

UFS THIRD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON DISABILITY RIGHTS

4 June – 5 June 2026

University of the Free State | Bloemfontein | South Africa



Universal Access for Persons with Disabilities: Designing Inclusive Futures

www.ufs.ac.za

Inspiring excellence, transforming lives through quality impact, and care



BACKGROUND

Accessibility is a precondition for equality, participation, and human dignity. Yet, for many persons with disabilities, access remains elusive. Across Africa and beyond, physical, digital, attitudinal, and institutional barriers continue to limit participation in education, employment, healthcare, and community life. These forms of exclusion are expressions of systemic inequality that demand a transformative response.

Anchored in the University of the Free State's (UFS) Vision 130, which highlights diversity, inclusivity, and social justice, this conference embodies the university's ongoing commitment to removing barriers and fostering environments where everyone can thrive. It also aligns with the UFS research focus area on flourishing life, which foregrounds human rights, disability inclusion, and equitable well-being.

The conference will be held in partnership with the Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support (CUADS), UFS Faculty of Education, Inter-Migrants Suisse and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC/Commission). The Commission's mandate is set out in section 184 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, to promote, protect, and monitor the observance of human rights in South Africa. Its enabling legislation, namely the South African Human Rights Act 40 of 2013 (SAHRC Act), empowers the Commission to carry out research and educate on human rights. The Commission is also the designated Independent Monitoring Mechanism (IMM) in South Africa in terms of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In its commitment to upholding the rights of persons with disabilities, the Commission has further established a focal area of Persons with Disabilities in the Commissioners' Programme, owing to the especially vulnerable and marginalised position of persons with disabilities in South African society.

The Third International Conference on Disability Rights seeks to move the conversation beyond compliance toward universal access as a driver of innovation, equality, and justice. The event will reimagine accessibility not as accommodation for a few, but as a universal design principle that benefits society as a whole.

The conference will engage with the global framework of the CRPD and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities In Africa (Africa Disability Protocol), connecting these instruments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), which promote inclusion and empowerment for persons with disabilities and the pursuit of universal access.

Bringing together persons with disabilities, scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and activists, the conference will create a collaborative and accessible space for knowledge-sharing, policy dialogue, and the development of actionable strategies toward inclusive societies where universal access is both principle and practice.

OBJECTIVES



The third International Conference on Disability Rights aims to:

- Critically assess current policies, practices, and societal attitudes that shape accessibility and inclusion for persons with disabilities.
- Foster interdisciplinary dialogue on emerging issues, innovative solutions, and practical strategies for advancing disability justice and universal design.
- Build partnerships among academics, policymakers, practitioners, civil society, and representative organisations of persons with disabilities.
- Identify gaps in legal and policy frameworks and propose actionable recommendations for implementation at local, regional, and international levels.
- Highlight accessibility innovations, including technological, architectural, legal, and social, that exemplify universal access in action.

SUB-THEMES



Submissions are encouraged under (but not limited to) the following themes, all framed within the vision of *Universal Access*:

- Accessibility and the Build Environment: Inclusive infrastructure, transport, and Public Services
- Digital and Technological Inclusion: Assistive technology, AI, and the right to accessible information
- Communication Access and Inclusivity: Ensuring accessible communication methods, including sign language interpretation, captioning, and alternative formats for all forms of communication. Ensuring that all individuals can effectively engage and participate in various aspects of society, have access to information, basic services and education.
- Equality, Non-Discrimination and Legal Reform: Advancing disability rights through jurisprudence and policy
- Access to Justice and Dispute Resolution: Removing barriers to courts, tribunals, and legal systems for persons with disabilities
- Human Rights Education: Advocacy and public awareness strategies for destigmatisation and inclusivity
- Service Delivery: The role of local and provincial government in universal access
- Gender and Disability: Intersectional approaches to foster accessibility
- Children, Youth and Education: Pathways to inclusive learning and lifelong development
- Care, Support, and Community: Strengthening the ecosystem for caregivers and persons with disabilities
- Inclusive Employment and Economic Participation: Rethinking workplaces and entrepreneurship through universal design
- Disability-Inclusive Development and Humanitarian Action: Accessibility in crises, climate response, and development programming
- Universal access and the right to development of persons with disabilities.

SUBMISSION OF ABSTRACTS

The Disability Rights Unit invites researchers, academics, practitioners, policymakers, advocates, and persons with disabilities to submit abstracts for individual presentations or panel discussions of 300 words to disabilityrightsunit@ufs.ac.za by **31 March 2026**.

For inquiries, contact Khothalang Moseli at MoseliK@ufs.ac.za.

Notification of Acceptance: **30 April 2026**.

Website Link: <https://www.ufs.ac.za/law/free-state-centre-for-human-rights/disability-rights-unit>

DOCTORAL STUDENTS

The 2026 conference will include a dedicated panel for doctoral students. This panel will provide a supportive space for doctoral candidates to present their work-in-progress, receive feedback from senior scholars, and engage in structured mentorship sessions.

CONFERENCE FORMAT AND PUBLICATION

The two-day hybrid conference is scheduled to take place from **Thursday, 4 June to Friday, 5 June 2026** at the **University of the Free State, Bloemfontein**.

The conference will feature Keynote addresses by renowned experts in disability law and accessibility innovation, thematic panel discussions, interactive networking sessions and a demonstration of accessibility technologies and inclusive design models.

Selected papers demonstrating originality, relevance and scholarly merit will be considered for inclusion in an edited volume or special journal issue in an accredited and peer-reviewed journal.

CONFERENCE COST

To ensure the sustainability of this important platform and to maintain accessibility features for participants, a nominal conference fee will apply:

- In-person attendance: R2 000 (100 Euro/Pounds/Dollar) per delegate
- Online attendance: R1 000 (50 Euro/Pounds/Dollar) per delegate

These fees will contribute towards conference materials, logistics and accessibility measures needed for a successful conference.

Efforts will also be made to secure sponsorships and fee waivers to support participants with disabilities, students, and community organisations to ensure broad and inclusive participation.

TOWARDS A UNIVERSALLY ACCESSIBLE FUTURE

Universal Access is a collective responsibility. Through research, advocacy, and collaboration, this conference seeks to chart a future where every person, regardless of ability, can participate fully, independently, and with dignity in every aspect of life.