



SOFTNConference 2025 : Conference Report

17 November 2026

Purpose: This Conference Report outlines the vision and outcomes of the three-day international ***Shaping Our Futures Through New Coalitions (SOFTN) Conference***, held in Sri Lanka, 27-29th October 2025.

The conference was delivered over 3 days to 135 participants consisting of students, practitioners, academics, researchers, community scientists and political leaders from six countries. Each representing collaborative work achieved across multiple organisations, over the past 4 years (2022 – 2025) associated with working to promote population health within coastal, rural and isolated communities addressing health inequalities magnified by climate change.

Background: The original concept was identified during the NHS Mental Health Curriculum Sri Lanka Project, funded by NHS England East of England, as a collaborative between Norfolk and Suffolk Mental Health Care Trust, Cambridge and Peterborough NHS Trust, NHS England and University of East Anglia (UEA). This work was associated with a UK government backed initiative to achieve additional international nurses into the UK health and social care economy. However, the field work quickly identified that, through active engagement in delivering a combined NHS Mental health awareness programme and English language training, the outcomes achieved were more about outreach (in terms of workforce capacity and local practice improvements) that went far beyond a short-term recruitment campaign and skills programme.

The partnering delivery team recognised early the potential for sustainable relationship building, as opportunities for mutual knowledge exchange relating to a global health population, workforce crisis and associated climate challenges that continue to impact those most at risk (e.g. maternal and mental health of individuals and communities).

In discussion with the General Sir John Kotewala Defence University Vice Chancellor, and the Dean of Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, the idea for a conference was initially discussed as a way of scaling collaborative achievements, disseminating programme outcomes and inspiring the future health care workforce.



Approach: An international steering committee was convened in January 2025 consisting of partner organisations engaged in several different collaborative projects via a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with UEA, all of which had common themes of population health challenges and associated workforce advancements.

International Steering and Scientific Committee consisted of:

- **University of Sharjah** (UoS), United Arab Emirates: Professor Mohammed Allemadine, Dean Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, was an invited key note speaker. Dr Jaqueline Dias, Head of Nursing and Dr Mohammed Taihi (Head of Allied Health Professions) were scientific and steering committee members.
- **University of West Indies** (UWI), Trinidad and Tobago: Dr Oscar Ocho (former Director of Nursing and Health Sciences) has engaged in work with Prof Sally Hardy since 2013 considering mental health literacy and crisis risk management for the Caribbean. Dr Oscar Ocho was a member of the International Steering Committee, Scientific Committee, Session Chair and Home Group co-facilitator.
- **University of Technology** (UTECH) Jamaica: Professor Adella Campbell, Dean of College was an International Committee member, session Chair, and Home Group co-facilitator.
- **Federation University**, Australia: Professor Michael Ojasoli, Head of Mental Health was an International Committee member, session Chair, and Home Group co-facilitator.
- **General Sir John Kotewala Defence University** (KDU), Sri Lanka: Hosted the conference in Colombo Sri Lanka. The Vice Chancellor Rear Admiral HGU Dammika Kumara was in attendance as honoured guest at the inaugural session. The Dean of Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, Surgeon Captain Dr Ranga Perera, attended the opening ceremony, day 1 and 2 events. Dr Kalpani Abhayasinghe, was an International Committee member, Day 2 Host, and session facilitator for the symposium of Community of Scientists, led by the Foundation for Health Promotion, and the Mindfulness sessions, led by the most Venerable Uda Eriyagama Dhammajiva Maha Thero, Satipasala Foundation.
- **NICHE at UEA** was present and provided significant input in planning and managing the three-day conference. Professor Sally Hardy was the Conference Chair, delivered an interactive workshop and co-presented several papers over the three

days. Idris Phillips Fry was the Conference Secretary, with Joseph Collins providing IT and Admin support. Scarlet Williams was the technical and design lead, providing the SOFTNConference25 communications strategy (via the Conference website, Social Media campaign, conference brochure and signage). Dr Johnny Yuen led delivered concurrent sessions and acted as Chair to several events. Madeline Johnson (UEA MSC mental health nurse alumni) engaged as student ambassador, and site visit facilitator, panel member and concurrent session lead. Anca Mena, NICHE fellow presented a concurrent session. Shiju Shijudas, Education facilitator from NSFT presented a concurrent session and panel discussion. Claire Thompson, NICHE Scholar lead a creative interactive workshop. Rosalind Hewitt, NICHE Kintsugi Lead, and colleagues Holly Sandiford and Susie Childerhouse led an interactive workshop outlining the Norwich Museums Culture Club for Dementia. Samantha Coleman delivered on behalf of NICHE fellow Rene Grey, the Out of Bed Project. Dr Pinar Guslu Uven (NICHE economic evaluator) delivered a concurrent session using Dual Track Methodology, evaluating NICHE economic impact. Dr Pinar Guslu Uven (NICHE economic evaluator) delivered a concurrent session using Dual Track Methodology, evaluating NICHE economic impact. Catherine McMillan and Helen Rossiter presented a concurrent session on the THEO project.

- **United Kingdom** was represented through the RCN International team, Elsa Alfonso, Sally Wilson, and the Mental Health PSI lead, Catherine Gamble. Ann Jackson consulting led an interactive workshop on Compassion and Self Compassion in the workplace and Paul Johnson was the Keynote Speaker Day 1, attended as independent consultants. The Caribbean Nursing and Midwifery Association UK were also represented through the President Paulette Lewis, and Vice President Maurina Baron, who were conference chairs and co-delivered a concurrent session on Global Citizenship and panel discussion members.

Conference Programme: A three-day programme offered delegates choice of activities including 3 daily Keynote Speaker sessions, 11 concurrent sessions, 9 interactive workshops, 2 site visits, 4 home groups, 2 social events, poster viewing and 1 symposium.



The SOFTNConference25 Brochure provides a detailed descriptor of each activity on offer and a full list of speakers including bios and can be found on the conference website, under delegate information: <https://softnconf2025.com/8/>

The conference venue, Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel is in central Colombo, which offered two main areas for conference activities: the main ballroom and a second break out area Dukes Court, where concurrent sessions and workshops were also on offer during the morning and afternoon sessions. Posters were on display along the corridor space of the Ballroom.

Day 1: Monday 27th October 2025.

The opening ceremony welcomed 30 invited dignitaries as special guests, including Dr Anhil Jasinghe, Secretary of the Ministry of Health and Mass Media, Sri Lanka. A full list of those invited guests in attendance is available as appendix 1. KDU provided cultural performances and a traditional oil lamp lighting ceremony. Speeches and a short welcome address from the Conference Chair achieved a culturally significant opening ceremony, followed by presentations as set out in the brochure. Home groups were offered at the end of each day for further reflection on learning and networking opportunities. An evening drinks reception sponsored by Federation University, was undertaken on a pontoon boat across the lagoon.

Day 2: Tuesday 28th October 2025

A second keynote address was followed by an interactive symposium presented by Community Scientists in association with the Foundation for Health Promotion, Sri Lanka. A Mindfulness workshop in the afternoon was delivered by most Venerable Monks from one of the oldest monasteries in Sri Lanka. A site visit was also arranged in the afternoon to the SOS Children's Village Pilihandala. Concurrent presentation sessions were also underway. The evening conference dinner was a Sri Lanka themed event, attended by the Former VC of KDU, Major General (Retired) Milinda Peiris and Faculty Dean, Surgeon Captain Dr Ranga Perera. The Special Guest for the evening who gave some inspirational words on his humanitarian work, was Roshan Mahanama, perhaps more famously known for his International Cricketing achievements.

Day 3: Wednesday 29th October 2025

The third keynote address was delivered, further concurrent presentations and workshops plus a second site visit to the Indira Cancer Trust, was achieved. Engagement with the audience on their intentions for future influence were captured, and the closing ceremony



concluded the conference, with delegates being piped out of the ballroom by KDU musicians.



Day 3 SOFTNConference25: Some local delegates join conference speakers on stage

Conference feedback

Several organisations that attended, including students (nursing and public health) have written their 'heartfelt thanks' for the opportunity to attend the conference. One of which is provided here as an example of impact.

I hope this message finds you well. On behalf of the eleven students from the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, I would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to you and the organising committee. It was a truly inspiring and enriching experience for us all. The conference gave us the valuable opportunity to learn from international experts, share knowledge, and gain deeper insights into population health challenges. We were especially motivated by the interactive sessions, networking opportunities, and the encouragement given to young scholars like us. We deeply appreciate your support and generosity in making our participation possible. This experience has strengthened our academic and professional growth, and we are motivated to continue contributing to this important field. Thank you once again for

your kind support and wonderful opportunity prestigious global event.

for giving us this to be part of such a

Individual participants have also written to several of the planning committee offering their thanks for the opportunity, such as :

The conference was an exceptional learning experience. I gained valuable insights into global health systems, workforce collaboration and innovative strategies for social care. What I found most impactful was the opportunity to build connections, with professionals and researchers from around the world, which truly broadened my perspective and opened doors for future collaboration.

Feedback from Home Groups were also captured including statements of learning such as:

- *I learned that if I have a friend with depression from exams, I mustn't be afraid, I must guide and talk through and help with the knowledge that I have to offer support and guidance*
- *This is my first conference, it's very wholesome*
- *It's been really wonderful*
- *I've learned how all these different disciplines come together, so we don't work in isolation, and it all impacts*
- *The diversity of all the different topics has been great*
- *It's opened by eyes to the need to decentralise and build a good society*
- *The community scientists have inspired me with the work in community*

Post Conference activities

Thursday 30th October 2025, several of the planning committee attended a tree planting



ceremony at the Bellanwila Attidiya Sanctuary. Six native Madhucalongi Folia (Mee tree) saplings were planted, of 50 trees donated to the Sanctuary to symbolise ongoing sustainability and commitment to future eco-systems.



The International Steering committee are planning a debriefing session which will consolidate lessons learned and any ongoing potential for collaborations.

We were saddened to hear that ongoing disaster associated with the Hurricane Melissa (one of the strongest hurricanes on record) hit Jamaica on Tuesday 28th October, 2025.

We all send our well wishes to all public sector services working hard to overcome the community devastation this has caused. We remain in contact with Dr Adella Campbell to consider how we can support any aspects of restoration required.

Professor Sally Hardy, SOFNTConference25 Chair.

Further information

The Conference e brochure is available on the conference website:

<https://softnconf2025.com>

Professor Saramasinghe (Keynote Speaker, day 2) was interviewed and gave a Sinhalese interview on Pehikada TV programme Sirasa TV

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkSknvX7BBc>) then the next day, Professor Sally Hardy was invited to be interviewed for broadcast on Newsfirst Sri Lanka TV.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoFuJqpRz6Y>

A paper article has been published based on the Symposium of community scientists in SLguardian (<https://slguardian.org/sri-lankas-community-scientists-redefining-health-from-the-ground-up/>)



APPENDIX ONE:

SOFTNConference 2025 Opening Ceremony

Agenda

- 08.30 am – 09.00 am : Registration of the Participants
- 09.00 am – 09.05 am : Arrival of Guests
- 09.05 am – 09.10 am : Lighting of the Traditional Oil Lamp
- 9.10 am – 9.15 am : Puja Dance Performance
- 9.15 am - 9.20 am : Welcome Address by the Conference Chair: Professor Sally Hardy
- 9.20 am - 9.25 am : Introduction to the Chief Guest
- 9.25 am – 9.35 am : Address by the Chief Guest: Dr Anil Jasinghe, Secretary of the Ministry of Health and Mass Media Sri Lanka.
- 9.35 – 9.40 am : Introduction to the Guest of Honour
- 9.40 am – 9.50 am : Address from Guest of Honor : Rear Admiral Dammika Kumara, Vice Chancellor KDU
- 09.50 – 10.00 am : Address by Special Guest Honorable Dilith Jayaweera MP
- 10.00 am – 10.05 am : Cultural Performance
- 10.05 – 10.10 am : Vote of Thanks by the Conference Secretary: Dr Kalpani Abhayasinghe

List of Invited Special Guests for Inauguration Event (Opening Ceremony)

TBC: *denotes those lighting the lamp (max 16)

TITLE	ORGANISATION	Lamp Lighting
Rear Admiral HGU Dammika Kumara, VSV, USP, psc, MMaritimePol, BSc (DS)	Vice Chancellor General Sir John Kotelawala Defense University (KDU) Sri Lanka	*
Surgeon Captain Ranga Perera MBBS, MS, MRCS, FRCS	Dean, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, General Sir John Kotelawala Defense University (KDU) Sri Lanka	*
Professor Athula Sumathipala	Honorary Director, Institute for Research and Development in Health and Social Care Sri Lanka	*
Dr Anil Jasinghe	Representative, Honorable Speaker to Parliament Sri Lanka	
Honorable Dilith Jayamera MP	Member of Parliament, Leader of the Sarvajana Balaya, Sri Lanka Attorney at Law	*
Theresa Mahoney	High Commissioner UK, Sri Lanka	*
Major General (Retd) Milinda Peiris	Former VC, General Sir John Kotelawala Defense University (KDU) Sri Lanka	*
Mrs MBC Samanmalee	Director of Nursing (Clinical) Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka	*
Senior Professor Narada Warnasuriya MBBS, FRCP, DCH	Senior Professor Paediatrics General Sir John Kotelawala Defense University (KDU) Sri Lanka	
Dr Sujatha Semeviratne	Senior Lecturer, Department of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Sri Aywardenepura	
Saroja Sirisena	Former High Commissioner UK, International	*

	SOFTNConference25 Committee	
Dr Kalpani Abhayasinghe	SOFTNConference25 Secretary Former Head of Nursing, General Sir John Kotelawala Defense University (KDU) Sri Lanka	*
Professor Diyanath Samarasinghe	Faculty of Applied Sciences, Rajarata University, Sri Lanka SOFTNConference25, Keynote Speaker	
Professor Mohammad Alameddine	Professor Health Management and Policy, University of Sharjah, UAE SOFTNConference25, Keynote Speaker	*
Paul Johnson	Independent Consultant, SOFTNConference25, Keynote Speaker	*
Dr Oscar Ocho	Former Director, School of Nursing, University of West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago SOFTNConference25 International Steering Committee Member	*
Professor Michael Olasoji	Associate Head of Nursing Research, Professor of Mental Health Nursing, Federation University, Australia SOFTNConference25 International Steering Committee Member	*
Professor Adella Campbell	Dean of the College of Health Sciences, University of Technology (UTECH) Jamaica	*
Maddie Johnson	Mental Health Nurse, Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust. SOFTNConference25 International Steering Committee Member	*
Idris Phillips-Fry	Programme Manager, Norfolk Initiative for Coastal and rural	*

	Health Equalities (NICHE), Anchor Institute, University of East Anglia (UEA) Norwich, England SOFTNConference25 International Steering Committee Secretary	
Gabrielle Irwin	Associate Director in Healthcare, East of England. SOFTNConference25 International Steering Committee Member	*
Dayani Baiai	Sri Lanka Nurses Association, UK	
Professor Sally Hardy	Professor of Mental Health and Practice Innovation, UEA England. SOFTNConference25 International Steering Committee Chair	