

Dr. Abe Oudshoorn's keynote speech at the conference centered on the themes of compassion, collaboration, and the complexities of transcontinental academic partnerships. He began by acknowledging his own positionality as a Canadian academic working in the Global North and recognized the privileges associated with his position. He highlighted that his perspective is only one of many in the field of Africa-Canada collaborations and emphasized the importance of learning from others with deeper experience.

Dr. Oudshoorn shared a personal anecdote about his PhD dissertation defense, where an examiner asked whether he was an activist or an academic. This question underscored the tensions between objectivity and advocacy in academia. He reflected on how traditional academic norms often discourage subjectivity and engagement with social issues, but he argued that compassion and values should be central to research and teaching. His work, particularly with individuals experiencing homelessness, demonstrated the need for an engaged approach to addressing systemic inequities.

He emphasized that compassion, not just passion, should drive transcontinental research. Passion is common among researchers, but academia often views compassion with skepticism, fearing it introduces bias. However, he argued that shared humanity and empathy bridge vast geographical and systemic divides, strengthening Africa-Canada partnerships. He illustrated this with his work on HIV prevention among street-connected youth, a project that has successfully expanded across Kenya and Canada. By employing peer navigators—individuals with lived experience—this initiative has been more effective in engaging marginalized youth than traditional academic-led interventions.

Despite the successes, he acknowledged the significant challenges in transcontinental academic work. These include bureaucratic hurdles, visa restrictions for African scholars, heavy teaching loads that limit research opportunities, and funding constraints due to national priorities. Ethical approval processes and financial oversight in international projects further complicate collaborations. He shared a concerning example of a financial audit questioning the credibility of African researchers in ways that would not have occurred with Canadian colleagues, highlighting implicit biases.

Dr. Oudshoorn stressed that, despite these difficulties, global academic partnerships must persist because they are fundamentally about human connection. He warned of rising nationalism and anti-science sentiments, particularly in the U.S., that threaten international aid and research funding. The best defense against these trends, he argued, is to demonstrate the human impact of academic work. Effective storytelling is crucial—moving beyond data and statistics to narratives that resonate with decision-makers and the public. He cited the success of a peer navigator from his project who secured a permanent public health position in Canada, thanks to compelling storytelling that showcased the initiative's real-world impact.

In conclusion, Dr. Oudshoorn urged academics to embrace compassion in their work, recognizing that their values and humanity should not be separate from their research. He encouraged researchers to engage in storytelling, advocate for the bilateral exchange of knowledge between the Global North and South, and persist in international collaborations despite growing political and financial challenges. His speech was ultimately a call to action: to integrate compassion into academia and use it as a foundation for meaningful, impactful research and teaching.