

Reimagining the Social Compact for Higher Education: From Implicit Promise to Deliberate Partnership



MEETING REPORT

Reimagining the Social Compact for Higher Education: From Implicit Promise to Deliberate Partnership

Event	HELM Engage 23 webinar
Date and time	13 October 2026 13:00–14:30 SAST
Format	Online webinar
Moderator	Professor Melanie Walker; Professor Peter Mbat
Contributors	Professor Tandi Lewin; Thovhele Nthumeni Masia; Dr Thato Masekoa

Executive summary

The 23rd HELM Engage webinar brought together representatives from government, higher education, student leadership and traditional leadership to explore a shared concern: how can South Africa renew the relationship between universities and the society they serve? Participants affirmed the value of higher education as a public good and its contribution to development, transformation and democratic life. They also spoke openly about the pressures facing the sector, including persistent inequality, financial strain, declining trust, uneven institutional capacity and the distance between policy promises and everyday experience within the walls of the institution.

A common message ran through the discussion. Renewing the social compact will take clear responsibilities, reliable funding, accountable leadership and meaningful participation from the people whose lives are shaped by higher education. Universities need to protect independent inquiry and demonstrate their public value through good teaching, ethical and relevant research, and lasting community partnerships. Government has a responsibility to provide stable policy, funding and oversight while respecting institutional autonomy. Students and communities must have a voice in shaping decisions from the outset.

Participants identified several priorities for further work. Access must carry students through registration, participation and a sense of belonging to success and graduation. Research incentives should recognise quality, fairness and public contribution, alongside output. Community partnerships need a secure place in university structures so that they endure beyond changes in leadership. Disability inclusion must be part of daily university life across the sector. Rebuilding trust will depend on transparent administration, shared responsibility and leadership that brings people together. No formal resolutions were adopted, but the discussion offered a starting point for a wider democratic process to agree on the purpose, responsibilities and practical support needed for a renewed compact.

1. Purpose and framing of the webinar

Professor Peter Mbatia opened the webinar by placing the discussion in the context of South Africa's Constitution and higher education policies. There is no single negotiated agreement setting out the relationship between universities, the state and society. An implicit compact does, however, run through the Constitution, higher education legislation and policy, particularly Education White Paper 3. These commitments recognise higher education as a public good and give universities an important role in development, transformation and democratic life. Three decades into democracy, the responsibilities that follow from those commitments are still unevenly reflected in practice and increasingly contested.

The webinar asked how this implicit promise could become a deliberate national partnership. Human dignity, equality, social justice and the progressive realisation of the right to education remained its foundation. The question was how to give those commitments practical meaning in today's social, economic and political circumstances. Professor Melanie Walker, who moderated the session, explained that the programme would bring government and policy perspectives into conversation with those of communities, traditional leaders and students, followed by questions from participants.

2. Keynote address: renewing public purpose through capability, trust and sustainability

Professor Tandi Lewin, Deputy Director-General for University Education in the Department of Higher Education and Training, noted declining trust in universities within a wider picture

of inequality, poverty, unemployment, conflict, technological change and pressure on public resources. Drawing on the capability approach, she described higher education as a way to broaden people's opportunities to live well, make choices, advance justice and take part in democratic life. Renewing the social compact would mean paying closer attention to how policy is put into practice while holding on to the enduring goals of South Africa's higher education framework.

She cautioned against looking back to an idealised university. Universities had not always been inclusive or served the public good; in South Africa, they had been deeply implicated in racial, class and gender inequality. Yet much had changed since 1994. Student demographics had shifted, the academic workforce had begun to change, and state financial aid had helped many graduates from poorer backgrounds enter professional life. These gains had been achieved through deliberate policy, funding, steering and oversight. Preserving and extending them would require a broad understanding of universities' educational, civic and critical roles, as well as their contribution to preparing people for work.

Professor Lewin highlighted four areas needing attention. The first was student success. Students from different social backgrounds struggled with the transition from school to university, and structural inequality continued to influence their chances of succeeding. Financial aid could not, on its own, remove the academic, social and institutional barriers they faced. Curricula, teaching, assessment and university arrangements all needed to support students' progress. An excessive focus on performance measures could obscure this work and place responsibility for failure on individuals when the causes were often structural.

The second area was an ethical research culture that serves the public good. Professor Lewin raised concerns about unintended effects of the research-output subsidy, including gaming the system and excessive publication, and referred to work on a research publications quality framework. Rankings, ratings and financial incentives could distort academic priorities when the number of publications took precedence over quality and social contribution. Reform would need to protect limited research funding and consider how incentives could support institutions, researchers and fields of inquiry more fairly. It would also need to leave room for valuable research whose benefits take time to emerge.

Third, she addressed governance and accountability. Cooperative governance depends on institutional autonomy and legitimate state oversight working together. Claims of ownership,

external interference, litigation and an overriding focus on compliance were weakening that relationship. Reporting remained necessary, but trust also had to be built through lasting relationships between institutions and government, allowing them to work together through uncertainty. Professor Lewin described this as 'systemic trust'. Universities needed the support and freedom to teach, research and engage well, alongside accountability for serious failures. Government and institutions also needed safeguards against attempts to capture resources intended for infrastructure, accommodation and student support.

Her fourth concern was funding. She described a structural crisis, with a substantial shortfall in the student funding budget, rising student debt and weaknesses in the administration of financial aid putting students and universities at risk. Spending on student support was approaching the level of the university subsidy, raising difficult questions about how to fund participation while sustaining the institutions in which students learn. Widespread use of temporary academic contracts also threatened continuity and transformation in academic work. A renewed compact would need stable policy, workable funding arrangements and shared responsibility for the sector's long-term sustainability.

Professor Lewin closed by encouraging universities to explain their public value more clearly, invest in teaching, research and engagement, and deepen their collaboration. Excellence should be judged through quality, equity and social contribution. Universities should develop knowledge with society while protecting independent inquiry, and prepare graduates for fulfilling roles as workers and citizens. Renewing this public purpose remained essential to building the society South Africa aspired to become.

3. Community perspective: relevance, co-creation and durable partnerships

Thovhele Nthumeni Masia spoke from his experience as a traditional leader in a rural community working with universities on development initiatives. He recalled once seeing a university mainly as a place that prepared students for employment. Encounters with transformative academic thought had broadened his understanding to include research and social impact. His work in community development had since deepened his appreciation of scientific knowledge and of universities as trusted partners in improving people's lives.

He argued that the relevance of a country's universities is closely tied to its prosperity. Where surrounding communities continued to face poverty, ill-health and underdevelopment, universities had a responsibility to bring their teaching, research and engagement to bear on those conditions. Communities already helped to produce knowledge by taking part in research. Too often, however, projects and findings were not explained in ways that people could understand and use. One measure of research relevance should therefore be its contribution to addressing local problems and improving lives.

For Thovhele Masia, trust began with involving communities through their recognised leaders and representatives, including in the structures that guide university initiatives affecting them. Partnerships needed formal arrangements so that commitments, knowledge and accountability could survive a change in university leadership. He also suggested that publicly funded universities should be assessed on research and community engagement as well as graduate numbers. Institutional autonomy carried responsibilities to society. His contribution placed community partnerships firmly within the core work of a university.

4. The capability approach and a planetary dimension

Professor Walker drew the government and community perspectives together through the capability approach, which asks whether institutions give people fair opportunities to live well and exercise agency. In higher education, this means considering what graduates are able to be and do, the knowledge and values they bring to society, and their commitment to the public good and solidarity. The approach also considers the lives of academic and professional staff, communities and others affected by universities.

She suggested that a social compact must look both within universities and beyond them. Institutional cultures, working conditions and educational practices all shape how universities relate to society. A credible compact would examine how fairly universities expand people's opportunities and how closely their work reflects constitutional values. Professor Walker also brought environmental rights into the discussion. Universities were producing strong environmental research, but undergraduate education and public awareness were not yet consistently preparing people for accelerating ecological challenges. Work developed jointly with vulnerable communities could bring environmental responsibility, justice and local knowledge together.

This approach raised further questions about fairness across a diverse university system, the limits of audit and compliance, the organisation of research, and universities' accountability to different publics. It also prompted a practical question: what support would institutions need to fulfil these commitments? Professor Walker welcomed the effort to renew the compact and stressed that it must lead to something concrete and workable.

5. Student perspective: meaningful access, co-authorship and belonging

Dr Thato Masekoa, speaking from the perspective of the South African Union of Students, argued that students must help shape a renewed compact as partners. An admission offer meant little to a student who could not register, secure accommodation, afford food or transport, obtain learning materials or resolve delayed funding. These everyday difficulties showed the gap between formal access and meaningful participation. Administrative problems took time and energy away from study, while financial and psychological burdens could remain long after graduation.

Affordability had to cover the full cost of studying: tuition, accommodation, transport, food, digital access, books and healthcare. Students had responsibilities for their own success, but universities and the state had to create conditions in which success was possible. Disability inclusion made this responsibility particularly clear. Accessible facilities and appropriate academic support needed to be available across the sector, rather than at only a few universities.

Dr Masekoa described a serious loss of trust between students, university management, the Department, student funding bodies and other participants in the system. Delayed payments and repeated administrative failures had weakened confidence in institutional promises. Restoring that confidence would require accountability and honest participation. Students needed an ongoing role in decisions about strategy, teaching and learning, funding, accommodation, curriculum, institutional culture, digital transformation, graduate employability and well-being. Consultation alone did not give them that role.

He also spoke about belonging. Universities should be places where students are intellectually challenged, treated with respect and able to disagree with leadership without fear of

victimisation. Student leaders, too, carried responsibilities. While protest could sometimes be necessary, policy engagement and joint problem-solving offered a more lasting way forward. He rejected violence and the destruction of university property. A functioning compact would bring together respect, adequate resources, accountability, partnership and trust.

6. Discussion with participants

Patrick Fish gathered questions submitted through the chat and put them to the panel. The first group focused on disability inclusion, fairness in research funding, and why some postgraduate research pertaining to the physical site in which they found themselves had not led to improvements in community concerns such as water insecurity and poor public health. Professor Lewin noted that South Africa had a comparatively strong policy framework for inclusion, but universities differed greatly in their capacity to put it into practice. The task was to agree on the minimum provision every university should offer, while helping institutions build complementary strengths and work together.

Similar considerations applied to research. Institutions with historically weaker research capacity continued to receive less subsidy, while better-resourced universities were better placed to benefit from output-based incentives. Reform needed to address quality and equity while recognising that universities could serve different missions. It should not require every institution to pursue the same rankings. Expectations of immediate impact also had to allow for fundamental research whose value might emerge over many years. Better connections were needed between university research, public policy and local service delivery. Policymakers needed the time and capacity to engage with research, rather than having their attention absorbed by compliance demands.

The final question concerned leadership: could a social compact work without effective leaders and investment in their development? All three respondents regarded leadership as essential. Thovhele Masia linked institutional failure to poor leadership. Dr Masekoa observed that success and collapse often began at the top, while Professor Lewin emphasised the importance of leadership at every level. Leaders in government, universities, communities and student structures were entrusted with public institutions. Their responsibility was to serve the public good and safeguard those institutions for future generations.

7. Emerging conclusions and directions

In her closing synthesis, Professor Walker identified common ground across the contributions. Renewing the compact would require an open, democratic process in which people could participate meaningfully. Students and communities needed to share in shaping the partnership and taking responsibility for it. The work would also need to address both deep historical injustices and the everyday bureaucratic obstacles that make it harder for students and communities to engage with higher education.

The webinar did not adopt formal resolutions. However, it became clear during the discussion that renewing the social compact was fundamental to shaping the university's short- to medium-term future. The discussion identified the following priorities for further work:

- Agree on the public purposes of higher education, grounded in human capability, dignity, equality, democratic participation and environmental responsibility.
- Set out the responsibilities that government, universities, students, communities and other social partners owe one another.
- Support students throughout their journey, from admission and registration to participation, belonging, success, graduation and life after university.
- Develop sustainable funding arrangements that support students and maintain the institutional capacity needed for teaching, research and engagement.
- Review research incentives and accountability arrangements to encourage quality, integrity, equity, collaboration and clear public value.
- Give long-term community partnerships a secure place in university structures, and improve how research findings are shared and used.
- Agree on minimum expectations for disability inclusion, while enabling universities to develop complementary strengths and collaborate.
- Invest in ethical, collective leadership and rebuild trust through reliable administration, transparent decisions and shared accountability.

The meeting closed with thanks to the speakers, moderator, organisers and participants. Professor Mbatia invited attendees to complete the evaluation form to help improve future HELM webinars. Across the discussion, participants had returned to the need for commitments

that people could see and experience in practice. A renewed social compact would depend on suitable conditions, lasting relationships and clear ways for partners to hold one another accountable.