

SOUTH AFRICA: Benchmark book on the state of science

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01 November 2009

Issue: 0040



South African science has come of age. It has moved from isolation during apartheid to a boom of international inclusiveness in today's world. This route - steeped in social political and global ethos - is captured in a new book, *The State of Science in South Africa*, published by the Academy of Science of South Africa, ASSAf.

The book was launched last month, ahead of the annual conference of the developing world's academy of science, TWAS, in South Africa's east coast city Durban. It was edited by Roseanne Diab, Executive Officer of ASSAf, and her predecessor Wieland Gevers, a former deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town.

Described as the biggest single package of information on science produced in South Africa since 1977, ASSAf President Robin Crewe said the book provided an overview of research across many fields, dating from 15 years before democracy in 1994 to now.

"It is an ideal opportunity for South Africa to take stock of South African performance. We want this book to stimulate discussion and act as a benchmark for future challenges," Crewe told *University World News*.

South Africa's Minister of Science and Technology, Naledi Pandor, said at the launch the new book would enhance the visibility of science in Africa and south-south cooperation - a vision promoted by TWAS - by highlighting areas of strength. Pandor said the core desire was to see more and more young scientists working in all fields, to guarantee future research and further development.

The State of Science in South Africa is a compilation of assessments by eminent scientists from diverse fields who drew on their experience to show the promise South African science held for the future. It covers mathematical sciences, physics and astronomy, chemistry, biological sciences, engineering, and health and medical sciences among other fields.

Diab and Gevers write in the preface that the book strives to "reflect on the state of science in South Africa, to consider the historical context and the key features that have shaped scientific research in the country and are determining the trajectories, to highlight some of the future challenges and opportunities and to celebrate some of the achievements of South African scientists".

Gevers told *University World News* the book should be viewed as work in progress and one that will hopefully have further life, perhaps in future editions. It would be made available to the wider public at concessionary rates.

The book traces the gradual isolation of South African science and scientists during the anti-apartheid era, before the sector started to open up to the world again, especially from the 1990s. At democracy in 1994 spending on science was low and it slumped further.

But then a new science and technology policy was promulgated, the ASSAf was established in 1996, and a transforming university system opened up to more students of all races. Recently there have been renewed efforts to support research while spending on science has been increasing.

Professor Patricia Berjak, a senior researcher at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban and a contributor to the book, said the biological sciences had a strong base in South Africa but ageing researchers should be replaced by younger academics to ensure continuation of a strong science sector.

Christina Scott, newly elected president of the South African Science Journalists' Association, said: "The book strengthens my view that South Africa occupies a unique place in the international scientific community.

"By the virtue of our rich biodiversity, our ancient geology, our outstanding view into the galaxies - and on a less pleasant note, our extraordinary cocktail of human diseases - South African scientists will continue to provide new discoveries and solutions," Scott told *University World News*.