

Concept for the 2026 WUN Global Mental Health Symposium at the University of Cape Town

Overview

The WUN Mental Health Leadership Group proposes the 2026 WUN Global Mental Health Symposium be hosted by the University of Cape Town (UCT), building on the momentum and rich dialogues established at the 2024 event held at the University of Leeds. This symposium will serve as a landmark platform for fostering global, cross-disciplinary collaboration and cross-cultural collaboration in the field of mental health, bringing together researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and community advocates to address urgent global mental health challenges.

As a leading African higher education institution, UCT provides a strategic venue for integrating global and local, relevant perspectives. The aim of the symposium will be to promote institutions from the ¹African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) and the WUN to strengthen South-South and North-South partnerships, reinforcing mental health as a key pillar of global health equity. The hosting university, UCT, is a member of both WUN and ARUA, it is uniquely positioned to convene a symposium that strengthens African mental health scholarship and global collaboration. The goal is to bridge research gaps, foster reciprocal knowledge exchange, and build sustainable, ethical partnerships that benefit both African and global institutions.

Strategic Importance of Hosting in Africa

Africa remains a region of immense opportunity and complex mental health challenges. Historical inequities, political instability, underfunded health systems, and social determinants of health continue to shape the mental health landscape. At the same time, Africa is also a hub of innovative mental health solutions, from community-based interventions to digital health advancements. Hosting this symposium in Cape Town provides a unique opportunity for the WUN to strengthen the voice of African scholars in shaping the global mental health agenda, policymaking as well as facilitate equitable partnerships between African and global universities.

Rationale

1. *Building Equitable Global Research Collaborations*
 - Strengthening WUN-ARUA Research Partnerships: With four universities, UCT, University of Pretoria, Makerere University, and University of Ghana, belonging to both WUN and ARUA, the symposium provides a critical platform to deepen collaborative networks between the 23 ARUA and 24 WUN member institutions. This will be an opportunity to design joint research agendas, resource mobilization strategies, and capacity development frameworks that are responsive to regional needs.
 - Strengthening research collaborations between WUN and the ²ASEAN University Network (AUN), building on the partnership formalised at the WUN AGM 2025.
 - The symposium will build on the 2025 ARUA Conference hosted at Makerere University, themed “Research, Innovation, and Artificial Intelligence for Africa’s Transformation,” in October 2025 and continue that momentum into a mental health focus within the WUN symposium.

- Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Contexts in Mental Health: The symposium will spotlight how traditional practices and indigenous knowledge systems can be incorporated into mental health interventions. Rather than viewing these systems as “alternative,” they will be positioned as integral to holistic and effective mental health care, particularly in underserved communities.
- Cross-Cultural Lessons and Best Practices: Participants will share innovative strategies for managing the complexities of cross-cultural research partnerships, ensuring equitable authorship, data ownership, and shared impact.

2. *Supporting Emerging Researchers and Knowledge Equity*

A major thrust of the symposium will be developing the capacity of emerging researchers, especially those based in low- and middle-income countries. Sessions will include:

- Case studies on mentoring postgraduate students into mental health research careers.
- Training workshops on grant writing, research ethics, digital scholarship, and community-engaged research methodologies.
- Opportunities for early-career scholars to present and publish their work.

Theme

Conference Theme: Digital Mental Health and Inequalities

The conference theme will examine how technology is reshaping mental health care while exposing gaps in access and equity.

The symposium will address compelling and urgent issues in global mental health, including various subthemes:

i) Artificial Intelligence, Inequality, and Mental Health in the African Context

Artificial intelligence (AI) holds significant promise for transforming mental health practice through digital diagnostics, adaptive interventions, and predictive analytics. However, its use must be approached with care. In contexts where historical injustices and systemic inequities persist, AI risks reinforcing existing disparities if implemented without ethical foresight and contextual sensitivity.

The symposium will explore the dual-edged nature of AI in mental health:

- How can AI be harnessed to reduce service gaps in low-resource settings across Africa?
- What ethical safeguards must be implemented to ensure inclusive, transparent, and culturally competent AI applications?
- How do we ensure African ownership in the design, deployment, and governance of AI mental health solutions?
- Opportunities and risks

ii) Technology, Digital Mental Health, and Future Directions

The symposium will critically explore the growing global cultural phenomenon of digital mental health technologies:

- Telemedicine and mobile health platforms for underserved populations.
- Digital peer support and virtual therapy in multicultural contexts.
- The risks of data privacy violations, algorithmic bias, and exclusion in digital tool deployment.
- Policy, regulation, and capacity building in the use of digital health tools in the Global South.
- Ethics, Privacy, and Data Justice. Navigating consent, confidentiality, and equitable data use in digital mental health platforms.
- The further entrenchment of current inequities between populations and health systems which have no or limited access to digital platforms.

Expected Outputs and Collaborative Impact

The symposium is not only a gathering, but a catalyst for lasting partnerships and outputs. Key outcomes will include:

- A special issue journal or edited volume consolidating papers presented at the symposium.
- Strategic collaborations on AI and mental health, indigenous knowledge, and ethics in global collaboration.
- Joint research proposals submitted by cross-WUN-ARUA-AUN teams for international funding.
- A post-symposium report highlighting practical frameworks for equitable research partnerships and inclusive mental health strategies.
- Contributions to the WUN Mental Health Leadership Group's ongoing webinar initiatives and policy briefs to inform global institutions.

ARUA Member Universities

¹Addis Ababa University; Eduardo Mondlane University; Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology; Makerere University; Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife; Rhodes University; University of Cape Coast; Université de Kinshasa; Université Mohammed VI Polytechnique; University Cheikh Anta Diop; University of Cape Town; University of Dar es Salaam; University of Ghana; University of Ibadan; University of Kwa-Zulu Natal; University of Lagos; University of Mauritius; University of Nairobi; University of Nigeria; University of Pretoria; University of Rwanda; University of Stellenbosch; and University of the Witwatersrand.

AUN Member Universities

²Universitas Indonesia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia, National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, and University of the Philippines.