

**Southern Africa Institute of  
Management Scientists: welcome and Opening**

**Dr. Saleem Badat  
Vice-Chancellor, Rhodes University**

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## Introduction

The Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Southern African Institute of Management Scientists, Prof. Elmarie Venter; the Head of the Department of Management at Rhodes University, Prof. Lynette Louw; the Rhodes Conference Organizing Team, presenters and participants from various universities and institutions, distinguished guests, molweni, good morning

It is a great privilege for Rhodes University to host the 2010 SAIMS conference, and also a great pleasure to welcome you all to Mpekwini and the Eastern Cape. To participants from other parts of Africa, a warm welcome also to South Africa.

My thanks to our Department of Management and Conference and Events Office for their efforts in hosting this conference, and also to SAIMS and you all 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 other parts of 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 like to say that our successes have to do with the fact that there is very little to do in our 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 values creativity, knowledge and scholarship.

## **Challenges**

Our world is dramatically different from that of a few decades ago and even just a few years ago.

For one, we live in the epoch of *globalisation*, which is characterised by “an expansion of economic activities across national boundaries” as manifested in “international trade, international investment and international finance”, by the “flows of services, technology, information and ideas across national boundaries” (Nayyar, 2008:4), and by the global organisation of production through transnational corporations.

The driving forces have been huge increases in the speed of travel and “the technological revolution in communications, the internet and large-scale computerized information systems”, which have resulted in the compression of time and space and “make it possible to conduct business on a planetary scale in real time” (Berdahl, 2008:46). The new “world market...is beyond the reach of the nation state” and also means a reduced agency on the part of nation state (ibid:47).

Driven by market forces and the technological revolution, globalisation has exercised “an influence on the nature of institutions that impact higher education”, and on the “ways and means of providing higher education” (Nayyar, 2008:7). It has also come to shape “education both in terms of what is taught and what is researched, and (has shifted) both student interests and university offerings away from broader academic studies and towards narrower vocational programmes” (Duderstadt et al, 2008:275).

For another, since 2008 we have been living under the severest *global financial crisis* that the world has experienced in over seventy years.

One reason for the crisis is that despite globalization and greater contact across regions, nations, cultures, religions and languages, during recent decades there has been an all too evident closing of minds and hearts and negation of important human values.

The negation of core human values – respect for human dignity, human rights, difference and diversity, and the oneness of humanity – and the closing of hearts have promoted destructive fundamentalisms of various kinds, intolerance and prejudice, and have made the world a much less just, safe and secure place.

The closing of the mind has been evident in economic and social thought and policies that have prevailed during the past twenty years. Wisdom derived from vigorous intellectual debate, knowledge, and understanding has been disdained. Instead of the idea of the public good, self-serving ideas based on arrogant power and narrow economic interests have triumphed.

The result has been dubious and pernicious economic and social orthodoxies that have slowly matured into the grave financial crisis which envelopes the world today.

Under the sway of these orthodoxies a culture of unbridled individualism, greed and crass materialism has taken root, its mantra ‘grab what you can and damn the rest’.

Instead of a concern with people, social equity and justice, in the new gilded age the unadulterated pursuit of power, self-interest, money, material wealth, profits, and performance bonuses have come to be the new gods.

Drawing on Dickens’ memorable opening lines in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the global financial crisis has been ‘the worst of times’, an ‘age of foolishness’, an ‘epoch of incredulity’, ‘the season of Darkness’, ‘the winter of despair’, with ‘nothing before us’.

Still, among the dark clouds there could be silver lining, and the global crisis could also become ‘the best of times’, an ‘age of wisdom’, an ‘epoch of belief’, a ‘season of Light’, ‘the spring of hope’, a time when we ‘ha(ve) ‘everything before us’.

The current crisis provides the opportunity for a new imagination that is freed from the stifling and dangerous orthodoxies of the past decades.

It creates the space for new ideas, and for the recovery of important values related to human development, justice, solidarity, freedom and the oneness of humanity.

It enables us to think about and act to construct a different kind of world and different kind of citizenship, 'a world where markets are servants, not masters'.

Whether and to what extent this happens, whether amidst these 'worst of times' and 'winter of despair' we move into 'the spring of hope' with 'everything before us' depends on us.

It depends on whether, as intellectuals and scholars, as graduates and citizens, and as universities and government's we take on the responsibility of re-thinking and re-making our world and our societies on the basis of other principles and logics than the ones that have dominated in recent decades.

This new logic must first and foremost put human development, people's needs, justice and human rights at the centre of all our actions.

It must more greatly appreciate, respect, and affirm difference and diversity related to race, gender, sexual orientation, language and culture as well-springs of social vitality and strength - a vitality that is as much intellectual, ontological, epistemological and methodological, as it is social and personal.

The orthodoxies of the last two decades have been especially harmful to how we think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about education and knowledge.

Increasingly the trend has been 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.

It is not disputed that higher education must cultivate the knowledge, competencies and skills that enable graduates to contribute to economic development, since such development can facilitate initiatives geared towards greater social equality and social development.

Nor is it disputed 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.

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.

A new logic must revalue and reclaim knowledge and education as fundamental cornerstones of human development and restore to universities their important and varied social purposes. It 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).

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”.



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, (and we should endeavour to locate them in salubrious and lovely environments such as this), 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 one hundred in all, on important issues will be covered at this conference, under the theme 'A discourse on the influence of management. Does it matter?'

I am most pleased that there are a number of papers that look inwards into higher education and universities. Universities are multi-million and even multi-billion rand enterprises, which continue to depend on significant public subsidies.

To effectively undertake our diverse educational and social purposes, and to discharge our commitment "to the spirit of truth" (Graham, 2005:163), our universities must possess the necessary academic freedom and institutional autonomy. However, while academic freedom and institutional autonomy are necessary conditions, they are also rights in which

duties inhere (Jonathan, 2006), and we must also be committed to being held publicly and democratically accountable.

Universities and scholars, quite rightly, bring under their gaze and analysis, micro-analysis and, now, nano-analysis everything in our universe. Yet curiously, and perhaps notoriously, we are often tardy and diffident to undertake penetrating analysis of our own institutions, be it our value to society, the efficacy of our research and learning-teaching, or our effectiveness and efficiency with respect to governance and management, policy- and decision-making, and so forth. We also tend to be poor at drawing on the expertise that resides in our own institutions in relation to issues of governance, management and administration.

I am also 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 management academics and specialists 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 and friendly 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 Mpekweni and I am confident that you will find your Rhodes colleagues friendly and hospitable hosts.

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