



INVITATION AND PROGRAMME

ASSAf AI Makgotla Series
12 August 2026

The Mental Health Crisis in South African Higher Education: Is Gen AI a Help or a Hindrance?

South African universities are facing an escalating mental health crisis among students, placing increasing pressure on already stretched support services. At the same time, AI is rapidly emerging as both a source of concern and a potential tool for support. Can Gen AI help expand access to mental health care, provide early intervention and reduce barriers to seeking help?

Or does it introduce new ethical, psychological and social risks?

The Scholarly Publishing Unit of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) invites you to join South African experts for this AI Lekgotla as they examine the opportunities, limitations and ethical implications of Gen AI-enabled mental health support in higher education.

The discussion will explore how some South African universities are harnessing Gen AI while ensuring that technology complements, rather than replaces, human-centred care.

Date	Wednesday, 12 August 2026
Time	14:00 – 16:00
Platform	Online (Zoom)
RSVP	Click here to register

Programme

14:00	ASSAf Welcome Prof Lynn Morris (University of the Witwatersrand, ASSAf Council Member)		Prof. Lynn Morris is Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Innovation at the University of the Witwatersrand and Research Professor and founding Director of the Antibody Immunity Research Unit at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases. An NRF A-rated scientist, she has spent more than 30 years advancing HIV vaccine research, publishing over 294 papers with an H-index of 74, and is among the world's most highly cited researchers. She is a Member of ASSAf, a Fellow of the African Academy of Sciences, the Royal Society of South Africa and TWAS, and serves as Deputy Chair of the ASSAf AI Forum Committee. She has also supervised and mentored more than 50 postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows.
14:05	Introduction by the Facilitator Dr Edmund Terem Ugar (University of Johannesburg and North-West University)		Dr Edmund Terem Ugar is a researcher and policy analyst with a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Johannesburg. His research focuses on the ethics, policy, and governance of AI and other digital technologies in healthcare, higher education, and the workplace, with a particular emphasis on African contexts. His current work examines how digital systems shape human flourishing, wellbeing, and interpersonal relationships.
14:10	An overview of the mental health landscape at South African higher education institutions Dr Christo Davids (Stellenbosch University)		Dr Charl Davids is a registered counselling psychologist and Director of the Centre for Student Counselling and Development at Stellenbosch University. With more than 20 years of experience, his work focuses on student mental health, community psychology, and digital mental health interventions. He has co-authored research on online therapy, mental health applications, chatbots, and cognitive behavioural therapy, and is committed to advancing accessible, evidence-based mental health support in higher education.
14:20	Speaker 1: Student mental health and the use of Gen AI Dr Dalray Gradidge (Nelson Mandela)		Dr Dalray Gradidge is a Research Psychologist at Nelson Mandela University, specialising in student mental health, research ethics, and higher education. Her current research explores the responsible integration of generative artificial intelligence into university mental health services, with a focus on ethical, accessible, and student-centred solutions. She is actively involved in collaborative initiatives that strengthen student wellbeing and innovation in higher education.
14:30	Speaker 2: Student mental health and the use of Gen AI Dr Hanlé Kirkcaldy (University of Pretoria)		Dr Hanlé Kirkcaldy is Head of the Student Counselling Unit at the University of Pretoria and a registered Clinical Psychologist with more than 30 years of professional experience. Her work focuses on student mental health, professional ethics, mood and anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic growth. She leads a multidisciplinary team dedicated to advancing student wellbeing and has published widely in the field of psychology.
14:40	Speaker 3: Student mental health and the use of Gen AI Dr Faeza Khan (University of the Western Cape)		Dr Faeza Khan is Director of Residential Services within Student Development and Support at the University of the Western Cape. With more than 15 years of experience in higher education, her work focuses on student mental health, social justice, and student support services. She has led pioneering research on the use of AI-powered mental health chatbots in higher education and is a recognised advocate for ethical, culturally responsive, and evidence-based approaches to using artificial intelligence to enhance student wellbeing.
14:50	Panel discussion Facilitated by Dr Edmund Ugar		
15:10	Q&A		
15:50	Closure Dr Edmund Ugar		
15:55	Word of thanks Susan Veldsman (Academy of Science of South Africa)		Susan Veldsman is Manager of the Scholarly Publishing Programme at the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). She has led the successful ASSAf AI Lekgotla series since 2025 and serves on the ASSAf AI Forum Committee. A leader in open science and scholarly publishing, she has played a key role in advancing South Africa's open access policies and the development of SciELO SA, earning international recognition for her contributions to scholarly communication.