

## INCLUSIVE GROWTH AND INNOVATIONS IN RESEARCH

### Opening of the Research Commons at Stellenbosch University

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Thank you for this opportunity to participate in this innovation and exploration in the search for greater synergies, access, efficiency in the production and distribution of knowledge and information.

In an increasingly uncertain, complex and competitive world, South Africa has to more urgently both marshal its existing – and intensify the production of new – creativity, talent and innovative resources to both collaborate on a level playing field and to advance as a people and economy beyond our current performance.

In a recent study on “Global growth generators: Moving beyond emerging markets and BRICs” Buitter, Willem H and Ebrahim Rahbari (2011), identify some indicators to assess the potential of various countries. Among them are:

- a measure of human capital, itself aggregating demographic, health and educational achievement indices, and
- a measure of institutional quality

The role of universities in the development of human capital, and their own internal efficiencies, have already come into sharp profile. As has the ability of a country and institutions such as universities to attain alignment in the quest to achieve national goals.

In addition Buitter and Rahbari say, “we believe that there was never a better time for humanity, as regards the satisfaction of material wants, than the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is likely to be. There is no secret to how to achieve high growth rates. Some of the necessary conditions are, however, not choices – even collective choices – that nations or regions can make. Others represent the result of choices that ought not to be made”.

The pre-eminent challenges in SA are indeed about “the satisfaction of material wants” by growing our economy, ensuring an equitable distribution of benefits and driving uncompromisingly toward social justice. The development of our capacity and a collective will to create a better life for all South Africans remains a vital concern.

The idea of the “commons” is familiar to students of economics and public policy because of an influential paper written by Garret Hardin entitled “The Tragedy of the Commons,” first published in the journal *Science* in 1968.

The basic idea has been around for far longer of course. It is that a common or shared resource will be over-exploited, that if herders are free to graze their livestock on shared grassland, it will become overgrazed. This understanding can be traced back to Roman and Greek explanations for the laws and institutions surrounding private property, and it was part of the justification for the great disruption of land tenure arrangements in Europe in the eighteenth century sometimes described as the “enclosure” movement.

In public policy, the idea of the “tragedy of the commons” has been applied to many regulatory problems: managing oceanic fish stocks, dealing with air pollution, licensing access to the radio frequency spectrum and of course in recent times, the challenge of greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.

These are important issues. But it is unfortunate that the idea of the commons is so closely tied up with this negative parable, because in reality the positive dimensions of our shared institutional legacy and resource base are far more important and more pervasive.

Modern life and civilization are built on an immensely varied and interconnected matrix of common assets – language, mathematics, the rules of science, the great bodies of scientific and engineering knowledge of which this University and others are the proud trustees, our systems of law and commerce, the arts, literature and even the imprecise and sometimes embarrassing field of disputation we call politics – all of this is a shared resource, a common heritage.

Librarians and archivists, hoarders of books and papers, and these days managers of websites and electronic databases, have for centuries been the custodians of humankind's documented commons, and so in an important sense have always understood this positive concept of the commons. Librarianship has always been at least in part about sharing access to knowledge – although of course that sharing has typically been stratified and segmented in ways that are variously bound up with power, wealth and influence.

*How* access to knowledge is shared is therefore part of the great drama of growth and the distribution of its benefits that is the object of political economy, as both a science of understanding and a practical art.

How to broaden the benefits of economic growth is central to the challenge of public policy and development in South Africa. But it is also a focus of renewed attention and controversy internationally.

We know that we have lived through, and are still living through, an extraordinary time of financial upheaval in the global economy. What went wrong in financial markets and financial governance and how to protect our economies against the same mistakes – these are questions under scrutiny within many countries and in numerous international forums.

There are many strands to this debate, and it is increasingly recognized that it is not just about financial arrangements.

It is beginning to be recognized that there is also an important distributional aspect to the dynamics of financial distress and crisis, and of economic recovery and its sustainability.

The severity of the sub-prime housing finance collapse in the United States was of course in part a consequence of the mis-selling and deceptive repackaging of loans through new financial instruments that were neither well understood nor effectively regulated. But it was also in part a consequence of the steady deterioration in earnings and income distribution in an economy in which the benefits of growth disproportionately went to the rich. There was a great expansion in employment and home ownership in the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s, but the income security of many millions of industrial and service industry workers and their families became more precarious as inequality and net wealth distribution widened. A crisis in household credit markets is never just about financial mistakes, it is also about the distribution of income and insecurity of living standards, which in turn affects the affordability of credit and vulnerability to changes in market circumstances.

So the question of how growth can be made more inclusive is being asked in the richest economies in the world, in fast-growing developing economies faced with the stresses of rapid urbanization and rising expectations, and it has suddenly come to the fore in countries facing unexpected democratic pressures. Questions about how the benefits of human development can be made more equal are being asked in Latin America, in India, in emerging African economies. Questions about how government expenditure can more rapidly and effectively contribute to broadening social and economic participation are being asked in rich countries as well as in developing economies.

What has all of this to do with modern facilities for supporting post-graduate research?

Mobilisation of knowledge is at the centre of growth and development, and so the direct objectives of this University facility are themselves important – supporting post-graduate research work, making use of

information technology in making the research process more efficient and bringing together expertise from different disciplines and from different institutions in innovative ways.

Higher education gets a significant share of our national budget, but it competes with many other priorities. And so we have to find better ways to support the research process, and to support partnerships between institutions and between the University and other research sponsors, if we are to succeed in building excellence and expanding access to higher education study opportunities and post-graduate work.

There are also indirect linkages between the “research commons” project and our inclusive growth challenge that deserve our critical attention.

There is an opportunity, firstly, to develop specialized areas of expertise in fields that we know are especially important in our social and economic circumstances. I don’t want to suggest that we should be overly prescriptive in shaping the University’s research agenda. But the academic project is not just about universal knowledge, it is also about specialized expertise. We have to seek solutions to our most pressing challenges: the unacceptable high death rate of adults and the concomitant breaking down of family structures as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, an unacceptably high infant mortality rate, the imbalances in our economic structure and labour market that contribute to such high rates unemployment, the dynamics of urbanization and meeting water and service delivery needs. We also need focused attention on our remarkable biodiversity, agricultural potential, improving safety in our mines or on our roads, taking advantage of developments in biotechnology or advances in materials engineering.

Progress in these and a thousand other areas of specialization depends on special people with extraordinary knowledge, but it also depends on the networks through which they work with others with related or complementary interests. And supporting these networks is part of what the Research Commons project is all about.

Secondly, there is an opportunity here to strengthen shared knowledge arrangements between the academic community and business or community partners.

This is more difficult than the business of supporting academic colleagues who need to work together. There may be intellectual property issues to consider, and the problems of trust or overcoming coordination difficulties can easily get in the way of effective knowledge sharing across sectoral and institutional boundaries.

Yet there is an important sense in which the research effort has far the greatest potential to change lives, to make a difference to economic and social development, if and only if we succeed in building bridges across the academic business/community divide. It doesn’t happen automatically. An excellent university can remain just that – and a world-class scientist can be exactly that, recognized and applauded by his or her peers internationally but of no practical consequence at home.

This is a challenge that needs to be addressed deliberately and with focused effort. We need to put serious, substantial work into strengthening working partnerships between our centres of research and knowledge expertise and our factories and business organisations, our municipalities, our schools and community organisations. This is surely a project in which a Research Commons can play a constructive role.

Thirdly, inclusive growth and broad-based participation means taking redistribution and equality of opportunity seriously. A well-managed Research Commons will not limit its shared resources to the established research community, but will also set out to support broad-based access to its shared resources.

In our “Google” age and with instantaneous access to *Wikipedia* and the like, we all understand the *possibility* of much expanded access of everyone to knowledge resources. The real constraints are not so much in the knowledge community as in the arena of communications technology, broadband distribution and availability of computers in the household and the classroom and the community library.

But there is a risk of complacency here. It is easy to say that there is a wealth of information available on the web, and there are wider forces at work driving access to the internet, and it is not necessary to get involved. On the contrary, it is that much more important in today's world of universal media that we ensure that our unique and dedicated knowledge resources should become more broadly available – and that the accompanying support services are also geared to meet needs from outside the formal post-graduate research community.

Which brings us back full circle, because support services are not without cost, in terms of time and capacity and skills. If the research commons operates without rules of access, and attempts to offer every kind of support to everyone, then it too will be subject to the burden of over-use, and accompanying degradation of capacity. And so the rules of access, and the intelligent use of technology to ensure the broadest possible access within realistic bounds of resource availability, have a lot of work to do. The opportunities are immense – to make a difference to more effective communication between researchers with shared interest, to promote proactive partnerships between researchers and the business and community sectors, and to create broad-based access to knowledge and research support beyond the confines of the academy. These are the challenges before you, and I am delighted to have had the opportunity to participate in the launch of this wonderful new venture.