Executive Management Report: NADEOSA 2026 Conference

Conference: National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa (NADEOSA) 2026

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Prepared by: Wonga Ntshinga

1. Executive Summary

The NADEOSA 2026 Conference focused on the future of open, distance, blended, and flexible learning amid rapid digital transformation, artificial intelligence (AI), quality-assurance reform, student success, and inclusion in higher education.

A dominant message throughout the conference was that higher education institutions must move beyond simply expanding access toward creating systems that support belonging, participation, retention, employability, and meaningful student success.

Key themes included:

• AI integration in teaching and learning;
• Human-centred and inclusive education;
• Student success and belonging;
• Quality assurance transformation;
• Digital inequality and infrastructure challenges;
• Curriculum transformation and employability;
• Lifelong learning and micro-credentials.

2. Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education

A recurring concern throughout the conference was that practice is moving faster than policy. AI tools are reshaping teaching, assessment, curriculum design, and student support while governance and ethical frameworks remain underdeveloped.

Key considerations included:

• Development of AI governance frameworks;
• AI literacy for staff and students;
• Ethical and responsible AI use;

• Reconsideration of assessment integrity;
• Institution-wide AI readiness.

3. Human-Centred and Inclusive Learning

Presenters repeatedly emphasised that technology should support people rather than replace human connection. Human-centred approaches were identified as essential for sustainable innovation and student belonging.

Important themes included:
• Pedagogy of care;
• Inclusive learning design;
• Student participation in learning design;
• Institutional responsiveness;
• Emotional and academic support systems.

4. Student Success, Belonging, and Retention

The conference stressed that access alone does not guarantee success. Institutions must intentionally create environments where students feel supported, connected, and capable of succeeding.

Interventions discussed included:
• Peer mentoring and coaching;
• Learning analytics;
• Personalised AI tutoring;
• Flexible learning pathways;
• Academic advising;
• Student engagement strategies.

5. Quality Assurance and Institutional Transformation

The keynote on quality assurance highlighted the shift from compliance-driven systems toward evidence-based transformational quality assurance.

Critical areas included:
• Integrated institutional quality systems;
• Multimodal learning governance;
• Student engagement monitoring;

• Inclusive provision;
• Continuous improvement;
• Proactive quality management.

6. Digital Inequality and Global South Challenges

The conference repeatedly highlighted the risk that technology-enabled innovation may deepen inequalities if institutions fail to address structural barriers.

Challenges identified included:
• Connectivity and data affordability;
• Infrastructure limitations;
• Device access;
• Digital literacy gaps;
• Socio-economic inequality.

7. Disability Inclusion and Accessible Learning

Presenters demonstrated that open learning is not automatically inclusive. Institutions must intentionally redesign systems around learner needs.

Examples included:
• Accessible assessment design;
• Tactile and audio-supported learning;
• Universal design approaches;
• Flexible learning support systems.

8. Curriculum Transformation and Employability

Several presentations focused on preparing graduates for a rapidly changing world of work.

Priority areas included:
• AI literacy;
• Critical thinking;
• Employability skills;
• Lifelong learning;
• Micro-credentials;
• Flexible programme offerings.

9. Strategic Implications for the Institution

The conference highlighted the need for institutions to:

• Develop institutional AI strategies;

• Strengthen student success initiatives;

• Enhance digital pedagogy capacity;

• Align systems with CHE HEPS requirements;

• Improve inclusive digital transformation;

• Review curricula for future readiness.

10. Recommendations

1. Develop a comprehensive institutional AI governance framework.
2. Strengthen student support and belonging initiatives.
3. Expand staff development in digital pedagogy and AI literacy.
4. Review institutional readiness against CHE HEPS requirements.
5. Invest in inclusive and low-bandwidth learning environments.
6. Prioritise curriculum transformation aligned to future skills.
7. Strengthen learning analytics and student support systems.
8. Promote human-centred digital transformation approaches.
9. Enhance sector collaboration and partnerships.

11. Conclusion

The NADEOSA 2026 Conference provided valuable strategic insights into the future of higher education in the Global South.

The conference reinforced that sustainable transformation depends not only on technology adoption but also on leadership, inclusion, governance, care, and evidence-based institutional practice.

Institutions must remain agile, ethical, student-centred, and responsive as they navigate the future of open and flexible learning.