

STAKEHOLDERS CONSIDER STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS POST-COVID-19 AT THE FIRST ONLINE MEETING OF THE TPCP AND THE CPHB

Participants attending the first online meeting of the Tree Protection Co-operative Programme (TPCP) and the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Plant Health Biotechnology (CPHB) on 12 May contemplated the state of partnerships between academia and industry. This as the research programmes gear up for a “new normal” in the aftermath of COVID-19. The TPCP and the CPHB have relied on a powerful synergy over the years and this has included their strategic partnerships with the University of Pretoria, stakeholders in the South African forestry industry and various government departments. In her introductory welcome address, Director of the CPHB Professor Emma Steenkamp predicted that these partnerships would remain “crucial” in a post-COVID-19 world.



Chief Executive Officer of York Timbers Mr Pieter van Zyl said COVID-19 would be considered a “good crisis” if it placed greater emphasis on universities to groom “sharp people” with the analytical abilities to be proactive in finding solutions to societal challenges. He also emphasised the importance of Universities as platforms to stimulate ‘Coopetition’ between diverse partners, including international expert networks, industries and government. He congratulated the two programmes on the excellence of their research in forestry and tree health over the years and urged them to never compromise on being “world-class”.

UP Vice-chancellor Prof. Tawana Kupe said the level of support that a university enjoyed from industry was a gauge of its “vibrancy”. Prof. Kupe said a “well-nourished university needs sustenance from industry”. He predicted that as the world transitions into a new economy post-COVID-19 and as industries reinvent themselves, universities would be central to the establishment of a “global store of knowledge”.

Dean in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences at UP, Prof. Barend Erasmus made the point that the workforce of the future would need skills that would effect change. Consequently universities had to be “engines of positive change” in society. Professor Erasmus said that interdisciplinary scholarship would ensure that universities were at the centre of finding “cross-cutting solutions for cross-cutting problems”.



Dr Marinda Visser, recently appointed to Innovation Africa@UP as the Director for Strategic Projects and Partnerships in Agriculture, said that universities with the ability to adapt rapidly to new priorities in a post-COVID-19 world would benefit from funding from industry. She warned that biosecurity should be a priority now more than ever before. This is because the next pandemic could easily be a plant or animal health crisis. She emphasised that resilience to climate change, as well as ensuring food and nutrition security should remain priorities post-COVID-19.

Manager for Projects and Partnerships at Future Africa Dr Osmond Mlonyeni shared with the participants his view that the CoViD-19 pandemic had cast the relationship between academia, scientific research and industry into the limelight. He said this period of uncertainty provided an opportunity to highlight partnerships that work well as it opened up a canvas for opportunities and possibilities.