

**SOUTH AFRICAN ASSOCIATION OF
BOTANISTS: WELCOME & OPENING**

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Introduction

The President of the South African Association of Botanists, Prof. Farrant, members of the SAAB Council, the Rhodes Conference Organizing Committee under the leadership of Prof. Nigel Barker, distinguished guests, presenters and participants from local and international universities, molweni, good morning

It is a great privilege to host the 2011 SAAB conference Rhodes University, and a great pleasure to welcome you all to Rhodes, to Grahamstown, to the Makana region and to the Eastern Cape province. To our participants from Nigeria, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, the UK, Australia and the USA, a warm welcome also to South Africa.

My thanks to our Department of Botany and Conference and Events Office for their efforts in hosting this conference, and also to SAAB and to all 250 odd of you for entrusting Rhodes with this conference, and for travelling long distances to grace us with your participation.

I am especially pleased by the presence of colleagues from elsewhere in Africa. The conference's Pan-African nature gels well with Rhodes' aspiration to be an outstanding African university, 'which proudly affirms its African identity', and is rooted in the aspirations, challenges and struggles of the continent.

For transport, logistic and costs reasons, compared to universities in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, Rhodes academics have to work hard to attract and host national and especially international conferences.

That we do so with considerable success is testimony to the quality of the scholars to be found at Rhodes and the recognition that the University enjoys nationally and internationally.

Indeed, as a University we take pride in having among South African universities the best pass and graduation rates and among the best research outputs per academic staff member.

Some imagine and like to say that our successes have to do with the fact that there is very little to do in our quaint small town. Hardly!

We like to think that it has to do with the fact that at Rhodes we take knowledge, scholarship and learning very seriously and that we work hard to create an institutional culture that embraces academic freedom and intellectual autonomy and debate, and values creativity, knowledge and scholarship.

The theme of this 37th annual conference of SAAB, '*Plants in a Changing World*', speaks to the dramatic changes that have been and are occurring in the epoch of *globalisation*, which has as its driving forces huge increases in the speed of travel and "the technological revolution in communications, the internet and large-scale computerized information systems." These have resulted in the compression of time and space and now "make it possible to conduct business on a planetary scale in real time" (Berdahl, 2008:46).

One consequence of globalisation has been to massively accelerate environmental problems and enhance global climate change, with clear consequences and implications for plant life – an issue you will be addressing in this conference.

At the same time, the epoch of globalisation has given rise to unfortunate orthodoxies that have been hugely harmful to how we think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about education and knowledge.

Increasingly the trend is to approach higher education and investments in universities from the perspective largely of the promotion of economic growth and the preparation of students as productive workers for the labour market and economy.

I don't dispute that higher education must cultivate the knowledge, competencies and skills that enable graduates to contribute to economic development; such economic development can facilitate initiatives geared towards greater social equality and wider social development.

Nor do I dispute that in many cases there is need for extensive restructuring of qualifications and programmes to make curricula more congruent with the knowledge, expertise and skills needs of a changing economy.

However, an instrumental and purely utilitarian approach to higher education which reduces its value to its efficacy for economic growth, and calls that higher education should comprise of largely professional, vocational and career-focused programmes and should prioritise 'skills' is to denude higher education of its considerably wider social value and functions. So to do the creeping horrendous notion of students as 'customers' and 'clients' of universities.

In the *Financial Times* of 1 February 2007 Martin Wolf writes: "We talk as if nothing mattered except a country's ability to create material wealth" and criticizes Britain's skills agenda and its "emphasis on practical utility". He goes on to say:

This narrow agenda now dominates policy for education and training. What, the reader might ask, is wrong with that? Why should anybody pay attention to airy-fairy notions of education for its own sake? The answer is straightforward: these attitudes represent not merely a confusion of means with ends. They represent a perverse placing of means above ends.

Education is also a goal in its own right. If we must put this in economists' language, we can say that understanding is a form of wealth.

Wolf goes on to add:

All this, however, today's depressingly utilitarian debate implicitly rejects. Thus the reason for compelling young people to stay on in school...is to make them not wiser or even better citizens, but more productive. Yet to glory in the utilitarian over the fulfilling, and in practical knowledge over understanding, is more than a mistake; it is perverse.

This is financial correspondent who displays great insight.

It is vital that as academics and university administrators we revalue and reclaim knowledge and education as fundamental cornerstones of human development and restore to universities their important and varied social purposes.

We must also insist on the core purposes of higher education.

The first is to *produce knowledge*, so that we can advance understanding of our natural and social worlds and enrich our accumulated scientific and cultural heritage.

This means that we “test the inherited knowledge of earlier generations”, we dismantle the mumbo jumbo that masquerades for knowledge, we “reinvigorate” knowledge and we share our findings with others (Boulton and Lucas, 2008:3).

We undertake research into the most arcane and abstract issues and the “most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge”. At the same time we also strive to apply our discoveries for the benefit of humankind (ibid., 2008:3).

We “operate on both the short and the long horizon”. On the one hand, we grapple with urgent and “contemporary problems” and seek solutions to these. On the other hand, we “forage” into issues and undertake enquiries “that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit” (Boulton and Lucas, 2008:3).

As a university our second purpose is to *disseminate knowledge* and to *cultivate minds*.

Our goal is to ensure that our students can think imaginatively, “effectively and critically”; that they “achieve depth in some field of knowledge”; that they can critique and construct alternatives, that they can communicate cogently, orally and in writing, and that they have a “critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves” (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000:84).

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At the same time, we should also seek that our students should have “a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times”; should be “able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it”, and that they should have “some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems” (ibid., 2000:84).

Implicit, here is the idea that our societies require graduates who are not just capable professionals, but also sensitive intellectuals and critical citizens and that we are “tasked with the arduous formation of a critical, creative and compassionate citizenry” (O’ Connel, 2006).

The idea of a contribution to democratic citizenship, and to the general “cultivation of humanity”, means the development of “three capacities” (Nussbaum, 2006:5). “First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions”; Second, is students seeing themselves “as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern” – which necessitates knowledge and understanding of different cultures and “of differences of gender, race, and sexuality” (ibid:6). Third, it is, however, more than “factual knowledge” that is required. Also necessary is “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” (Nussbaum, 2006:6-7).

Our final purpose as a university is to undertake *community engagement*.

On the one hand this involves our students’ voluntary participation in community projects. On the other hand, it involves service-learning, in which through academic courses our students and academics take part “in activities where both the community” and we benefit, “and where the goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance our *learning* through rendering this service”.

I have deliberately avoided using the words ‘epistemology’ and ‘ontology’ in reminding us of the core purposes of universities, since my erstwhile professor, Nigel Barker, says that these

concepts are foreign to natural scientists. But in the epoch of globalisation and given contemporary orthodoxies and discourses as universities we are, nonetheless, having to increasingly grapple with issues of 'epistemology' and 'ontology' and our traditional and often outmoded and unacceptable ways of thinking about knowledge and about people.

Conferences such as these involve considerable resources and efforts. These resources are, not infrequently, public resources. In as much as they provide valuable important 'breathing' spaces from the daily routines of teaching, tutorials, meetings and work, conferences are vitally important spaces for the respectful clash of theories and ideas, for the advancement of knowledge and understanding, and for the thinking through of the implications of such knowledge and ideas for day-to-day practice.

Colleagues, beyond communicating, as we do at conferences such as these, with peer scholarly communities, our universities and scholars have the responsibility to also, in the words of Stephen Jay Gould, "convey the power and beauty of (knowledge) to the hearts and minds" of the general public (2006).

The issue of communicating beyond the confines of universities and scholarly communities poses whether our universities and scholars engage sufficiently with the public and serve adequately as catalysts of critical public education and intellectual and cultural debate, as part of higher education's rationale of advancing the public good. I sincerely hope that some of the papers being presented here will be turned into newspaper feature articles and opinion pieces.

Over the next three days an exciting and impressive range of sessions and presentations, over 170 oral presentations and 35 poster presentations on a variety of issues will be covered at this conference.

I am most pleased that there are postgraduate students at this conference. Producing new and next generations of scholars, who also more extensively reflect the demographics of our country, are urgent and pressing challenges. These postgraduates are the next generation of

botanists and they must be given the requisite support and opportunities so that they can develop as outstanding scholars and specialists.

In closing, I trust that you will enjoy a stimulating and productive conference in this lovely Eastern Cape location, and that through vigorous and critical discussion you will emerge with insights and ideas that will help advance discovery, knowledge and understanding.

I also wish you an enjoyable stay at Rhodes and in Grahamstown and I am confident that you will find your Rhodes colleagues friendly and hospitable hosts.

References

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