



Summary report

Version 9 July 2026

1. Overview

On 20 May 2026, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam hosted the UNESCO Symposium *We Shall Overcome: Building Inner Peace and Hope*, bringing together roughly 150 participants - UNESCO Chairs, academics, policymakers, students, high school students, artists and community partners, around a single question: how can peace and hope be rebuilt together in a world marked by polarization, conflict and uncertainty? The symposium was organized by the UNESCO Chair on Cross-Cultural Sustainability together with the Netherlands Commission for UNESCO and a broad coalition of university and community partners. The day opened with a guided tour of VU heritage and the UNESCO Memory of the World collection before the main programme began at half past one, and it closed some five hours later with a reception that let the day's participants keep talking long after the formal sessions ended.

The title was not chosen lightly. *We Shall Overcome* ties the symposium directly to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who received an honorary doctorate in Social Sciences from VU Amsterdam in 1965, the same year he led the marches from Selma to Montgomery. Invoking that history was a way of insisting that peace and hope are never mere abstractions to be admired from a safe distance, but disciplines that have to be practiced, especially when the world news is full of war, displacement and division.

Kathleen Ferrier, Chair of the Dutch UNESCO Commission, opened the plenary ceremony by connecting the symposium's theme to present-day realities. She referred to the situations in Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan, noting that peacebuilding cannot remain abstract while people are affected by conflict, displacement and limited access to education. For her, the university's value lies precisely in its imperfection: it is one of the few remaining places where people still gather to learn, investigate, question one another respectfully and begin again. She encouraged universities to remain engaged in public debate even when that engagement is not always comfortable.



Figure 1: Opening keynote by Kathleen Ferrier at the UNESCO Symposium



Figure 2: Rector Magnificus Jeroen Geurts keynote during the plenary session



Figure 3: Overall venue view of the symposium conference hall

Prof. Dr. Jeroen Geurts, Rector Magnificus of VU Amsterdam, picked up that thread by framing the day's work as part of something larger: a worldwide peace network of universities, built and sustained one small step at a time through cooperation between institutions, UNESCO Chairs, students, researchers and policymakers. Dr. Sylvia van de Bunt, UNESCO Chair on Cross-Cultural Sustainability and the symposium's master of ceremonies, drew the two ideas of the title together in her welcome, observing that intergenerational dialogue is key for building inner peace and hope.



Figure 4: Welcome speech by Sylvia van de Bunt and introducing Indirah Olf



Figure 5: Indirah Olf delivering her speech

It was then, fittingly, that Sylvia invited the youngest voice of the day to the floor. Fifteen-year-old Indirah Olf, a student in VU's Pre-University College, delivered the motivational address *Breaking Polarization*, drawing on her own experience to make the case that more cultural education in schools could help young people understand one another better, and that building connection across backgrounds is a constructive way forward. Her contribution set the tone for a programme that treated youth not as an audience to be spoken to, but as relevant participants with a most meaningful perspective for dialogue.

From there the afternoon moved into the panel discussion *Peace as Practice - Universities, a Beacon of Hope in Divided Times*, a poster session held over coffee, six parallel interactive workshops, and a closing plenary reflection before the reception.



Figure 6: Group photo of international UNESCO Chairs, workshop leaders and co-organizers

2. Symposium Programme at a Glance

Theme	We Shall Overcome: Building Inner Peace and Hope
Venue	Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, NU Building
Date & time	Wednesday 20 May 2026, 13:15–18:00 (guided VU History tour at 12:00)
Participants	~150, including UNESCO Chairs, academics, policymakers, university and high school students, artists and community partners
Opening contributors	Kathleen Ferrier, Prof. Dr. Jeroen Geurts, Dr. Sylvia van de Bunt, Indirah Olf
Panel discussion	Peace as Practice - Universities, a Beacon of Hope in Divided Times, moderated by Dr. Jon Verriet
Core activities	Opening ceremony, panel discussion, poster session, six workshops, plenary reflection, reception

3. Main Themes

Peace and Hope as Interconnected Practices

If one idea threaded through nearly every session, it was that peace and hope cannot be pulled apart without weakening both. Sylvia gave this its clearest formulation: inner peace without hope becomes procedural, while hope without any concept of peace dissolves into sentiment. That framing shaped the whole programme, from the opening keynotes to the closing plenary, treating peace and hope less as fixed destinations than as an ongoing, occasionally uncomfortable process of maintenance and renewal that has to be practiced across generations, disciplines and cultures rather than declared once and left alone.

Universities as Spaces of Peacebuilding

Several speakers pushed back against the idea of the university as a neutral, apolitical knowledge factory. Kathleen in particular argued that universities are public institutions with a stake in the conditions that make humane societies possible, and that this comes with real friction: many communities want their university to take a stance on the conflicts shaping their lives, while others accuse the same institution of being too political. Her answer was not to avoid the tension but to hold it responsibly, setting firm boundaries against intimidation, racism and dehumanisation, while insisting that difficult conversations must otherwise remain possible. The panel discussion carried this into more practical territory, asking what "peace as practice" actually looks like in daily academic life, and landing on the idea that disagreement and uncertainty are not threats to be managed away but starting points for learning.

Intergenerational Dialogue and Youth Voice

The symposium made a visible effort to put young people at the centre of the conversation rather than at its margins. High-school students sat alongside university students, displaced learners, mentors and UNESCO youth representatives throughout the day, and van de Bunt described the high-schoolers present as living examples of the UNESCO mission itself. That was not just rhetoric: in the weeks after the symposium, Indirah Olf was selected for the UNESCO National Youth Commission 2026–2027, a concrete outcome that traced directly back to her impactful contribution on VU stage.

Cultural Understanding, Language and Crisis

Language emerged as a theme in its own right, framed by the Language Stories project as something that can just as easily connect people as exclude them, carrying identity, heritage and power all at once. A parallel thread ran through the workshop and poster materials on Sudan and Uganda, where war, displacement and institutional fragility have forced universities to keep functioning however. These disadvantaged universities courageously carry on, often through online teaching under deeply unstable conditions. UNESCO Chair Josje van der Linden made this vivid during the panel discussion, describing how in Sudan students fled with their families, staff were displaced, university property was damaged. Teaching had to continue online even as students and staff themselves were living through the same crisis. What came through in her account was not a story of institutional collapse but of a university persisting as a strong network of people still trying to protect education, care and hope for one another.

Polarization and Reconciliation

Indirah Olf's speech and the accompanying Breaking Polarization poster from her team suggested that more cultural education, together with more direct contact between different groups, could help ease polarization among Dutch youth. The dilemma reconciliation workshop, led by VU Professors Brian

Tjemkes and Fons Trompenaars, offered participants a way of working with that kind of tension rather than around it, treating peace and hope, or stability and transformation, not as competing choices but as values that could be made to strengthen one another. For instance, by using fast, visible action to surface the feedback that is required for longer-term transformation.

4. Poster Session

During the coffee break, the hallway outside the main hall turned into something closer to a small exhibition, with nine posters giving participants a chance to talk directly with the co-makers, the students and researchers. Taken together, the posters were less a supplement to the day's speeches than a demonstration of the same argument in miniature: that peace and hope can be turned into actions with names, budgets and engaged people attached to them.

Toby Monte and Nikita de Kruijff presented the *UNESCO NL Youth Commission's poster*, which made a direct call for youth to be given a genuine seat at the table in decisions about a fairer, greener world. Portia Georgouras's *Blue Road Academy Global Impact* poster described a training and mentoring model that helps newcomers build careers in cloud computing through certification, mentorship and job-search support. From Türkiye, Arif Yilmaz and Nuri Soyucak presented on the *Turkish National Youth-centre System*, showing how culture, sport, skills training and volunteering are woven together to support young people at scale.

A cluster of posters addressed crisis and displacement directly. Robert Jjuuko, Alawia ElFarag, Manal Mohamed, Manal Eltayeb and Josje van der Linden presented *African Universities in Times of Crisis*, drawing on Sudan and Uganda to reimagine universities as spaces of hope and resilience rather than simply casualties of war. UNESCO Chair Cristina Giudici's MAPS and UNICORE posters extended this into research on migration and displacement and into concrete higher-education pathways for displaced students. A group of PUC high school students asked, in *No Hunger: Can the World End Hunger Without Stable Aid?*, whether food security should keep depending on unstable government funding, proposing instead a model built on smart logistics and diversified funding. Another student team presented *Breaking Polarization: Connecting Children Across Cultures*, proposing a cultural-exchange event called Culture Connect as a practical response to the same polarization Indirah Olf had raised in her plenary speech. Finally, Laura Rupp's *Language Stories Project* poster invited visitors to reflect on their own languages as carriers of identity, belonging, power and connection — a fitting companion to the workshop of the same name held later that afternoon.

5. Workshops

The heart of the afternoon was six parallel workshops, each taking a different route into the same underlying question of how peace and hope get built in practice, through communication, mentoring, ethics, dilemma reconciliation, crisis response, spirituality and research.

In Workshop 1 on Language Stories, Laura Rupp invited participants to sit with documentary clips and their own linguistic histories, exploring how language can open doors for some people while quietly closing them for others.



Figure 7: Presentation moment by Laura Rupp of Workshop 1, Language Stories themed session



Figure 8: Participants attending the discussion within the Language Stories workshop

Workshop 2 on Mentoring in Times of Uncertainty, run by mentors from the UNESCO Lecture Series We Shall Overcome, brought mentors and mentees together to share their stories of reconnecting displaced learners with academic and professional life, showing how something as simple as a consistent mentoring relationship can rebuild trust and continuity after displacement.



Figure 9: Workshop 2 leaders Portia Georgouras and Wim Leereveld in action – Mentoring in Times of Uncertainty



Figure 10: Group interactive discussion within the workshop 2 session

Dr. Brian Tjemkes, Rik Grooten and Fons Trompenaars's Dilemma Reconciliation and Paradoxes workshop 3 gave participants a structured way to work with — rather than resolve away, tensions such

as peace versus hope or stability versus transformation, treating the discomfort of holding both as productive rather than something to be engineered out.



Figure 11: Panoramic view of Workshop 3 venue with Brian, Rik and Fons steering the dilemma reconciliation process



Figure 12: UNESCO symposium volunteer interactive moment guiding workshop 3 participants

Workshop 4 on *African Universities in Times of Crisis*, was led by Josje van der Linden together with Dr. Robert Jjuuko, Dr. Alawia ElFarag, Manal Eltayeb and Cristina Giudici. Participants were split into subgroups working through real case studies from Sudan and Uganda, discussing online, hybrid and even "flying university" models for contexts shaped by war and post-conflict trauma.



Figure 13: Participants Workshop 4 seated for thematic group discussion

Workshop 5 *Be the Change: Indian Perspectives on Inner Transformation and Collective Harmony*, was facilitated by Dr. Puneet Bindlish and Dr. Gunjan Joshi. This workshop took participants through the concepts of Śāntiḥ, Ahimsā and Dharma as lenses for working through genuine ethical dilemmas. The workshop closed with five groups each designing their own model "peace-centred university". Among them a Dove University built around inner peace in the curriculum and an MLK University that made cross-cultural sessions mandatory for every student.



Figure 14: Interactive activity by UNESCO symposium volunteer at the symposium venue



Figure 15: Small subgroup discussion scene during Workshop 5

Finally, in Workshop 6 Jan Jorrit Hasselaar's *Hope as a Research* Program examined hope not as a mood but as a legitimate research and policy orientation, illustrated through the Hope-Driven Transition case in the Dutch infrastructure sector.



Figure 16: On-site interactive guiding activity of symposium workshop 6 participants



Figure 17: Presentation by Jan Jorrit Hasselaar, inside the conference room

What Participants Took from It

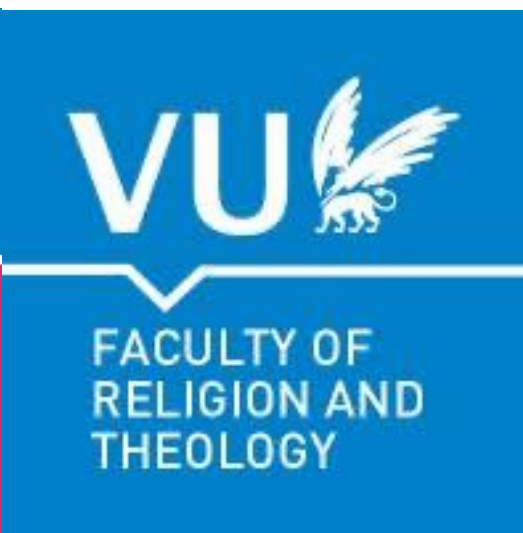
Reading across the reflections participants shared afterward, a few things stood out repeatedly: that language quietly shapes how confident people feel about speaking up in multicultural settings; that mentoring works in large part by shrinking the psychological distance between people from very

different backgrounds. Another takeaway is how deeply dilemma thinking connects to real human interaction. Dilemma reconciliation is a skills that can be developed, approaching tensions not as obstacles but as opportunities to build bridges. The Uganda case focused on Gulu University in a post-conflict context where trauma, unemployment and weak infrastructure continue to affect students and communities. The discussion identified hope as both necessary and complex: imposed hope can become negative when it lacks a material basis, while positive hope must be created collectively. Participants also reimagined the university as more than a physical building, discussing online, hybrid and flying university models. The five student-designed universities from the Indian-perspectives workshop captured this especially well, showing how abstract concepts like Śāntiḥ, Ahimsā and Dharma could be pulled down into concrete, if imperfect, institutional design. Finally, the Butterfly Programme in Workshop 6 where researchers periodically step back from their work to rest and reflect, seems like something many organizations could benefit from.

6. Acknowledgements

None of this happened in isolation. The symposium drew gratefully on cooperation with the Netherlands Commission for UNESCO, VU Workplace of Hope, the Martin Luther King Lezing, SBE Paradox and Dilemma Reconciliation Hub VU, SERVUS-VU, Inner Development Goals community, the VU Faculty of Humanities, THT Consulting, WCCES (World Council of Comparative Education Societies), Lived Religion and Society, VU Durf, and the VU Peace & Conflict Studies Centre. Behind the scenes, an organizing committee led by Dr. Sylvia van de Bunt and a team of student volunteers handled everything from hospitality, internal alignment, welcoming guests to running the poster session. It was their attention to the human details of the day, not just the logistics, that let so many different people feel genuinely at ease in the room together.





7. Reflection

If there is one sentence that captures what the day argued for, it is this: peace and hope cannot be separated. Peace on its own risks becoming procedural and distant; hope on its own risks staying abstract. Both need dialogue, education, institutional care and shared responsibility across generations, disciplines and cultures to stay real.

“We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” — Martin Luther King Jr., recalled in the symposium's closing reflection

What made the symposium more than a day of speeches was that it largely practiced what it preached, gathering youth, scholars, practitioners and community partners into one shared room rather than simply talking about the value of doing so. Echoing Archbishop Thabo Makgoba who stayed for a research sabbatical at VU during Spring 2026, we profoundly consider this UNESCO symposium and its six workshops as "islands of hope": small, concrete UNESCO actions that, taken together, add up to a wider landscape of hope in the spirit of King's own "infinite hope", the discipline of accepting finite disappointment without ever abandoning the larger commitment to justice, peace and connection.

That landscape kept extending impacting society after completion of the symposium. Indirah Olf's subsequent selection to the UNESCO National Youth Commission 2026–2027 was direct evidence that a youth voice raised in that room could translate into a lasting institutional role. Also, the book *Voices of Hope: Rediscovering and Building Hope for All*, published in May 2026 and coordinated by workshop leader Jan Jorrit Hasselaar, situates the day's message within a broader societal argument that hope is not passive optimism but an active, shared practice built through faith, courage, memory, responsibility and action. Taken together, the keynotes, panel, posters and workshops did not just discuss peace and hope as ideas - they practiced them, offering islands of hope, a working model for how universities might stay open, courageous and humane in divided times.

To All Participants, thank you for your engagement!

The Organizing Committee

1. Sylvia van de Bunt, UNESCO Chair on Cross-Cultural Sustainability (CCS) VU, UNESCO symposium co-leadership, and co-host
2. Gagan Kaur, VU international relations (DURF), UNESCO symposium co-leadership, and co-host
3. Jon Verriet, Netherlands Commission for UNESCO, senior science advisor, and co-host
4. Eleonora Tonazzoli, CCS UNESCO chair assistant
5. Sanaz Kateb, PhD and Post-doc researcher, CCS UNESCO Chair assistant

6. Jaap Gordijn, UNESCO Chair Decentralized Information Society Engineering VU
7. Jan Jorrit Hasselaar, Associate Professor Public Theology and director Amsterdam Centre for Religion and Sustainable Development VU
8. Willemijn Dekkers, secretariat