

[DRAFT: Embargoed until delivery; Subject to change; Compare against delivery]

Inaugural National Higher Education Conference,

organised by Universities South Africa (USAf)

2–4 October 2019, CSIR International Convention Centre, Meiring Naudé Road, Brummeria, Pretoria

**Opening and welcome by Prof Wim de Villiers, USAf Vice-Chairperson
and Stellenbosch University Rector and Vice-Chancellor**

Morning, folks! Good to be here. Glad to see all of you. A warm welcome to this inaugural National Higher Education Conference, organised by Universities South Africa (USAf).

We have academics and other staff from both public and private higher education institutions here; researchers; policy makers from government; representatives from business and industry, as well as interested members of the public.

Thanks for joining us – from around the country. Around 250 delegates have registered for this event, which is very encouraging. This is the first time that USAf is hosting a National Higher Education Conference, and the intention is to make it a regular feature on the calendar.

We certainly need a gathering like this in our sector, which continues to see rigorous debate about the future of our institutions. Universities are some of society's most enduring institutions. Yet the world is changing fast, and all kinds of pressures are mounting on universities that are likely to affect their on-going existence. Technological advances, economic forces, demographic shifts and various other social factors mean universities have to adapt or face the risk of going under.

This is not only a local discussion. Critical questions continue to be asked of universities globally. Are they still relevant? Does a university education guarantee good employment? Are they not too expensive? Why should one go to university if the world's best professors are sharing their knowledge online for free? Are they not too elitist and exclusive?

Universities are having to think deeply about their continued existence and make major changes in order to adapt to new circumstances. But institutional transformation and innovation – deep and extensive change with an eye to systemic sustainability – is not easy. It creates uncertainties and places high demands on all involved. This makes it difficult to achieve the desired results.

We cannot shy away from our challenges. We play an important role in society; we have a vital contribution to make to national development, helping our country and its citizens tackle the numerous challenges we face now and going into the *future*.

Yet we come from a particular *past* that continues to influence the *present*. So, it is apt that we talk about **“Reinventing South Africa's universities for the future.”**

The rationale for this theme is two-fold. Firstly, the imperative for SA universities to change their institutional cultures to better accommodate new generations of students and staff; and secondly, to respond appropriately to the challenges and opportunities presented by the rapid technological developments associated with the fourth industrial revolution (4IR).

Our universities must change, not only for their own sake but for the benefit of society at large.

We will have plenary sessions and also parallel sessions. Topics that will be addressed in plenary sessions include the implications of the 4IR for universities; a new look at systemic quality assurance; and interesting developments in open access to scholarly publications.

The parallel sessions will explore such topics as curriculum for the future; ethics and integrity in research publishing; institutional culture change; infrastructure for a growing and evolving sector; and reinventing work integrated learning and internships.

We hope that all of this will inform and shape the ongoing discussion in USAf's five strategy groups: teaching and learning; research and innovation; transformation; funding; and the world of work.

Colleagues, Jeffrey Buller (2015) points out that higher education does not handle change particularly well. Ironically, “the very institutions that exist to develop innovative ideas and question traditional ways of doing things” seem to be “so resistant to change that they often stifle it.”

We’ve heard it said before, but it remains true that it is probably ‘easier to change the course of history than it is to change a history course.’

This is a problem because the “choice in higher education today isn’t whether we should change but how ... Change is already here. The issue is what we’re going to do about it and what type of change we want for our ... universities” (Buller 2015:55).

Therefore, the challenge becomes how we “can work together constructively to produce an academic culture that responds well to each new challenge or opportunity, capitalise on evolving possibilities when times are good and demonstrate resilience when times are bad.”

The “most important task for ... leaders in higher education is not to announce a specific goal but rather to spend [our] time creating a culture of innovation and continuous learning” (says Buller).

We need to engage “in a new kind of change leadership – one that takes an organic approach to ‘grow’ change, not a mechanical approach to ‘manufacture’ change.”

Meaningful change is all about the culture of an institution, and the culture is all about the people.

We need to trust the people we work with, empower them, and recognise their efforts to be creative, and the change that can result from that is likely to be more spectacular than can be possible with even the [best] strategic plan.

This conference provides a strategic opportunity for the higher education sector and its stakeholders to critically reflect on what it will take to “Reinventing South Africa’s universities for the future.”

Let’s make the most of this wonderful opportunity ... as a collective.

REFERENCES:

Buller, Jeffrey L. 2015. *Change Leadership in Higher Education: A Practical Guide to Academic Transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.