



UNIVERSITY OF MAURITIUS

SPEECH

Chancellor of University of Mauritius

Opening Ceremony

UoM Innovation Week 2020

Government-Academia-Industry Partnership a Key Driver of Innovation

Monday 30 November 2020

Mr. Ravij Meettook, Senior Chief Executive, Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research

Mr. Preaduth Chitamun, Pro-Chancellor

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Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Pro-Vice Chancellors

Distinguished guest speakers

Deans of Faculties

Members of Academic and Non-Academic Staff

Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you this morning at the University for the Opening Ceremony of the Innovation Week the first ever to be organized at the University. At the outset, I would like to congratulate the Vice-Chancellor and the Management of the University for this very laudable

initiative which comes really at the right time, as innovation is the key to our future.

In my speech on the occasion of my installation as Chancellor of the University of Mauritius in 2015, I stated, I quote:

« En tant que chercheur de formation, la recherche et le développement seront très haut sur notre agenda d'autant plus que la recherche et la formation sont intimement liées. Notre recherche doit être impérativement multi ou pluridisciplinaire ou pour utiliser un nouveau terme l'interdisciplinarité sera privilégiée mais nous ne découragerons pas pour autant l'individualité. Ce qui fera la force de nos institutions tertiaires c'est notre capacité à entreprendre la recherche et bien sur le développement qui sont indispensables au progrès de nos activités. De la recherche viendra l'innovation qui comporte diverses définitions mais celle que nous préférons est : ajouter de la valeur à la connaissance. Il s'agit donc d'abord d'acquérir les connaissances pour leur donner de la valeur. Nous ferons des contributions au National Innovation Policy du Gouvernement actuellement en gestation. »*Fin de citation*

Having been involved for some 53 years in R&D I am in a good position to understand the value of the activities of this week. We have in Mauritius a

culture of innovation which is not enough valued. It is especially at the level of the sugar cane industry that we have innovated leaving an imprint at world level. I will mention four examples as follows: plantation white sugar which is manufactured worldwide was first produced in Mauritius prior to which there was only raw sugar; horizontal rollers in sugar factories which increased considerably their efficiency, is a Mauritian invention; foliar diagnosis techniques universally using sugar cane are from Réduit here and lastly and probably very pertinent in the present context of bioenergy is that cogeneration of electricity from bagasse, a clean and renewable source of biomass which is also used worldwide; emanated from the sugar cane industry here at St. Antoine in the North in 1957. I could go on and on with innovations which have originated from here especially in the biological field. Today we are working on gene editing which is at the forefront in Molecular Biology.

Mr. The Senior Chief Executive

Ladies and Gentlemen

The invitation of today for this innovation week lays emphasis on industry partnership. It is useful to recall that we have an interesting model in Mauritius which has proved to be efficient and successful. As early as 1893, Mauritius was among the first countries in the same year as Australia and the

US to have organized research on sugar cane being preceded by the Dutch in Java and the British in Barbados seven years earlier. The sugar industry created in 1893 the **Station Agronomique** paid from its own funds in partnership with the colonial Government and this initiative at a time when there were 138 factories, put agronomic research on scientific basis. The *Station Agronomique* was in 1914 incorporated in the new created Department of Agriculture, but this did not work out well for various reasons one of them being Red Tape. The Economic Commission after World War II recommended in 1947 that the producers pay for their own research and this led to the creation in 1953 of the Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute (MSIRI) totally paid for by producers on which Board there was one representative from Government, all the others being producers. This approach worked out well as under the leadership of Dr. Paul Octave Wiehe, the MSIRI became world renown for the innovations that it brought to the sugar industry, to agriculture, well beyond our frontiers. These innovations had tangible impact and allowed the industry to competitive and sustainable.

Interestingly and pertinently academia is being mentioned in the invitation and the MSIRI scientists contributed to the running of the University of Mauritius and it is to be recalled that Dr. Octave Wiehe became the first Mauritian Vice-Chancellor of this University and the auditorium in which we stand are today, is named after him.

I have thought it useful to bring to you the road that we have travelled so far which paves the way for the road ahead of us. Having spoken of the past, I wish to reassure you that it is the future, which is of interest to us. Thus, in a few weeks we will see the outcome of a project on biomass valorization which will add considerable value to our sugar cane industry. There is no age for innovation or trying to be innovative what is important are ideas first.

In my humble opinion, one of the problems concerning innovation in Mauritius is the lack of R&D in many fields. There has been a lot of technology transfer which has sustained our economy development since Independence but the main sectors have not embraced the value of R&D which would have led to innovation. Today as we have to rethink our tourism industry and our industrial sector the existence of well-established research institutions in these fields would have provided vital support in this process. This leaves the University of Mauritius, a research and an entrepreneurial university with an open field to explore and blossom.

In this era of globalization, Artificial Intelligence and digitalization at a time when we are speaking of disruptive innovation what will allow us to be competitive and to survive will be to making change happen through generation of ideas, leadership and creative strategy.

Ladies and Gentlemen

This year with the advent of COVID-19, we have realized how innovation is vital to our society. New approaches have been used for the production in record time of the three vaccines which are about to be approved for large-scale use. It is scientific innovation, which will probably allow the world to overcome this pandemic and allow humanity to lead a normal life again although the new buzzword is the new normal. Novel ideas by themselves would lead nowhere unless there are resources to make them materialize. These vaccines would not have materialized unless billions of dollars had been made available for the R&D work behind them. Therefore, funding and other resources are important elements to support innovation.

Crises give us the imperative to learn, adapt and emerge stronger. When we draw on reserves of resilience and work together to reach bring our diverse ideas, skills and expertise to have impact beyond ourselves, then anything is possible. As spelled out by Sir Wilton Churchill, I quote: “*Let’s take change by the hand before it takes us by the throat*”. Unquote. My interpretation is now is the time to change, to innovate because we are at a cross road in our country and we have to choose the right path of which innovation is probably the main focus.

Having set the scene, I will now pass on to the Vice-Chancellor for his address and I will conclude by thanking all those who have accepted to participate in this Innovation Week, especially our various Guests Speakers who will cover such aspects as Key Drivers for Innovation, Entrepreneurial Mindset, Fintech just to mention a few.

I wish to you all a very successful week, which will be measured by the tangible achievements and outcomes that will issue out of it.

Mr. The Senior Chief Executive

Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for your attention