



Economic Society of South Africa

National PhD Conference 2026

Debrief Report

June 2026



1. Introduction

In March 2026, the Economic Society of South Africa (ESSA), in collaboration with Economic Research Southern Africa (ERSA), hosted the National PhD Conference. The objective of the conference was to provide PhD students studying in South African universities with a platform to obtain feedback on their research from a panel of discussants, as well as an opportunity for networking with fellow PhD students. The ultimate goal was to improve the quality of PhD research in the economics field in South Africa.

The conference aimed to engage students from a broad spectrum of universities across the country, and was jointly hosted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the University of Zululand (UniZulu). This aligns to ESSA's mandate to create an inclusive platform for economists in South Africa, and the conference also provides an opportunity for students and staff members from the host university to leverage learnings and insight from the conference to further strengthen their own postgraduate and PhD programmes.



Group picture including students, discussants, and UKZN, UniZulu, ERSA and ESSA staff. Image provided courtesy of UKZN.

2. Purpose of this Report

This report is intended to provide a debrief of the National PhD Conference.

The report documents the process that was undertaken in the planning of the conference and also provides some key findings and recommendations for the conference going forward. The

recommendations are based on reflections and insight from: the ESSA Executive Council; ERSA, UKZN and UniZulu staff who assisted with the conference logistics; and from a feedback survey that was completed by both the students and the panel of discussants after the conference.

3. Collaborators

Role of ESSA and ERSA

The conference was jointly organised and funded by ESSA and ERSA with an agreement to share costs on an equal basis. ESSA took primary responsibility for arranging the submission process and the academic programming and ERSA lead the organisation of conference logistics and provided operational support.

Role of the Host Institutions

This year, the conference was jointly hosted through a partnership between UKZN and UniZulu. UKZN provided a conference venue for the two days of academic programming at no cost to ESSA and ERSA. Both institutions were part of the conference organising committee and provided support with reviewing abstract submissions, the academic programme, logistics and conference arrangements.

The role of the host institution/s includes the following key activities:

- Obtain buy-in from their institution and provide ESSA / ERSA with a list of staff and students that will attend the conference
- Secure a senior representative from the institution to provide opening / closing remarks at the conference
- Secure a venue that is large enough to accommodate 30 to 50 people depending on the number of students, panellists and other attendees from the host university (the sessions are all held in one venue)
- Ensure that the venue is adequately equipped with facilities to enable the smooth running and operation of the conference (i.e., projector, cables for laptop projection, power supply, Wi-Fi, back-up power in the case of load shedding)
- Ensure that there is an adjacent venue / area to serve lunch and refreshments

- Provide advice and recommendations to ESSA / ERSA on accommodation, programming to cater for locational specifics, service providers for catering etc.
- Provide general operational support before and during the conference

Role of the Sponsor

A big achievement for the 2026 conference was our ability to secure sponsorship of R50,000 from the Professional Provident Society (PPS). PPS has been a long-standing partner of ESSA, having provided sponsorship for three of ESSA's Biennial Conferences. As part of the sponsorship, PPS set up a desk with promotional material in the entrance hall of the conference and were given a 30 minute time slot on the programme to address conference participants. The PPS logo also appeared on the programme and in all pre- and post-conference communication material.

4. Pre-Conference Process

A Call for Papers was issued in September 2025 (attached as **Annexure A**), in which students were required to submit an extended abstract of approximately 1,000 words in January 2026. The Call for Papers outlined the following key dates:

- **9th of September 2025:** First call for abstracts
- **22nd of January 2026:** Deadline for extended abstract submission with letter of support by supervisor
- **9th of February 2026:** Selected candidates notified of acceptance
- **9th of March 2026:** Full paper required
- **30th March – 1 April:** Workshop

A change with this year's conference was including a **requirement that students submit a letter of support from their supervisor**. This was an important addition to the application process which ensured the awareness and buy-in from the supervisors. This requirement was introduced as an improvement within the process to ensure proactive engagement and responsiveness from students throughout the process.

The **communications plan** for the conference included the following mechanisms:

- Circulating the Call for Papers and periodic reminders to the ESSA membership database;

- Circulating the Call for Papers to the Heads of Department / School for economics across all South African institutions; and
- Posting the announcements and reminders on LinkedIn via ESSA, ERSA and the host institutions.



Poster designed by UniZulu for circulation by ESSA and other partners.

The review process was managed by the President who completed an initial review and then assigned a second reviewer which consisted of members from the organising committee (including ESSA Council members, ERSA, UKZN and UniZulu).

The response to the calls resulted in a response from 74 applicants from 17 institutions including: Nelson Mandela University (NMU), North West University (NWU), Pan-African University (PAU), Rhodes University (RU), Texas Tech University (TTU), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), University of Cape Town (UCT), University of Fort Hare (UFH), University of Johannesburg (UJ), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), University of Limpopo (UL), University of Pretoria (UP), University of Stellenbosch (US), University of the Free State

(UFS), University of the Western Cape (UWC), University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) and the University of Zululand (UniZulu).

The table below compares the number of applications received for the three PhD Conferences held in 2023, 2024 and 2026. In addition, numbers for shortlisted applicants, and participant numbers are also provided.

Description	2023	2024	2026
Number of applications received	45	24	74
Number of institutions represented in application received	12	10	17
Number of shortlisted applications	30	20	21
Number of conference participants	20	17	18

Applications from 21 students accepted and invited to attend the conference and requested to submit full papers. Of the 21 invited participants, two did not submit their full papers and one withdrew due to challenges with their paper. Therefore, 18 full papers were received and were assigned a discussant who reviewed the full paper in preparation to provide feedback to the student at the conference.

Another important addition to the pre-conference activities included a **one-hour virtual workshop for the students on presentation skills two weeks before the conference**. In previous years the conference has not included any pre-conference activities. This new initiative was also introduced in response to feedback from previous conferences where we identified the need for students to improve their presentation skills. The workshop provided an opportunity for students to meet one another and members of the organising committee; to understand the format of the conference; to receive guidance on the structure of their presentation; to get tips and tricks for presenting their work; and to ask any questions ahead of the conference.

5. Format of the Conference

The conference was structured over a three-day period which comprised of two days of presentations and discussions. Each student was given 30 minute time slot which comprised of 15 minutes to present their research, thereafter, the student's assigned discussant was given 10 minutes to provide feedback, followed by 5 minutes where the floor was opened for questions and feedback from all participants.

The panel of discussants were selected based on alignment between their expertise and the student's research topic. The panel of discussants were comprised of individuals from a range of different institutions and included:

- Jen Snowball (ESSA President, RU)
- Harold Ngalawa (ESSA President-Elect, UKZN)
- Daniela Casale (ESSA Immediate Past President, WITS)
- Heinrich Bohlmann (ESSA Council, UP)
- Fouche Venter (ESSA Council, ERSA Executive Director)
- Irrshad Kaseeram (ESSA Council, UniZulu)
- Sibanisezwe Khumalo (ESSA Council, RU)
- Carol Chisadza (ESSA Council, UP)
- Justin Visagie (WITS)
- Claire Vermaak (UKZN)
- Talent Zungu (UniZulu)
- Gabrielle Wills (SUN)
- Bongamusa Makhoba (UniZulu)
- Simiso Msomi (UKZN)

A conference programme was created (**Annexure B**) and circulated to all participants ahead of the conference. An overview of the conference proceedings is as follows:

- **Day 1** – arrival and hotel check-in for out of town participants, followed by a welcoming and cocktail event for all participants
- **Day 2** – 12 student presentations, feedback from assigned discussants and general discussion from all participants. A masterclass on writing for publication was provided by the Managing Editor of the South African Journal of Economics (SAJE) and a presentation from the conference sponsor, PPS.
- **Day 3** - 6 student presentations, feedback from assigned discussants and general discussion from all participants. A presentation from a recent PhD graduate was also included in the programme, with the intention of providing advice and reflections for students on the softer side of the PhD journey. Closing remarks were provided by the ESSA President.

6. Cost

The table below provides a summary of the costs for the conference.

Description	Cost (ZAR) (rounded off)
Accommodation (including Welcome Cocktail and Gala Dinner)	R257,000
Flights	R76,000
Shuttles	R26,000
Catering	R38,000
Total	R397,000

The table below provides a comparison of costs for the three PhD conferences held to date.

Description	Total Cost (ZAR) (rounded off)	Notes
Conference in 2023	R349,000	This conference was held at the University of Fort Hare. The remote location meant that the majority of participants had to travel and to be accommodated for the conference.
Conference in 2024	R217,120	This conference was held at the University of the Western Cape. The location played a role in the lower cost of this conference, with 3 of the large universities being in close proximity to the event, a lower number of participants had to travel for the event.
Conference in 2026	R397,000	This conference was held at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Although the location for this conference was not remote, a large number of the participants had to travel, hence the travel and accommodation cost was high.

7. Feedback from Participants

After the conference, participants were asked to complete a feedback form (**Annexure C and D**). The form consisted of questions asking participants to rate their experience with regard to

the programming of the conference, the value that they gained from the conference, the communication and logistics, the venue and hotel (the rating scale included: excellent, good, average and poor). In addition, open-ended questions were asked where participants were asked to reflect on their experience of the conference and to provide recommendations for future improvement. 22 participants responded to the survey, **Figure 1** summarises the responses to the questions.

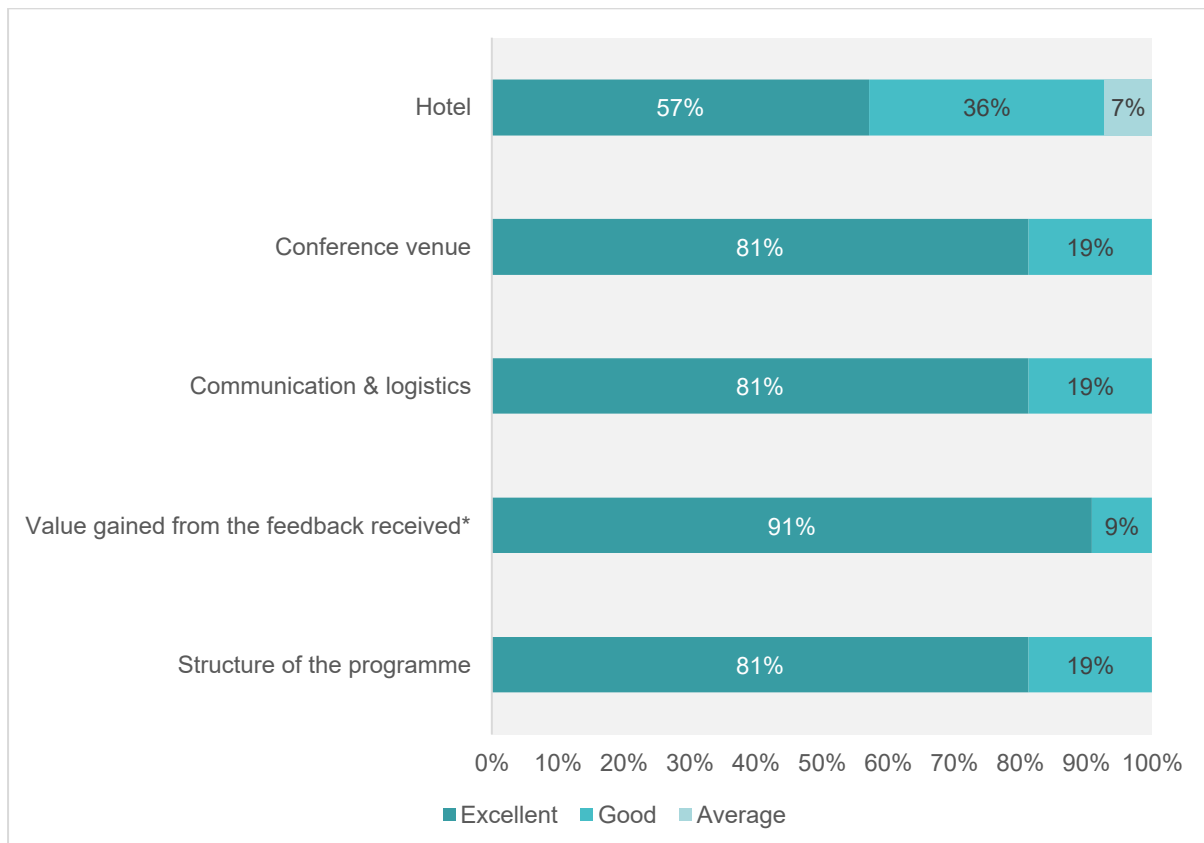


Figure 1: Summary of Survey Responses

**Response is only applicable to student respondents*

All the responses to the open-ended questions are provided in **Annexure E**. The key themes emerging from the responses are as follows:

- **High educational and mentorship value:** Attendees found the conference to be an exceptional learning experience. It provided crucial exposure to the academic peer-review process, article publication nuances, and presentation skills.
- **Deep and meaningful engagement:** Sharing full papers with discussants ahead of time was highly praised. It allowed for robust, detailed, and constructive feedback that went far beyond what presentation slides alone could offer.

- **Valuable networking and community building:** Both students and senior researchers deeply appreciated the opportunity to connect, share advice on the PhD journey, and build supportive peer networks. The relaxed settings of the welcome cocktail and dinner were highlighted as excellent platforms for this engagement.
- **Pacing and fatigue challenges:** Multiple attendees noted that the schedule was heavily packed, particularly on the first day, which ran from 8:30 AM to 6:00 PM, leading to concentration fatigue by the final session.

8. Recommendations

Reflections from the organising process, as well as feedback from conference participants, have informed the following recommendations for future conferences. It is important to note that the extent to which these recommendations can be operationalised is dependent on ESSA's ability to support these suggestions from a financial and operational perspective.

Schedule and time management: to address attendee fatigue and the packed nature of the event, several respondents suggested extending the conference across more days, such as converting the second day into a full day or moving to a three-day format. Alternatively, to avoid the increased accommodation and logistical costs of a longer event, a discussant proposed optimising the existing two-day schedule by removing the late afternoon tea break on the first day to end sessions by 4:30 PM, and distributing the remaining presentations onto the second day while still concluding by 1:30 PM for airport transfers. Additionally, it was recommended that student accommodations be situated closer to the conference venue to eliminate long wait times for morning transport shuttles.

Enhanced peer interaction: the feedback highlights a desire for more structured engagement and interactive dialogue during the presentation sessions. Attendees noted that while students often shared feedback informally during breaks and dinners, they rarely spoke up during the formal plenary sessions. To resolve this, it was recommended to formally assign an attending PhD student as a "junior or second discussant" alongside the professor to lower the barrier to entry and spark peer-to-peer dialogue. Furthermore, organisers should allocate dedicated time for actual back-and-forth discussions, allowing presenting students the opportunity to directly respond to comments and deeply integrate the feedback they receive.

Professional development and masterclasses: Building on the success of the existing writing workshop, participants strongly advocated for the introduction of new masterclasses addressing the core professional challenges PhD students face. Specifically, they

recommended adding training sessions focused on academic presentation skills—particularly how to tailor a research presentation to different audiences like academia, industry, or policymakers. Other proposed masterclasses include job market preparedness—covering CV structures and interview techniques—as well as guidance on preparing doctoral, postdoc, or internship funding proposals. Finally, there was a suggestion for the conference to scale its academic impact by publishing official conference proceedings.

Annexure A

Call for Papers

Annexure B

Conference Programme

Annexure C
Feedback Form for Students

Annexure D

Feedback Form for Discussants

Annexure E

Reflections from Feedback Survey

Student reflections on the conference

Please reflect on your experience at the conference

- I had a very amazing and exposing experience. I am glad for the exposure and enlightenment I got here. I learnt a lot as I listened to others share their study and provide feedback.
- The conference was truly an eye opener, more particularly in relation to minor details that I normally neglect when writing articles for publication. the design of the conference was educational and I am really grateful for the opportunity.
- It was a very very good learning experience. experiencing how paper are reviewed how the professors ask questions, the critiques and learning that comes with the workshop and also the confidence in presentation was very excellent. It was beyond what I expected.
- Sharing the full paper with the discussant was extremely valuable, as it gave them enough time to engage deeply with the study and provide more constructive feedback. Unlike relying only on the presentation, the full paper allowed them to comment on aspects that may not have been fully captured in the slides. This made the feedback process far more meaningful, insightful, and encouraging.
- It was a great pleasure to attend the conference, interacting with colleagues and getting feedback from senior economists. It was valuable for my chapter. The conference was an intellectually enriching experience, bringing together a community of passionate scholars engaging with research that speaks directly to some of the most pressing and relevant issues of our time. I had the opportunity to interact with inspiring researchers and learn from a wide range of thought-provoking papers. I am especially grateful to have met Professor Bohlmann, who served as my discussant. As an expert in energy economics, his constructive feedback and insightful comments on my paper, were invaluable in strengthening this chapter of my PhD research. I truly appreciate the platform, the engagement, and the scholarly exchange. Experiences like these continue to shape and refine my academic journey.
- Great to meet students from all universities, and to have a chance to get to know some senior researchers better in a relaxed setting. I received a lot of valuable input on my work, and it felt good to be able to contribute in some small ways to other people's work (or giving advice on the PhD journey to those who are near the beginning).
- It was an incredibly rewarding conference. It was my first conference and presentation (discounting the ones offered by my university) and it was an incredibly enriching experience. I have connected with soo many students that will support me with different elements of my research and other students that I will also support. The feedback from the

discussant were robust and detailed and I benefitted from the feedback that was given to other students as well. The welcome cocktail and dinner also provided good platforms to engage outside of the conference walls which incredibly important as well. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

- The conference served as a highly valuable, positive, and enjoyable opportunity to meet, engage, and connect with new academic peers.

Do you have any suggestion for improvement for future conferences?

- I wish to suggest the conference could grow and consider publishing conference.
- Maybe spread the event over more days and have more established professors teach us about publishing and other stuff.
- There should be other activities if the budget allows or if we get sponsors
- Yes, maybe the accommodation can be closer to the conference venue because working up early to wait for a shuttle was a bit of a stretch.
- Yes, I think all is well
- Everything was good
- Maybe if the presentations could be spaced across the two days a bit more to not have so many on the one main day. If possible maybe a little more time (or expectation) for students to respond to comments (with some back and forth), this might be challenging for students but would also make it more likely that they take input forward with them.
- The conference was quite packed, perhaps having the second day as a full day might have helped, however I acknowledge that has huge cost implications as well so I am a bit uncertain how to resolve this issue. But overall the format and schedule worked perfectly. Another suggestion is maybe to have a structured manner for PhD students to give feedback to other during the plenary, I say this because I realise a lot of students didn't give feedback to others during the plenary, although we did offline during the breaks and dinners. Perhaps an option could be to have a professor be the discussant, and an attending student be junior/second discussant, perhaps this could open the door and allow the students to interact a bit more and provide feedback to others in the plenary.
- Slightly more time for interaction/engagement with the discussant and receiving the discussants suggestions for improvements afterwards, and slightly more time for networking/exchange in the breaks between the sessions.

Discussant suggestions for improvements

Please reflect on your experience at the conference

- Yes. Extend it to day 3
- It was great
- Add a couple of details to the programme e.g. affiliations, supervisors
- I felt that the first day was very long 8.30 to 6pm. Maybe it was just me, but that last session was brutal to concentrate. However, I also understand that moving that last session to the next day means an additional day of accommodation and costs. Maybe 1st day keep 1st and 2nd sessions as is before lunch. Then after lunch have 4 presentations and end day at 16.30. Cut costs by removing that 4pm tea break. Then 2nd day, have 4 presentations and should still be able to end by 13.30 for airport transfers, while maintaining number of presentations expected for the conference.
- None

Do you have any suggestion for improvement for future conferences?

- Maybe the papers should be shared
- None
- Allow audience to throw plastic stress balls
- I like the idea of bringing in someone to talk about soft skills like the master class in writing for publication. Maybe next we can have a masterclass in academic presentation since all PhD students at some point in their journey have to present to an audience, or how to tailor presentations differently given audience (academic vs industry vs policymakers). Another class could look at job preparedness e.g. structure of cv, how to prepare for interview. Another class could entail preparing a funding proposal. These are all issues PhD students face, be it applying for doctoral or postdoc funding or applying for an internship job.
- None