

1st Southern African Regional Universities Association Conference

CONFERENCE

'Innovating Higher Education for Sustainable Development across the SADC: Innovation for Impact'

ANNOUNCEMENT AND
FIRST CALL FOR ABSTRACTS



SARUA



Context

You are invited to the **first Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) Conference** taking place from 21–23 May 2025, in Lusaka, Zambia. This conference represents a critical moment for higher education in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

The Conference theme, **Innovating Higher Education for Sustainable Development across the SADC: Innovation for Impact**, reflects the urgency of adapting education systems to support economic growth, regional integration and sustainable development. In a rapidly changing global environment, higher education institutions must respond proactively to economic, technological and social shifts. The conference will address these challenges and foster collaboration among university leaders, academics, policymakers, industry players and civil society organisations, ensuring that higher education in before SADC evolves to meet future needs.

A key theme of the conference is the need for collaboration across sectors, i.e. that universities, governments, industries and civil society organisations must work together to address complex societal challenges through innovation. SADC universities must move beyond siloed approaches and build multi-disciplinary and cross-border partnerships. Collaborative efforts enhance research impact, improve policy relevance and ensure that higher education serves its mission towards regional social and economic empowerment. Partnerships with the private sector are especially crucial to bridge the gap between academe and the society into which it is embedded.

WHY THE CONFERENCE IS CRITICAL

- Addressing multiple regional challenges through higher education to facilitate dialogue on how to transform these limitations into opportunities, ensuring that higher education becomes a driver of social change, economic development and geopolitical regional cohesion.
- Promoting regional integration and cooperation as a cohesive higher education system is critical to regional integration, a priority for the SADC.
- Innovation as a key to sustainable development rethinking traditional models of education to ensure expansion, accessibility, relevance and quality and thus repositioning higher education as hubs of innovation.
- Fostering leadership and governance in higher education to face increasingly complex demands, balancing academic excellence with financial sustainability and community engagement.
- Aligning higher education with the SDGs and regional priorities through showcasing good practices and promoting knowledge exchange, the event will demonstrate how universities can integrate sustainability principles into their operations and curricula.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF THE CONFERENCE

The SARUA Conference aims to produce actionable outcomes that will guide the transformation of higher education in the SADC region:

- Best-practice models for curriculum innovation, leadership development and regional collaboration
- Frameworks for quality assurance and digital transformation in education
- Recommendations for aligning higher education strategies with SDGs
- Strengthened regional partnerships to promote teaching, learning, research, engagement and innovation
- Policy suggestions for government officials and education ministries to support higher education reform

The conference will also inform SARUA's future initiatives and contribute to building a sustainable higher education ecosystem in Southern Africa. These recommendations will be further discussed and formalized during SARUA's annual general meeting, held on the final day of the conference.

PROPOSED THEMES

- The role of higher education in advancing regional integration, economic development and social cohesion
- Innovation and transformation of higher education institutions in the SADC region
- Best practices and successful models of higher education transformation from within the region and beyond
- Collaboration and partnerships towards impact in SADC higher education
- Digital transformation in higher education
- Higher education leadership as agents for change
- Knowledge co-production for regional development
- Quality assurance to support higher education innovation
- Higher education in the context of the SDGs

PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOPS

- Knowledge co-production
- PhD supervision and conceptualisation
- Leadership in higher education

Universities are invited to participate in the special poster and oral events about how they are showcasing the conference themes.

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

- Abstracts may be in English, French or Portuguese but the conference will be held in English.
- Please provide: authors, email addresses and affiliations.
- Provide a key summary of not more than 500 words comprising a brief background, the methodology and the intended outcomes.
- Provide not more than four key words.

IMPORTANT DATES

SARUA pre-conference workshops	19–20 May 2025	Poster event submissions	30 January 2025
SARUA conference	21–23 May 2025	Notification of acceptance	31 March 2025
Abstract submissions	30 January 2025	Final submission of paper (edited and in final form)	30 April 2025

CONCLUSION

The SARUA Conference comes at a critical time for the SADC region. As the world becomes more interconnected and social-economic spaces increasingly reliant on knowledge and innovation, higher education must play a central role in shaping the future of Southern Africa. This event will catalyse new ideas, foster collaboration, and embolden the universities to transform into engines of economic growth, social cohesion and sustainable development.

By engaging university leaders, policymakers, academics and industry representatives, the conference aims to unlock the potential of higher education to contribute to a more equitable, integrated, and sustainable future for the SADC region. The discussions and partnerships that emerge from this event will have lasting implications for how universities operate and collaborate across borders, ensuring that higher education systems remain relevant and resilient in the face of future challenges.