



## **SAAB President's Report – 2017**

### **Paul Hills**

After the tumult of the nationwide university protests of 2016, 2017 was a relatively quiet year for universities and for SAAB alike. Nevertheless, the effects of the protests were still felt, and for SAAB this was particularly evident on the need for the local organising committee from the University of the Western Cape and Cape Peninsula University of Technology to move the congress off campus. We are indeed fortunate that the 2018 congress may again be held on a university campus (University of Pretoria), but as a society we will need to be mindful of the potential effects that the December government announcement of free education for economically disadvantaged students, as well as other political developments around these announcements, could have on all academic institutions and societies. Strategic planning will be required to ensure that the Society can continue to operate effectively, come what may.

### **Council**

The 2017 SAAB council consisted of Dr P Hills (President), Prof K Balkwill (Vice-President); Dr Sandy-Lynn Steenhuisen (Hon. Treasurer), Prof J van Staden (Editor, South African Journal of Botany), Dr L McGaw, Prof M Meyer, Dr Q Kritzing, Dr S Boatwright, Prof N Ludidi and Dr M Greve. Mr M Scott was the Executive Secretary for the Society. During the course of 2017, Dr Joseph Sebola was elected by SANBI to represent them on the SAAB council, after the post of SANBI representative remained vacant during 2016. Dr M Light, Dr D Thompson and Prof P Watt's terms on council came to an end following the January 2017 Council meeting. We are very grateful to them for their services to council over several years. As incoming President, I am indebted to the outgoing Vice-President for all his assistance, advice and wisdom which he has imparted so freely during this past year. Moreover, during his term as President, Prof Balkwill oversaw massive changes to the conference guidelines and the Constitution of the society, oversaw the purchase of copyright of old copies of the South African Journal of Botany from NISC, their digitisation and their publication by Elsevier, as well as acting for an additional year as President due to the resignation of the incoming Vice-President in 2016. I would like to extend the gratitude of the entire society to Prof Balkwill for all that he has done and for the legacy that his Presidency has left for SAAB.

### **Student Council**

The Student Council of SAAB has unfortunately virtually ceased to exist. There was no meeting of the students at the 2017 Congress and no new Council was elected. I would very much like to see this once vibrant Council re-established, so it will be important to meet with the students at the 2018 congress, to reconstitute and re-invigorate the Student Council. It is, after all, these students who will form the next generation of lecturers, researchers and academics who will be the next generation of our Society.

## **Constitution**

The SAAB Constitution has now been thoroughly revised, following a mandate from the SAAB AGM in 2016 and further motions accepted at the 2017 AGM. This process was driven by Prof Balkwill and resulted in the clarification of several issues, as well as a modernisation of the constitution to deal with technical developments such as e-mail and the advent of video-conferencing. The final revisions were published in February of 2017.

## **Conferences**

As previously mentioned, the venue for the 2017 Annual congress had to be moved from the University of the Western Cape to an off-campus conference venue due to the massive student protests of 2016. At one stage, it appeared that this would result in considerable, unbudgeted costs which would have had to be covered by the Society. Due to the diligence of the LOC and their conference organisers, SAAB was spared from having to subsidise the unexpected expense, and we are very grateful to the LOC that they were able to host such a superbly organised, intellectually stimulating conference under the circumstances.

The 2018 Conference will be held at the University of Pretoria. As exciting as it is to again be able to experience a SAAB conference on a university campus, we must remain mindful of the possibilities of future disruptions, and the Society needs to warn all future conference organisers to put contingency plans in place to avoid problems with late venue changes. The conference guidelines were recently updated by Dr M Light and Prof P Watt, and were finalised early this year with help from Dr S Boatwright. We will continue to update these guidelines to incorporate the most recent experiences of Local Organising Committees.

Future conferences have been mapped out until 2020. The 2019 congress will be held at the University of Johannesburg, where Prof Annah Moteetee has volunteered to head the LOC. Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (Now Nelson Mandela University) has offered to host the conference in 2020, but this must still be confirmed.

## **SAABNET**

As it has now been for several years, SAABNET continues to be a valuable tool for SAAB to communicate with its members, as well as offering them the opportunity to both advertise and receive useful posts, such as vacancies and bursary opportunities. The managers of SAABNET have been extremely dedicated and vigilant; we have never received spam mail via this source and all messages sent to SAABNET are sent out timeously. The Society is

indebted to these managers, especially to Dr Q Kritzinger. Now that his term as a council member has come to an end, it will be important to manage the future of SAABNET, to ensure the continued success of this priceless resource.

### **South African Journal of Botany**

SAAB is extremely pleased to note that the impact factor of our journal has once again increased and is now 1.427, up from 1.244 in 2016! The number of articles published has also increased to 235, with 1157 articles having been submitted. We are extremely grateful to the Editor-in-Chief and the team of Assistant Editors for their effective and professional management of our journal. Additionally, we are grateful for the very good and beneficial relationship that we have with our publishers, Elsevier.

### **Website**

Since being hacked twice in 2016, the new website has remained active and acts as a source of valuable advertising for the Society, as well as a valuable source of information on the history of the Society. The website is maintained by the Executive Secretary, Mr M Scott.

### **Membership**

The Society currently has a total of 239 ordinary members, slightly down from the 267 members of 2016. Unfortunately, student membership is significantly down, from 199 in 2016 to only 57 this year. This again highlights the need for us to re-invigorate the student council, and to strategically consider how best to interest students in joining our Society. Overall, we have a total of 358 members, down from 457 in 2016. To some extent, this decrease in membership is due to the removal of members who have arrears of over two years in subscription payments. It will be important to make certain this is not a continuing trend, however.

### **Awards**

All SAAB medals and Certificates have been awarded in 2017, and will be announced at the Gala Dinner at the end of the conference. We are grateful to Prof Annah Moteetee at the University of Johannesburg who organised the adjudication of the theses submitted for the Bronze medal.

### **Finances**

The Society continues to be in very good shape financially, with the reserves in our two savings accounts growing once again this year (see Treasurer's report). To a large extent, this is due to our contract with Elsevier to publish the South African Journal of Botany, and the generosity of our Editor-in-Chief, who bears a large proportion of the costs of editing the journal from his personal funds, which means that the income from Elsevier can be used largely to subsidise SAAB. Our financial stability is also due, in no small part, to the efforts of the Treasurer and the Executive Secretary, who carefully manage our finances.

### **SACNASP**

The majority of the SAAB Council are not members of SACNASP, which has made it difficult for the society to interact meaningfully with this body. Previously, Dr D Thompson held the council portfolio for SACNASP, and Prof George Bredenkamp has represented the society at SACNASP. However, since the departure of Dr Thompson, this portfolio has remained empty. It is vitally important that we identify at least one council member to handle this portfolio in the future, to enable SAAB members to draw full benefits from their association with our Society.

### **SABSPlat**

The South African Basic Sciences Platform was established during 2018 by the Department of Science and Technology with the aim of enhancing the basic science disciplines in South Africa, through enhanced engagement, funding and collaborative networks. To date, an initial meeting has been held in Pretoria to which representatives of Societies reflecting the basic science disciplines were invited and from which an action plan has been drawn up. I have represented SAAB at this meeting, and will continue to do so in 2018.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am extremely grateful to all members of the Council for their support and input into SAAB. I am particularly grateful to the Executive Secretary, who does so much of the day to day running of the Society, and indebted to the outgoing Vice-President for all his advice and wisdom on numerous important matters. Thank you all for your contributions towards keeping the South African Association of Botanists strong and vibrant!