This structural asymmetry creates a system running in **two different gears** — universities moving with agility and independence, while TVET colleges navigate operational constraints that limit their responsiveness. Both sectors, however, share common governance weaknesses: council interference, factional battles, blurred lines between oversight and administration, and in the TVET sector, persistent capacity gaps and councils drifting into operational and HR matters.

The Central Charge: Articulation

The speaker identifies **articulation** — the recognition of learning gained in one part

of the system within another — as the single most critical and most neglected challenge in post-school education. It is described as the promise made to every student that their qualifications will open doors, not close them.
In practice, that promise is routinely broken:

- University qualification frameworks and TVET programme offerings are developed in **isolation**, with limited pathways for vertical or horizontal student movement.
- Many National Certificate Vocational (NCV) and N-level graduates find their qualifications lead to **dead ends** at university gates.
- As TVET programmes are phased out and replaced by occupational programmes under the QCTO, the risk of students being left behind grows without coordinated institutional responses.

The speaker poses a direct challenge to institutions in the **Western Cape** specifically: how should universities, TVET colleges, the provincial government, and the Council on Higher Education position themselves to build a **provincial articulation platform** — a unified skills ecosystem rather than a collection of separate entities?

The Autonomy and Trust Gap

Universities approach articulation cautiously, citing the need to protect academic quality. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is inconsistent and varies widely across institutions, making articulation dependent on institutional goodwill rather than national policy. At the same time, low throughput rates in TVET programmes — particularly for NCV — fuel resistance from the university sector. The speaker is clear: **articulation cannot succeed without trust, and trust must be earned through consistent quality.**

The Story of Tintswalo: A Governance Metaphor

The speaker invokes the story of **Tintswalo**, cited by the President in 2024 to celebrate 30 years of democracy — a young woman who moved from an RDP house through education and into employment. The speaker reframes this story as a governance failure: the moment Tintswalo entered the education system, her identity became **fragmented**. In basic education she was a CEMIS number; at university, a HEMIS number; at a TVET college, a COLTECH number — yet Home Affairs tracks her seamlessly with a single ID number throughout her life.
This fragmentation makes it impossible to track student pathways, monitor progression, or design effective interventions. The speaker argues that **a single national student identifier**, following a learner from early childhood development through to employment, is not an IT project — it is a **governance project** essential for transparency and accountability.

A Governance-Led Articulation Agenda

The speaker closes with a set of concrete proposals:

Sector	Proposed Action
Universities	Approve transparent RPL frameworks; establish joint curriculum tables with TVET colleges to map learning outcomes and clear pathways
TVET Colleges	Hard-wire quality monitoring into council scorecards; prioritise lecturer development, assessment integrity, and internal moderation
System-wide	Adopt a formal **compact on credit transfer** standardising admission of learning across institutions
High-performing institutions	Grant **calibrated autonomy** — greater decision-making powers to institutions demonstrating governance excellence
Digital infrastructure	Invest in a **single national student identifier** spanning ECD through to employment

Conclusion

The speaker closes with a call to collective responsibility: universities must protect their standards ***and*** open their doors; TVET colleges must build the quality that earns trust; and the Department must provide the systems and leadership that bring coherence to the landscape. The ultimate goal is not merely to survive the trial of public opinion, but to **restore public trust and accelerate national development** by aligning governance structures with the real pathways that students actually follow.

Dr Delmaine Christians (MP) The Human Cost of Higher Education Under Strain

This is a speech that shifts the lens of the "higher education on trial" debate away from institutions and systems, and firmly onto **the people who sustain those institutions** — academics and students. The central argument is that the academic project is not failing because it is irrelevant, but because it is being asked to do more with less, in an environment of growing complexity and shrinking support.

The Invisible Crisis: The Overloaded Academic

The speaker opens by painting a vivid portrait of the modern academic — someone on a short-term contract, answering emails at midnight, trying to publish, supervise students, and hold everything together simultaneously. Even senior academics who entered the profession believing in scholarship, public purpose, and intellectual freedom now find themselves buried under **performance metrics, administrative overload, and an unsustainable pace of work** that leaves little room for deep thinking.

The critical insight here is that **institutions do not teach, publish, or supervise — people do.** And those people are increasingly exhausted, uncertain, and invisible in the reform conversation. Policy debates focus heavily on student access and success rates, but the workload, supervision capacity, and working conditions of academics are rarely discussed. When academic work becomes fragmented, rushed, and over-measured, something deeper is lost: the time to think, to mentor, and to engage meaningfully with knowledge.

The South African Context: Teaching in a Wounded Society

The speaker sharpens the argument through the South African lens. Universities here do not operate in a neutral environment — they operate in a society marked by **deep inequality, unemployment, and historical divides**. Many students depend on NSFAS funding, and with funding come cascading problems: accommodation pressures, food insecurity, and mental health challenges. A hungry or food-insecure student is not simply facing a welfare issue — they are facing an **academic barrier**. This means the academic standing in front of that student is not merely delivering content. They are navigating the intersection between knowledge and a student's lived reality — often for students who are the **first in their families** to enter higher education. The university, and the academic, carry a weight that extends far beyond the classroom. Yet the institutional and financial support required to carry that weight is shrinking.

The AI Question: Adaptation Without Support

The speaker acknowledges the arrival of AI as an undeniable force reshaping

higher education, but reframes the question: it is not *whether* AI will change higher education, but **whether academics are being supported to adapt thoughtfully**. Many colleagues, the speaker notes, are not embracing AI to its full potential — not out of fear, but because they are navigating its complexity without adequate training or guidance. The risk is that AI simply adds another layer of pressure onto an already stretched system rather than relieving it. Crucially, the speaker defends the irreplaceable human role in education: students still need to learn how to think, question, argue, exercise judgment, and engage with complexity — capacities that AI cannot yet offer. That work is still carried by academics.

The Real Verdict: Not Abandonment, but Renewal

The speaker proposes that higher education must be judged on four dimensions simultaneously:

Dimension	What It Means
Access	Are there enough spaces for students exiting basic education?
Success	Entry without completion is a broken promise — throughput must improve
Dignity	Students need dignified accommodation; academics need the tools to teach
Intellectual Depth	Thinking must not be rushed, oversimplified, or outsourced

The verdict, the speaker concludes, **cannot be abandonment**. The academic project has not lost its value — if anything, in a world of noise, speed, and uncertainty, the ability to think carefully, question deeply, and engage responsibly with knowledge has become **more essential than ever**.

The verdict must be **renewal** — a renewal that:

- Supports not only access, but the conditions that make success possible
- Protects the space for genuine thinking, teaching, and meaningful research
- Ensures that both students and academics can still believe in the purpose of what they are doing

"The project is not only about knowledge — it is about whether a young person entering higher education today, and an academic standing in front of them, can still believe that what they are doing matters. That is the test. That is the responsibility."

Dr Lucy Wakiaga Inclusion, Gender, and the Human Realities of Academic Work in Africa

This speech draws on two active research projects to ground its argument in **evidence rather than assertion**, before turning to the structural and human pressures facing academics — with a particular focus on **gender, inclusion, and the realities of academic work in the African higher education context**.

Grounding the Argument: Two Research Projects

Project 1 — Pedagogies of Inclusion (Completed) This two-part study examined the nexus between gender, pedagogy, and STEM in higher education institutions across Africa, drawing evidence from 98 studies. Key findings include:

- Women remain persistently **underrepresented in STEM** fields due to a combination of social, cultural, institutional, and psychological factors — including stereotypes, limited role models, and hostile learning environments.
- Most existing studies focus on **student participation** rather than on **pedagogical interventions**, which is a significant gap in the literature.
- Bridging courses and extended programmes show improvements in access and confidence, particularly for women in STEM — but these tend to be **add-ons rather than systematically integrated** into mainstream curricula.
- Academic staff require **professional development** to exercise inclusion more deliberately; gender-responsive teaching practices cannot be implemented without building educator capacity.
- Case studies across Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe identified promising practices including community engagement, access programmes, strengthened institutional policies, and curriculum reform.

Project 2 — HERIA Africa (Ongoing) The *Harnessing Education Research for Impacting Africa* initiative is a pan-African project aimed at strengthening Africa-led, university-based education research to drive policy, practice, and societal transformation. The urgency is underscored by a stark data point: **Africa produces only 2–3% of global education research**, yet is home to 19% of the world's population — and by 2050, nearly 40% of new entrants to the global labour market will be young Africans. The initiative addresses systemic challenges including weak funding (90% of research funding is external, meaning African voices are largely absent from the decision-making table), fragmented research agendas, limited institutional capacity, and poor uptake of research in policy. The ambitious goal: by 2050, Africa will contribute **30% of global education knowledge**, informing real-time educational and societal change.

Charges Against Higher Education: Structural and Human Pressures

Building on this research foundation, the speaker identifies several interconnected charges:

1. Teaching as Undervalued Labour
Despite institutional rhetoric about teaching excellence, academics face enormous teaching loads with little recognition or remuneration proportional to the effort involved. The "publish or perish" imperative coexists with crushing teaching demands — yet teaching is systematically undervalued relative to research output.

2. The Policy-Practice Gap Institutions may declare themselves gender-inclusive or student-centred, but these policies rarely translate into classroom practice. The burden of interpretation, implementation, and operationalisation falls on individual academics — without adequate support, capacity building, or resourcing. This creates **implementation pressure and ambiguity**.

3. Emotional and Relational Labour
Academics carry significant **psychosocial strain** — they are expected to deliver content while simultaneously supporting students facing financial hardship, mental health challenges, and social exclusion. In STEM classrooms specifically, women students face active bias from both peers and educators: they are assigned menial tasks while male students engage in the intellectual work of the classroom. This is exclusion embedded in daily practice, not just in policy.

4. Gendered Realities of Research
Female academics must balance research demands with caregiving responsibilities — the **"second shift"** — which directly impacts the quality and volume of their scholarly output. Persistent gender bias and harassment exist even at the institutional leadership level, and academic environments are not always safe or equitable spaces.

5. Fragmented Inclusion Efforts
Inclusion remains the responsibility of the individual educator rather than a systemic institutional commitment. The burden of bridging the inclusion gap falls on the person in the classroom, without structural support, advocacy systems, or institutional accountability.

Conclusion:
What Institutions Must Do
The speaker closes with three clear institutional imperatives:

Action	Purpose
Recognise and reward teaching and inclusion work	End the structural devaluation of teaching relative to research
Provide structural support for pedagogy and research	Move inclusion from individual burden to institutional responsibility
Invest in academic staff development	Build the capacity needed to implement gender-responsive, inclusive practice

Without these changes, the speaker warns, the system risks **burnout, superficial policy compliance, and persistent inequality** — in both staff and student experiences. The central takeaway is that academic work is **deeply human work**: it involves care, identity, social negotiation, and continuous adaptation. It cannot be treated as a mechanical or administrative function without profound cost to the people who carry it and the students who depend on them.

George Webster
AI in the Visual Effects Industry

Speaker Background

George Webster is an award-winning **Visual Effects (VFX) Supervisor** in the film industry. He studied advertising and was an early adopter of 3D animation in 1999, even being failed by his school for using it before it was on the syllabus — only for his peers to later intern at his animation studio.

His Role as a VFX Supervisor

job has two main components: consulting on film sets to prevent costly post-production problems, and collaborating in the studio with artists and directors to realise a creative vision — essentially acting as a translator between technical tools and the director's language.

Practical AI Use Cases in VFX

Use Case	Traditional Approach	With AI
De-aging actors (e.g., *Regretting You* with Dave Franco & Scott Eastwood)	1–2 days of manual painting per frame	Train a model on a few painted frames; apply to entire video automatically
Rotoscoping / masking (separating subjects from backgrounds)	Days to weeks of manual frame-by-frame work; entire industry outsourced to India at ~$100/second	One-click automation in DaVinci Resolve (free software)
Depth maps for 3D film conversion	Manual rotoscoping of every layer	AI generates depth maps automatically
Lip-sync dubbing (used by Netflix)	Not previously feasible at scale	Deep fake technology syncs lips to dubbed audio in any language

Historical AI: Lord of the Rings Crowd System (c. 2000)

George noted that AI in film predates modern neural networks. The crowd simulation system used for *The Lord of the Rings* battle scenes was built on **fuzzy logic**, where thousands of individual characters each had their own depth perception, pattern recognition, and motion library. None of the battle choreography was hand-animated. Famously, on the first test render, the Hobbits "got scared and ran home" — an early sign of emergent AI behaviour.

The Broader Impact on Jobs and Education

On employment: George acknowledged that AI is not merely reducing individual jobs but has effectively displaced **entire industries** — specifically, India's large rotoscoping sector, which has seen a dramatic collapse in work due to a single automated tool.

On the future of creative careers: He advised steering away from **labour-intensive, lower-skill creative tasks** (e.g., standard graphic design) which are highly vulnerable to automation. Work requiring **intuition, taste, and high-level creative judgment** is safer for now. He cited Ben Affleck's view that AI outputs represent a statistical ***average*** — talented individuals who produce exceptional work will remain valuable, while average output will be replaced.
On higher education: He acknowledged the challenge educators face: curriculum reform is slow, yet the pace of AI disruption is rapid. His advice was to identify which tasks within a profession AI can easily replicate, and redesign curricula to focus on higher-order skills that oversee or manage those automated processes. He suggested that a higher education qualification still provides a meaningful edge over those whose work sits at the more automatable end of the spectrum.

The Hollywood Strike and Image Rights

George recounted being on set for *G20* (starring Viola Davis, a director of the Actors Guild) when the 2023 Hollywood strike was called via SMS. The strike centred on renegotiating contracts around **AI ownership of actors' images and voices**. He described a real incident where a stunt performer refused a 3D scan despite a signed contract, halting production — illustrating the live tension around image ownership. He also mentioned that the late **Burt Reynolds'** family signed an agreement for him to appear posthumously in a film using AI.

Key Takeaway for Educators

The moderator concluded that the film industry serves as a **leading-edge case study** for how AI disrupts any industry — eliminating certain roles while enabling entirely new capabilities. The lesson for higher education is to proactively identify vulnerable skill sets and redesign programmes around human judgment, creativity, and oversight rather than task execution.

Prof Teeroven Soobaryen (Aston Business School) Summary: Higher Education as a Public Good — A Defence from the Business School

This speech offers a thoughtful, somewhat personal defence of higher education, delivered by an academic from a Business School background with experience across Mauritius, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. Rather than adding to the prosecution's case, the speaker mounts a **defence of higher education's enduring public value** — while honestly acknowledging its failures and the corrosive effects of marketisation.

Setting the Context: Why Are We Still Here?

The speaker opens with a reflective question: given everything that has been said about the failures, pressures, and dysfunctions of higher education, **why do so many academics remain committed to it?** There must be something worth defending. The speaker's own journey — from accountancy in Mauritius, to further study, to a career spanning developmental universities and UK research institutions — grounds the argument in lived experience rather than abstraction.

The Problem of Neoliberal Marketisation

Drawing on over 25 years in UK higher education, the speaker describes the **marketisation of universities** as "astoundingly problematic" in its reach and depth. Higher education has been progressively transformed into a system of metrics and measurements:

- Student satisfaction scores
- Student progression rates
- Graduate salary outcomes
- Number of publications
- Value of research grants

The speaker — an accountant by training — uses the accountant's own language to make the critique: the system has become obsessed with **what is being counted rather than what counts**. This is not a peripheral concern; it affects every dimension of academic and institutional life. The UK higher education system is, at the time of speaking, facing what the speaker calls a "watershed moment" — massive funding changes and decline across the board.

Higher Education as a Public Good: Three Dimensions

Against this backdrop, the speaker makes a positive case for what universities are still for, organised around three dimensions of public good:

1. The Intrinsic Value of Ideas The most fundamental defence of the university is that it remains one of the few spaces in society where ideas are debated for their own sake — not because they lead to a product, a job, or a policy outcome, but because the **construction and sharing of knowledge is intrinsically valuable**.

Whether it is a professor and a doctoral student, or an undergraduate cohort engaging with their lecturers daily, this exchange has worth in itself. The speaker notes with concern that this kind of mature, disinterested intellectual debate is becoming increasingly rare and increasingly taken for granted — and that AI, being statistically driven, is fundamentally incapable of replacing it. AI can produce the average of a thousand ideas; it cannot produce the singular, resonant idea of one human mind.

2. Addressing Structural Inequality Higher education, as a public good, carries a mandate to address **systemic, historical, and structural inequality** — inequality of access, inequality of voice, and inequality of opportunity. The speaker acknowledges this is a difficult burden to place on a single institution, and that universities are not performing this role particularly well. But the mandate remains legitimate and important. In the UK, this takes the form of a formal social mobility mandate. The speaker also raises **epistemic inequality** — the question of whose knowledge counts, and whether knowledge construction has been too narrowly defined by Western, international frameworks, to the exclusion of other ways of knowing.

3. The Connected University Higher education must shed its image as an ivory tower — disconnected from society, inaccessible, and self-referential. The speaker argues for a **connected university** that recognises the context in which it operates and actively serves the state, students, employers, and civil society. This is not a new idea, but it remains unrealised in too many institutions.

The AI Question: A Humanist Concern

The speaker expresses genuine discomfort with the uncritical embrace of AI in higher education — not from a position of technophobia, but from a philosophical concern about what AI is structurally incapable of doing. Because AI is fundamentally **statistical** in nature, it can only produce what already exists in aggregated form. The singular, dissenting, or genuinely novel idea — the kind that changes how we think — will never emerge from a large language model. In a university setting, the idea of **one person** can still have profound resonance. That possibility must be protected.

Conclusion

The speech does not offer a verdict of acquittal. The speaker is candid that universities are not performing well on many of the charges laid against them. But the defence rests on this: higher education still holds something that no other institution in society holds — the space for the **intrinsic debate of ideas**, the mandate to address **deep structural inequality**, and the potential to be a **genuinely connected public institution**. These are worth defending, worth reforming, and worth remaining committed to — even in the face of everything that is broken.

William T. Malik (Cybersecurity Consultant, USA)
What AI Can and Cannot Do — An Expert Witness Perspective

This is a concise, technically grounded speech delivered by someone with deep roots in the field of AI — having studied at MIT under pioneers such as Seymour Papert and Pat Winston, and having watched the evolution of AI across multiple decades. The speaker positions himself not as an advocate but as an **expert witness**, offering a clear-eyed account of AI's genuine capabilities and its fundamental limitations.

What AI Can Do

The speaker provides a precise inventory of AI's actual capabilities:

- **Identify the centre of a dataset** — finding averages, trends, and trajectories within a body of data
- **Categorise, rank, and classify** elements within a defined population
- **Play games** at superhuman levels (chess, Go)
- **Blend artistic styles** — for example, rendering an image in the style of a particular painter
- **Mimic language behaviour** — the earliest example being ELIZA (1966), which did nothing more than flip declarative sentences into questions and flag emotionally loaded words, yet convinced users they were speaking to a therapist
- **Generate content** at scale — essays, poems, marketing assessments, competitive intelligence reports
- **Assist in complex physical tasks** — the speaker's most compelling example is a bariatric surgeon using robotic-assisted AI that compensates in real time for the patient's breathing and heartbeat, allowing smaller incisions, faster healing, and more precise outcomes
- **Support cybersecurity** — aggregating logs, modelling attack scenarios against digital twins, and drafting threat assessments

What AI Cannot Do

This is the more important half of the argument, and the speaker is emphatic:

- **It cannot invent new patterns or produce genuinely novel content.** If trained on Beethoven's first eight symphonies, it cannot compose the ninth. If trained on 153 of Shakespeare's sonnets, it will never write the 154th — and if it produces something that did not appear in the training data, that is classified as a **hallucination**, not creativity.
- **It cannot empathize.** The speaker flags serious legal cases in which young people, believing they were speaking to a therapist through a generative AI system, were led to harm themselves or others.
- **It cannot solve unbounded problems.** AI performs well on problems with a defined, closed population of possible answers. It

flails on open-ended, genuinely novel challenges.

- **It cannot make you smarter than you already are.** This is the speaker's sharpest and most repeated point, illustrated through two analogies:
  - Give computer-aided design tools to a skilled architect — excellent results. Give the same tools to a neighbourhood handyman — you get pretty drawings, but the toilet still blocks.
  - Give a skilled robotic surgical assistant to an untrained person — they will cause harm.

The quality of AI output is entirely dependent on the quality of human judgment governing it. The speaker's own firm uses AI successfully only because all team members have over ten years of industry experience and their prompts run to dozens of pages per case.

AI in Education: A Practical Reframe

Rather than banning AI from classrooms, the speaker endorses a creative pedagogical approach. A colleague in Manhattan asks students to use AI to generate an essay on how they spent their summer, then **critique the output**: Was the voice authentic? Did it represent how they actually felt? Was it genuine? This reframes AI as a **teaching tool for critical thinking** rather than a threat to academic integrity.
Similarly, AI can serve as a **contributing member of a brainstorming session** — not a recording secretary, but an active participant whose contributions students then evaluate and challenge.

AI in Society and the Workforce

The speaker identifies two dominant areas of AI impact in society: **entertainment and political manipulation**. The use of deep fakes for embarrassment or non-consensual pornographic content is described as "deeply troubling." Cambridge Analytica-style personality profiling through AI is noted as powerful, useful in competitive intelligence, but requiring very close governance.
In the workforce, beyond surgery, the speaker notes the use of **augmented reality glasses** to help technicians detect flaws and perform preventative maintenance on aircraft engines and petrochemical infrastructure — AI as a precision tool in the hands of skilled professionals.

The Core Message

"AI can't make you smarter than you were before you used it."
AI is a powerful tool for bounded, well-defined problems in the hands of skilled, experienced practitioners. It is not a substitute for human judgment, creativity, empathy, or the capacity to navigate genuinely novel and open-ended challenges. The danger lies not in the technology itself, but in the **misapplication of it by those who do not understand its limits** — and in higher education's failure to teach students how to govern it, question it, and work with it responsibly.

Prof Ramon Torrent (President, OBREAL Global) Higher Education on Trial — A Nuanced Critique

This is a transcript of a keynote address arguing that while higher education deserves scrutiny, any fair judgment must account for enormous complexity. The speaker — an experienced academic — structures the talk around **three preliminary cautions**, **two political framing issues**, and **three substantive counts of indictment**.

Three Cautions Before Judging

The speaker insists that blanket verdicts on higher education are intellectually dishonest without first recognising three layers of complexity:

1. **Context matters enormously.** The role and value of higher education differs radically depending on a country's socioeconomic and demographic conditions. In Nigeria or Ethiopia, where access is still expanding, universities serve as powerful engines of social promotion. In wealthier, more educated societies, that same justification no longer holds — the purpose must be reframed.
2. **Not all higher education is the same.** Medical schools, engineering faculties, and social science departments serve entirely different societal functions and cannot be judged by a single standard.
3. **Universities themselves are deeply varied.** Institutions differ by size, resources, student composition, and mission. Generalised verdicts obscure more than they reveal.

Two Political Framing Issues

Before issuing any verdict, two underlying political assumptions must be made explicit:

1. **Is education investment or consumption?** The speaker argues that education is both — a social investment *and* a legitimate form of individual and collective consumption. Demanding a narrow, measurable financial return misunderstands the vast positive externalities that education generates for society.
2. **Who is really responsible for skills mismatches?** The speaker challenges the assumption that education alone is to blame when graduates are unemployable. Poor-quality, non-innovative companies that do not seek or reward well-educated workers share equal responsibility. The economy must also be put on trial.

Three Counts of Indictment

Count 1 — Teaching and Learning

The central failure is that most university lecturers never ask themselves: *"What am I teaching for?"* Universities still position lecturers as monopolistic providers of knowledge — a role made obsolete by the internet. The speaker advocates for **problem-based learning**, where teachers guide students through real

community problems, building knowledge organically. Learning, he stresses, happens far more through doing, debating, and self-directed inquiry than through passive classroom attendance.

Count 2 — The Research Illusion Most universities in the world — particularly in resource-constrained contexts — do not have the libraries, infrastructure, or adequately paid staff to conduct meaningful research. Yet they all claim "research excellence." The speaker's charge is direct: **replace the aspiration of research with the more achievable and equally valuable goal of innovation.** Innovation requires curiosity, willingness, and creativity — not expensive laboratories. It is within reach of every university.

Count 3 — Failure to Access International Development Funding When universities engage internationally, they focus narrowly on joint degrees, student mobility, and research partnerships. They **ignore the enormous pool of international development cooperation funding** — money allocated for agriculture, entrepreneurship, environmental challenges, and community development — which instead flows to private consultancy firms. Universities do not feel empowered to compete for this funding, and this represents a major missed opportunity for social impact.

Conclusion

The speaker resists a simple verdict. Higher education is too complex, too varied, and too context-dependent for a single judgment. His recommendation is that **the trial must be permanent and ongoing** — universities and society must continuously hold higher education accountable, but with the intellectual rigour and nuance the subject demands. Simplification is the real enemy of reform.

Summary: Inclusion, Gender, and the Human Realities of Academic Work in Africa

This speech draws on two active research projects to ground its argument in **evidence rather than assertion**, before turning to the structural and human pressures facing academics — with a particular focus on **gender, inclusion, and the realities of academic work in the African higher education context**.

Grounding the Argument: Two Research Projects

Project 1 — Pedagogies of Inclusion (Completed) This two-part study examined the nexus between gender, pedagogy, and STEM in higher education institutions across Africa, drawing evidence from 98 studies. Key findings include:

- Women remain persistently **underrepresented in STEM** fields due to a combination of social, cultural, institutional, and psychological factors — including stereotypes, limited role models, and hostile learning environments.
- Most existing studies focus on **student participation** rather than on **pedagogical interventions**, which is a significant gap in the literature.
- Bridging courses and extended programmes show improvements in access and confidence, particularly for women in STEM — but these tend to be **add-ons rather than systematically integrated** into mainstream curricula.
- Academic staff require **professional development** to exercise inclusion more deliberately; gender-responsive teaching practices cannot be implemented without building educator capacity.
- Case studies across Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe identified promising practices including community engagement, access programmes, strengthened institutional policies, and curriculum reform.

Project 2 — HERIA Africa (Ongoing)
The *Harnessing Education Research for Impacting Africa* initiative is a pan-African project aimed at strengthening Africa-led, university-based education research to drive policy, practice, and societal transformation. The urgency is underscored by a stark data point: **Africa produces only 2–3% of global education research**, yet is home to 19% of the world's population — and by 2050, nearly 40% of new entrants to the global labour market will be young Africans. The initiative addresses systemic challenges including weak funding (90% of research funding is external, meaning African voices are largely absent from the decision-making table), fragmented research agendas, limited institutional capacity, and poor uptake of research in policy. The ambitious goal: by 2050, Africa will contribute **30% of global education knowledge**, informing real-time educational and societal change.

Charges Against Higher Education: Structural and Human Pressures
Building on this research foundation, the speaker identifies several interconnected charges:

1. Teaching as Undervalued Labour
Despite institutional rhetoric about teaching excellence, academics face enormous teaching loads with little recognition or remuneration proportional to the effort involved. The "publish or perish" imperative coexists with crushing teaching demands — yet teaching is systematically undervalued relative to research output.

2. The Policy-Practice Gap Institutions may declare themselves gender-inclusive or student-centred, but these policies rarely translate into classroom practice. The burden of interpretation, implementation, and operationalisation falls on individual academics — without adequate support, capacity building, or resourcing. This creates **implementation pressure and ambiguity**.

3. Emotional and Relational Labour
Academics carry significant **psychosocial strain** — they are expected to deliver content while simultaneously supporting students facing financial hardship, mental health challenges, and social exclusion. In STEM classrooms specifically, women students face active bias from both peers and educators: they are assigned menial tasks while male students engage in the intellectual work of the classroom. This is exclusion embedded in daily practice, not just in policy.

4. Gendered Realities of Research
Female academics must balance research demands with caregiving responsibilities — the **"second shift"** — which directly impacts the quality and volume of their scholarly output. Persistent gender bias and harassment exist even at the institutional leadership level, and academic environments are not always safe or equitable spaces.

5. Fragmented Inclusion Efforts
Inclusion remains the responsibility of the individual educator rather than a systemic institutional commitment. The burden of bridging the inclusion gap falls on the person in the classroom, without structural support, advocacy systems, or institutional accountability.

Conclusion:
What Institutions Must Do
The speaker closes with three clear institutional imperatives:

Action	Purpose
Recognise and reward teaching and inclusion work	End the structural devaluation of teaching relative to research
Provide structural support for pedagogy and research	Move inclusion from individual burden to institutional responsibility
Invest in academic staff development	Build the capacity needed to implement gender-responsive, inclusive practice

Without these changes, the speaker warns, the system risks **burnout, superficial policy compliance, and persistent inequality** — in both staff and student experiences. The central takeaway is that academic work is **deeply human work**: it involves care, identity, social negotiation, and continuous adaptation. It cannot be treated as a mechanical or administrative function without profound cost to the people who carry it and the students who depend on them.

Summary: AI, Higher Education, and the Failure to Adapt

This is a lively, candid speech that puts higher education on trial specifically for its **failure to understand, adopt, and integrate Artificial Intelligence** — arguing that the sector has had the time, the knowledge, and the resources to adapt, but chose comfort over courage.
The Opening Provocation
The speaker anchors the entire address in a quote from 1983:
"We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented yet, in order to solve problems we don't even know about."

The point is that this warning is now **more urgent than ever** — yet higher education has responded with the same inertia it always has. The speaker's metaphor is sharp: universities are asking students to compete in a Formula One race while training them on bicycles, taught by teachers who have never seen a car.

Understanding AI: Three Models
The speaker cuts through the noise by introducing three operational models of AI in the world of work:

Model	Description	Risk
AI-Enabled	Humans augmented by AI tools	Efficiency gains; jobs preserved
AI-First	AI leads, humans support	Some job displacement
AI-Only	Full automation, no human role	Significant job loss

The speaker also distinguishes between **narrow AI** (designed for specific tasks — translation, weather modelling, voice recognition) and **generative AI** (large language models trained on vast datasets of text, images, video, and code). He notes bluntly that large language models are "the biggest copyright fraud in the world" — having consumed published works without author consent — and dismisses concepts like Artificial General Intelligence and Artificial Super Intelligence as distractions not worth academic attention.

The Two Charges: Management and Computer Science Departments

The speaker directs his indictment at two specific groups within universities:

1. University Management Leadership has been slow to adopt digitisation even within their own offices. The logical chain is simple: if management does not understand AI, universities will not adopt it; if universities do not adopt it, students will not benefit; if students do not benefit, society will not benefit. Only **25% of academic lecturers** are currently using generative AI — a figure the speaker calls "very, very sad."

2. Computer Science Departments Despite being the fastest-growing discipline in history, computer science departments at South African universities cap enrolment at 300–500 students — while English departments comfortably accommodate over 1,000. The speaker argues this is both **lazy and negligent**. Critically, the digital revolution — from the desktop era to the smartphone — did not happen ***because*** of computer science departments; it happened ***despite*** them. Now, with AI embedded in every device and platform, these departments are still not scaling, not empowering other faculties, and not leading the institutional response.

Reimagining Assessment and Teaching in the AI Era

Rather than policing AI use among students, the speaker advocates for **creative adaptation**. If a student can complete an assignment using AI for free, the answer is not punishment — it is redesigning assessment to test **critical thinking and judgment**. His practical suggestion: instead of marking 600 written assignments, get 200 students to present and defend their work. This shifts assessment from output verification to intellectual engagement, and has the

added benefit of making students talk and listen to each other.

The Missing Variable: Employment Uptake

The speaker identifies a fundamental flaw in how universities measure success. The sector focuses on **employability** — producing graduates with generic skills — but never measures **actual employment uptake by industry**. He argues that market absorption must be built into the funding formula. When government funding is linked to graduate employment outcomes, universities will be incentivised to build genuine industry relationships, enable cross-pollination of ideas, and design curricula that respond to real labour market needs.

Applied Research Over Academic Research

For developing countries, the speaker argues that **applied research** — research that solves real national problems — is far more valuable than pure academic research. He uses water quality as an example: why are water researchers scattered across 26 universities working in isolation, when they could pool their collective expertise to address a national priority? Universities produce more MBAs per year than there are companies in the country, yet cannot generate revenue for themselves — a contradiction that undermines their credibility as institutions of practical knowledge.

Micro-Credentials and the Speed of the Private Sector

The speaker contrasts the sluggishness of universities with the agility of private providers. A private company in the health sector designed and launched an AI-for-healthcare course in two weeks, reaching an entire industry — while universities have been discussing the same concept for three years without delivering. Micro-credentials, he argues, are the vehicle for **just-in-time learning** and must be embraced urgently.

Closing Argument

The speaker's verdict is delivered with clarity:

"Artificial intelligence will not replace humans. Humans who understand AI will replace humans who do not understand AI."

And his final indictment of higher education:

"Education is not on trial because it moved too quickly. It is on trial because it is adapting too slowly. Higher education had the time, the knowledge, and the resources. It chose comfort over courage."

The World Economic Forum's position is cited in support: AI literacy must be compulsory across **all** students; the mathematics curriculum must shift from information delivery to **judgment training**; and industry must be an active **co-designer** of curriculum — not merely an occasional adviser.

I've uncovered extensive discussions on higher education's failure to adapt to AI, emphasizing slow institutional change, undervalued teaching, and the need for curriculum redesign centered on judgment and industry collaboration. Next, I will synthesize these insights for strategic planning.

Summary of the Speech by the Honorable Minister Dr. Sukoon

The Honorable Minister Dr. Sukoon delivered a speech addressing the intersection of higher education, artificial intelligence (AI), and the rapidly evolving labor market, with a specific focus on the initiatives undertaken in Mauritius. The core message emphasized the urgent need for higher education systems to adapt to technological disruptions rather than resist them.

Key Themes and Initiatives

Addressing the Skills Mismatch

The Minister highlighted past successes in addressing skills shortages, such as flooding the market with trained individuals to combat poaching in the cyber city sector. He noted that with AI, such training could be completed much faster today. The primary goal is to ensure the market has sufficient people equipped with the right skills, particularly language and technical skills.

AI as a Tool for Personalized Learning

AI is presented as a transformative tool for education, particularly in facilitating personalized learning. The Minister provided examples of how AI can enhance traditional teaching methods, such as using multimedia to provide context in literature classes. Furthermore, AI can help identify individual student weaknesses early in the semester, allowing for targeted support and ultimately increasing success rates, rather than waiting until the end of the term to assess performance.

Structural Reforms in Higher Education

Recognizing that higher education often moves too slowly compared to technological advancements, Mauritius has taken proactive steps to redesign its system:

- **Legislative Amendments:** The Higher Education Act was amended to formally recognize micro-credentials and stackable learning pathways, particularly in AI, data, and digital fields.
- **Quality Assurance:** To ensure that flexibility does not compromise credibility, Mauritius is developing a homogeneous quality code for the higher education sector. The emphasis is on producing trusted, recognized capabilities rather than just more paper credentials.

Mandatory AI Literacy

In response to the growing importance of AI, Mauritius has made AI a mandatory module for all students in public higher education institutions, effective from January of the current year. The Minister stressed that digital literacy is no longer sufficient; AI literacy is essential for all graduates to understand how to use, question, govern, and challenge AI technologies responsibly.

Adapting to the Future of Work

The speech underscored that the traditional model of "train once, work for decades" is obsolete. With the World Economic Forum predicting that 39% of workers' skills will change by 2030, continuous learning is imperative. Mauritius is tightening the collaboration between universities and employers to ensure curricula are evidence-informed and aligned with actual labor market needs.

Conclusion

The Minister concluded by asserting that the role of higher education is not to protect learners from disruption but to prepare them to navigate and master it. The overarching strategy in Mauritius is not merely to react to change but to redesign the educational architecture to absorb and turn change into opportunity. The speech served as a call to action for institutions to move beyond rhetoric and implement meaningful reforms.

Summary: Complementary Opposites and the Future of the Academic Model

This speech examines the internal tensions — described as **complementary opposites** — that define how higher education currently operates, and argues that how institutions choose to work with these tensions will determine whether the sector declines, incrementally improves, or genuinely transforms.

The Core Framework: Tensions, Not Binaries

The speaker rejects simple either/or choices and instead frames the challenges of higher education as **productive tensions** that must be navigated simultaneously. Four pairs of complementary opposites structure the entire argument:

- **Autonomy vs. Accountability**
- **Efficiency vs. Effectiveness**
- **Performativity vs. Productivity**
- **Transmission vs. Co-construction / Conformity vs. Co-creation**

Tension 1 — Autonomy and Accountability

The current balance is heavily skewed toward **overt managerialism**: external standards, external regulation, external quality assurance, and top-down bureaucracy dominate the space. This crowds out the genuine possibilities that **community, collegiality, collaboration, academic voice, and initiative** could offer. The sector is over-regulated and under-trusted.

Tension 2 — Efficiency and Effectiveness

Higher education is fixated on **inputs and outputs** — how many students enter, how many graduate — with far less attention paid to **outcomes and impacts**: Are graduates transitioning meaningfully into employment and social life? What difference is higher education actually making in society? The obsession with quantitative metrics and excessive reporting has replaced a genuine focus on performance enhancement and supporting academics to do their best work.

Tension 3 — Performativity and Productivity

The speaker raises serious concern about the **casualisation of academic work** — short-term contracts, no permanency, no stability — and the **juniorisation of teaching**, where important undergraduate teaching is assigned to new entrants who still need space to develop their own research profiles. The "publish or perish" pressure dominates, while staff development, mentoring, induction, and meaningful engagement with learning and teaching are neglected. Senior academics and professors are often reluctant to engage with undergraduate teaching, which further weakens the system.

Tension 4 — Transmission vs. Co-construction and Conformity vs. Co-creation

In terms of student learning, higher education remains largely wedded to **passive, transmission-based models** — students as recipients rather than

active co-constructors of knowledge. Pathways remain restricted, qualifications static, and curricula are repackaged rather than genuinely repurposed or rebuilt. Student voice is limited, and external players increasingly seek to prescribe curricula, diluting academic authority. On the curriculum question, the speaker draws a sharp distinction between **work-ready** and **work-able** graduates. Training students for a specific context is futile if that context has changed by the time they graduate. What is needed instead is **"graduate-ness"** — the capacity to learn quickly, adapt, and function across changing environments. The speaker also calls for greater inclusion of **Global South and African knowledge frameworks**, challenging the dominance of Global North epistemologies.

Articulation — both between the TVET and higher education sectors and between public universities themselves — remains deeply problematic and limits student mobility across the system.

Three Possible Futures

The speaker closes by mapping three trajectories for higher education, depending on how these tensions are managed:

Scenario	Description
Business as Usual	Continued imbalance leads to **drift toward mediocrity** — a non-responsive sector where research and teaching remain competing priorities, one-size-fits-all planning persists, funding declines, and fees rise
Disciplined Improvement	More intentional collaboration across the sector — TVET, higher education, and government — enables **diverse, flexible, and customised learning pathways**, strategic investment in technology, and the meaningful integration of micro-credentials
Transformation	Full embrace of technology and AI enables **personalised learning** at scale, dynamic interplay between teaching and research, new metrics focused on flexibility and adaptability, and curricula that are personalised rather than standardised

Conclusion

The speaker's closing argument is both a challenge and an invitation: the future of higher education is not something that simply happens to institutions — it is something they can actively **choose to create**. How the sector works with its complementary opposites — autonomy and accountability, efficiency and effectiveness, transmission and co-construction — will determine whether it declines, improves incrementally, or genuinely transforms into something fit for the complexity of the world ahead.

Addendum 4: Panel discussion by members of the jury

Panel discussion led by members of the jury

Overview The text is a transcript of a panel or jury discussion focusing on the current state and future of higher education, particularly in South Africa. The speakers argue that higher education is facing a fundamental governance and systemic crisis. It is described as being misaligned with the complex, rapidly evolving, and AI-driven modern economy.

Key Themes and Findings:

Misalignment with the Labor Market:
Universities are operating in isolated silos, disconnected from industry and the labor market.
Curricula are slow to adapt and often fail to equip students with the practical skills needed for employment.
There is a shift from needing mere "knowledge" to needing "skills proficiency" and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world contexts.

Inefficiency and the "Cost Disease":
Public universities are generously funded but highly inefficient.
Despite increases in student and staff numbers, productivity gains have been minimal (e.g., a 5% increase over 13 years).
This inefficiency has led to skyrocketing university fees, pricing average citizens out of higher education and threatening access.

The Impact of AI and Technology:
The education system has responded reactively rather than strategically to AI and digital transformation.
AI should be viewed as a tool to increase efficiency, but human elements like contextual understanding, judgment, and problem-solving remain critical.
Assessments need to be redesigned to evaluate how students interrogate and use AI, rather than just testing just knowledge.

Youth Development and Employment:
Completing a qualification no longer guarantees entry into the labor market.
There is a lack of structured pathways, career guidance, and work-integrated

learning to help students transition from education to employment.
This disproportionately affects students from disadvantaged backgrounds who lack networks and resources.

The "Jury's Verdict" on Higher Education: The speakers present a series of "charges" against the higher education system, finding it "guilty" on several fronts:

1. **Failure to remain relevant:** Teaching for a world that no longer exists.
2. **Exploitation of academic labor:** Depending on unsustainable overwork and burnout.
3. **Perpetuation of inequality:** Expanding access but failing to ensure equitable success.
4. **Technological negligence:** Failing to properly integrate AI and digital fluency.
5. **Weak accountability to society:** Disconnecting from local development needs.
6. **Governance paralysis:** Hindering innovation with excessive compliance and bureaucracy.
7. **Misrepresentation of value:** Overselling degrees that don't match employment outcomes.
8. **Failure to redesign itself:** Protecting outdated structures instead of transforming.

Conclusion and Call to Action: The panel concludes that higher education must undergo systemic reform. It needs to transition from a closed, compliance-driven model to an open, adaptive, and ecosystem-oriented system. This requires deep collaboration between academia, industry, and government to ensure curricula are demand-led and that graduates are not just employable but sustainably employed. The speakers emphasize that the time for incremental change has passed, and immediate, innovative redesign is necessary.

Addendum 5: Summary: The 8 charges against Higher Education

Summary: The 8 Charges Against Higher Education

This is a structured indictment of higher education systems, arguing that universities are not failing due to a lack of excellence, but due to a **failure to evolve at the pace the future demands**. The eight charges are as follows:

Charge 1
Curriculum Irrelevance

Graduates leave technically qualified but **underprepared for real-world complexity**. Sustainability and entrepreneurial skills are treated as peripheral rather than foundational to the learning experience.

Charge 2
Exploitation of Academic Labor

The system is built on **structural burnout** — expanding teaching, supervision, research, administration, and compliance loads. Performance cultures reward overwork and penalize care. Invisible labor such as mentoring, emotional support, and inclusion work goes entirely unrecognized.

Charge 3
Perpetuation of Inequality

Higher education **reproduces the very inequalities it claims to transform**. Rural, working-class, first-generation, and historically marginalized students carry disproportionate risk. Financial aid systems are unstable, opaque, and anxiety-producing.

Charge 4
Digital and AI Unpreparedness

The system has **failed to integrate digital and AI transformation responsively**. Institutions are reactive rather than strategic, confusing policing AI misconduct with redesigning learning. Unequal access to devices, connectivity, and digital support compounds the problem.

Charge 5
Weak Accountability to Society

Higher education has **withdrawn behind institutional walls**, limiting meaningful engagement with cities, communities, provinces, and small businesses. Knowledge production is often disconnected from local developmental needs, and civic engagement is treated as optional.

Charge 6
Governance Paralysis

The system **confuses compliance with quality**. Slow decision-making, risk aversion, and excessive compliance burdens crowd out innovation. Governance frameworks are designed for stability, not adaptation.

Charge 7
Misrepresentation of Value

Higher education is accused of **overselling the degree** — rising costs without proportional returns, credential inflation eroding the signaling value of qualifications, and limited recognition of alternative pathways such as micro-credentials and lifelong learning.

Charge 8
Institutional Inertia

Most damning of all: **the system knows what is broken and fails to act**. Pilot projects are never scaled. Reports are written without reform. Dialogue happens without redesign. The institution protects its form more fiercely than its purpose.

The Closing Indictment: Higher education is not on trial for lacking excellence — it is on trial for **failing to evolve its excellence at the pace the future demands.**

Acknowledgements

The success of HE ON TRIAL: The People vs Higher Education was the result of the vision, commitment and collaborative effort of a wide range of individuals and institutions. It is therefore important to acknowledge those whose leadership, expertise and support made this landmark event possible.

The programme confirms the key roles, speakers, panellists and jury members who contributed to the event.
First and foremost, special acknowledgement is due to Prof René Pellissier (CHEC), who conceptualised and led the entire HE ON TRIAL process from inception to implementation. The event was not simply a convening, but a carefully designed intellectual and strategic intervention intended to provoke honest reflection on the state, role and future of higher education. Through her vision, design leadership, prosecutorial role in the proceedings, and stewardship of the overall process, Prof Pellissier shaped the event into a bold and forward-looking platform for dialogue on systemic reform and transformation.

Sincere appreciation is extended to **Ms Melissa Parker** from the **Western Cape Government (WCG)** for her valued partnership, co-leadership and visible contribution to the day. As co-convenor and panel prosecutor, and as the person who closed the event with words of thanks, Ms Parker played a key role in ensuring the successful collaboration between **CHEC** and **WCG,** while also strengthening the policy and public-sector relevance of the initiative. Importantly, this partnership itself modelled exactly the kind of collaborative future higher education requires: one in which universities and government work together, not in isolation, but in purposeful dialogue and shared responsibility to shape more responsive, connected and publicly relevant systems.

Warm thanks are also due to Natasha McDavid from Amazon Web Services (AWS) for hosting the event at the AWS Training Center in Cape Town and for enabling a professional and welcoming environment for both in-person and online participants. The venue and technical setting contributed significantly to the quality and accessibility of the event.

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A very special word of thanks is due to the jury members, whose role was crucial in moving the event from debate to judgement and from reflection to system-level priority setting. Their deliberations helped frame the structural issues that higher education must now confront. The jury members were: Ms B Abrahams (MERSETA), Ms Lieza Blom (WERSETA), Ms Anita Carollisen (TAKEALOT), Prof Stan du Plessis (STADIO), John Lawson (Cape Chamber of Commerce), Bertram Loriston (, Western Cape Education Department), Deidre Samson (The CollectiveX), Mbali Williams (Youth Capital), Nomahlubi Mosethedi (Harambee). Their presence reflected the multi-stakeholder nature of the higher education project and brought important perspectives from education, industry, skills development, youth advocacy and civic partnership into the final verdict of the day.

Appreciation is also extended to the organising and support team whose behind-the-scenes commitment was essential to the success of HE ON TRIAL. In particular, sincere thanks are due to Ms Elspeth Sheldon (WCG), Ms Sisipho Zweni (CHEC), Ms Debbie Meyer (CHEC) and Ms Kelly Hess (WCG), whose administrative, coordination and communication support helped ensure the seamless planning, organisation and delivery of the event. Their careful work, professionalism and attention to detail contributed significantly to the smooth and successful running of the day.

Finally, and most importantly, sincere appreciation is extended to all participants in the room and online, whose presence, attentiveness, questions, reflections and willingness to engage gave the event its real energy and meaning. **HE ON TRIAL** was not intended to be a one-way conversation, but a shared space for critical reflection, challenge and collective sense-making about the future of higher education. The depth and quality of the engagement from participants strengthened the day considerably and affirmed the importance of creating spaces in which diverse voices can think together, interrogate difficult questions, and contribute to shaping a more responsive, relevant and future-facing higher education system.

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