Opening remarks by Prof H Russel Botman,
SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor, and a
Vice-President of the Association of African Universities

Distinguished guests, in particular:

- Dr [Horst] Freitag [Germany’s Ambassador in South Africa]
- My fellow Vice-Chancellors from universities local and abroad
- Conference partners and sponsors
- Conference delegates from around the world
- Colleagues, members of the media, ladies & gentlemen ...

Good morning to you all, and from my side, welcome again. It is a great honour for us to have you with us for this event.

In 2010, when Stellenbosch University signed the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities, I said it was an “historic occasion”. I said that Africa was facing serious challenges, but that open access could help us by ensuring a better flow of research to and from the continent.

Now, when it comes to open access, the Berlin Declaration and this Berlin Conference are key mechanisms. So, it is probably quite apt for me to say, “Ich bin ein Berliner”, to use a phrase from John F Kennedy’s famous 1963 speech. As Ambassador [Dr Horst] Freitag [of Germany] said this morning, the important thing to remember about the Berlin Declaration is that it is about the falling of walls, not the erection of walls. If we look at barriers preventing a free flow of information, we should ask, do they belong here, should they go, and how can we do it together?

It would also be appropriate to quote another former president, Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, who in 1996 said, “I am an African.” These were very important words. He said it to help Africans define their unity; to explain that whoever you are, wherever you’re from, under the Constitution of South Africa you are an African if you live here. But Africa is also the cradle of humanity, and therefore the continent is home to all people. Wherever you come from, you feel your roots when you are in Africa.

If we combine the two perspectives – the one of Berlin and the one of Africa – we see that the number of African institutions who have signed the Berlin Declaration on Open Access has grown to 28, many of whom are here today. And this happened over a very short period of time – since October 2010.
To my mind that means Africa has taken up a very important baton. The continent is ready to lead itself, its sciences – in relation to the network of sciences worldwide – deeper into the 21st century. We are on track to really make the 21st century Africa’s century, because open access will help us move the continent from the periphery of knowledge production to the centre.

In December last year, The Economist published a special report entitled, “Africa rising”. The subheading of the story was very interesting. Reversing its decision a decade before to label Africa “the hopeless continent”, it now called us “the hopeful continent”.

But is that correct? Isn’t Africa still at the bottom of the UN’s Human Development Index? Isn’t Africa’s research output still less than 1% of the global total? Yes, these things are true. But what is also true, is that Africans are doing something about it. The world should know this.

From Addis Ababa to Cape Town, Nairobi to Lagos, Africans “Are Doin’ It for Themselves” – to adapt the title of the 80s hit by the Eurhythmics and Aretha Franklin slightly.

Vitally important is the role played by higher-education institutions, research institutions and individual academics.

Times are changing fast, and there are encouraging signs that Africa is not being left behind. For instance, the digital divide is still a reality for Africa, but the continent is at the centre of a mobile and smartphone revolution.

This speaks to the fact that Africa has a dynamic, vibrant, youthful population. In South Africa, we last week learnt from the results of our national census last year, close to 60% of the population is under the age of 35.

Now, as we all know, young people have two characteristics that stand out: they are curious, and they are excellent at networking. This is where open access comes in – it brings an opportunity to young people to engage more fully with knowledge; not just any knowledge, but trusted and relevant knowledge.

Castells (2009) points out that in the current “global knowledge economy”, “knowledge production” and “technological innovation” have become “the most important productive forces”.

According to Naisbitt (1982), “The new source of power is not money in the hands of a few, but information in the hands of the many.”

The times are changing, and along with it, the publishing landscape. In this time of flux, there is a window of opportunity for us to improve two things – particularly for the developing world: access, and visibility.

Open access achieves exactly that. It gives access to those who need to participate more fully in the knowledge community. And at the same time it increases the visibility of research coming from the developing world. And thereby greater equity is achieved.

If knowledge is the currency of our time, then open access amounts to the redistribution mechanism of that wealth.
Ladies and gentlemen, open access is hope-generating. For Africa it does this by giving voice to those who have been largely silent and invisible contributors to global research production.

Stellenbosch University has adopted hope as a guiding academic concept. This is captured in our **HOPE Project**. We follow a science-for-society approach, using knowledge production, transfer and application to address major societal challenges.

And open access is a perfect fit for us. We have decided to make our research accessible to the world – including the very communities where the data comes from. And this is done for the sake of promoting human development and a more sustainable environment, which are the moral imperatives of our time.

I now want to make an important announcement. Stellenbosch University’s Library and Information Service has developed two open access platforms that will help achieve this goal. The aim is to assist African higher-education institutions to become independent digital academic publishers.

For those who need it, we will host their online collections and train their professional staff. This would be for institutions that do not presently have the technological capacity to host their own systems.

They can now use the two platforms created for this purpose:

- a digital repository collection – the green route to open access; and
- a platform for publishing academic journals online – the gold route to open access.

The training that we will provide will not just cover skills development for managing these systems, but we will work towards our partners building and running their own systems over time.

We are doing this to build digital academic publishing capacity among African higher-education institutions. And it is incumbent on us for two reasons – we were the first African signatory of the Berlin Declaration (in 2010), and Stellenbosch is a leading research-intensive university on the continent. We do it in the spirit of being a supportive partner.

Ladies and gentlemen, best of luck for the rest of the conference. We are honoured that you are here.

**References**

Castells, M. 2009. Transcript of a lecture on higher education delivered at the University of the Western Cape, 7 August 2009. [Accessed 31 October 2012]