Seven of South Africa’s brightest young scientists will soon be wringing their way to the picturesque town of Lindau in Germany to represent the country at the 67th Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting. Taking place on the shores of Lake Constance with a view of the Swiss Alps, the meeting brings more than 400 of the world’s top young researchers together to meet 30 Nobel prize-winning scientists in the field of chemistry.

“These are the top young scientists in the country, who have been through a very rigorous selection procedure,” says Prof Roseanne Dabi, Executive Officer of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). “Supporting these young scientists at the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings aligns very closely with our mandate at ASSAf to promote excellence in scholarly activity in service to society.” ASSAf is nominating organisation: having partnered with the Council for the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings to identify and guide five young scientists in the lead-up to the meeting.

The ASSAf-nominated researchers are Frikkie Malan (University of Pretoria), Funeka Nkolosi (University of the Witwatersrand), Dr Hlumlumo Makalakhe (University of the Western Cape), Mark Williams-Wynn (University of KwaZulu-Natal), and Retha Peach (North-West University). All work in the broad category of chemistry – their research touches on fields like e-waste recycling, industrial processes, and water purification. Dr Hlumlumo Makalakhe (University of KwaZulu-Natal), Phuti Chelopo (North-West University/CSIR) and Mildred Airo (University of the Witwatersrand) are also attending the event, having been nominated by other organisations.

They are all thrilled to be representing South Africa at this prestigious event, and excited for the opportunity to meet the giants of their field, along with five Nobel laureates from around the world.

“A whole week spent with Nobel laureates and other passionate young scientists,” says Phuti Chelopo enthusiastically. “Such an electric environment will surely inspire a new generation of ideas in the kind of research that I’m doing.”

The 5-day meeting (26-30 June) will principally consist of lectures and discussion groups with Nobel laureates like 2016 winners Jean-Pierre Sauvage and Bernard Feringa, along with a packed social schedule that puts the attendees in close contact with the Nobel laureates and fellow researchers from 75 countries around the world. Key topics of this year’s meeting will include big data, climate change and the role of science in a ‘post-truth’ era.

Frikkie Malan says that he knows this is a rare opportunity for these young scientists to form global collaborations. “We as young scientists see the big picture. We wonder what the best researchers in the world are doing, but they are also looking at what we are doing in SA, and that is where the opportunity lies.”

Dr Thomas Auf der Hyde, Deputy Director-General for Research Development and Support at the Department of Science and Technology (DST), believes that these meetings will improve South African science in the long term.

“In science you have to take the long view, and I’ve no doubt that in time this will be a major positive spin-off for us as a country,” he says. “Participation by young South African scientists in the Lindau meetings help profile South African science and its human potential to a wide network of scientific excellence.”

Without a doubt, the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings will be a life-changing experience for these young scientists. Hlumlumo Makalakhe says “It is a great honour and a great experience for me to be a Lindau delegate.”

The young scientists during a Pre-Travel Meeting held in Pretoria

The young scientists who will represent South Africa at the 67th Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting

Astronomy Observatory, attended the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting in 2016. “When I went to Lindau, the way I saw things, saw myself, just changed overnight,” he says. “After I went to the meeting I started believing in myself, believing that if these guys could achieve these things, then so could I.”

He says that his research and communication has improved since the meeting. “There have been tangible changes too: he will soon be launching a renewable energy research laboratory with fellow 2016 attendee Luysenda Lunga Notsi.

“We didn’t know anything about starting our own lab, but now we can proudly say that we have something that came out of that meeting,” says Notsi.

2014 alumnus, Dr Catherine Kagwe-Kondechetti says that attending the meeting motivated her in her own research. “When I came back, I was so excited to go back to the lab and do more. Everything started working and the challenges I thought I would be impossible to deal with were suddenly easy, because I had a different perspective.”

She also drew inspiration as a woman from meeting one of her role models in her field of research.

The young scientists during a Pre-Travel Meeting held in Pretoria

“While in Lindau I had an opportunity to meet Professor Françoise Barré-Sinoussi, who co-discovered HIV. It was so relevant to me to sit with her and discuss not just scientific aspects of her work, but also how to succeed as a woman in science.”

Dr Raymond Hewer, who attended in 2013, called his time there “an extraordinary and formative experience for many of the Lindau alumni.”

He says that his research and communication has improved since the meeting. “I think this meeting will change the way that we look at our own research and how we further plan to have an impact on not only the local community, but also the broader science and technology community worldwide,” says Retha Peach, one of the Lindau meeting attendees.

Thabang Mathe, chairperson of the Mastery Science Club at Mr. De Wet Secondary School in Ga-Rankuwa. The club was founded in 2010 by The Young Scientists Club, a group of young science enthusiasts established with assistance from the South African Young Academy of Science (SAYAS).

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“The visit to Modri High was part of wider efforts by ASSAf and SAYAS to communicate science and its benefits to the public. “Science, technology and innovation are important drivers of economic development and the alleviation of poverty,” says Michael Ellis, Science Communication Manager at the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA). “To achieve this, science must be communicated to society in accessible and useful formats.”

Ellis had provided coaching to the young scientists attending the 67th Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting on how to effectively communicate their research and engage with the broader public in the lead up to the international event.

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Edith Shikumo from the SAFYS Secretariat, arranged and coordinated all the outreach and engagements with the young scientists.

One member of the Mastery Science Club, Thabi Mathe, says, “I want to do research and engage with the broader public in the lead up to the international event.”

“One of the highlights was being able to meet Nobel Prize winners who have inspired us. We were able to ask them about their work and the challenges they face,” Thabi says.

The young scientists during a Pre-Travel Meeting held in Pretoria

All articles were written by Paul Kennedy, Science Link