

Message from SAAPAM President: Kgothatso Shai, Prof.

On the occasion of the 1st provincial conference of SAAPAM Limpopo Chapter

30-31 July 2026

UMP Tfokomala Hotel & Conference Centre

Programme Director, thank you for the opportunity!

Dear colleagues, current and future leaders in government, academia, civil society and private sector, allow me to ride on the protocol established earlier on. I do so due to the limited time afforded to me to render this item and above all, to save time whose luxury we do not have at any rate.

On behalf of the National Board of SAAPAM, it is my privilege and singular honour to extend a word of acknowledgement and welcome to all the delegates on the august occasion of the 1st provincial conference of SAAPAM Mpumalanga Chapter hosted under the theme: “Development, Economic Growth, Local Government Elections and Sustainability: Reimagining Public Trust and Building Strong Institutions”. If this theme is anything to go by, this conference clearly promises to become yet another melting pot of cutting-edge ideas with consequential policy and scholarly implications. Among others, the revelations of the Zondo and Madlanga commissions point to the breakdown of social contract, trust deficit and hallowing of public institutions for selfish interests. This conference theme resonates with our association’s historic mission “to promote good governance and effective service delivery through the advancement of professionalism, scholarship and practice in public administration”.

As a professionalised epistemic community of Public Affairs with a clear track record in thought leadership in South Africa and beyond, we are truly humbled and thankful for the enduring partnership with the University of Mpumalanga (UMP), Tshwane University of Technology (Mbombela Campus), provincial department of Culture, Sport and Recreation and Mpumalanga Green Cluster Agency. We do not take this partnership for granted and we hope it shall grow from strength to strength. This is because the success of our articulated mission largely depends on the support, collaboration and partnership with government, institutions of higher learning and other likeminded but progressive organisations with an apologetic commitment to the professionalisation of the public sector and developmental transformation.

SAAPAM is not new to Mpumalanga. We are proudly building on the successful 19th annual national conference at the same Mbombela campus of UMP in May 2019. Then conference was staged under the theme: “Public affairs, governance, and the impact of the 4th Industrial Revolution”. The focus of the 2019 national conference and current provincial conference reflects SAAPAM’s consistency and painstaking commitment to find timely, lasting, contextual relevant and evidence-based solutions to some of the challenges facing the country’s governance architecture.

Without any doubt, it is clear that the theme of the current conference was carefully chosen, and it is indeed timely and welcome. This conference is happening in the year when the country is heading for the much-anticipated local government elections, still ashamed by countless dysfunctional municipalities and troubled by retarded economic growth. At a global level, International Association of Political Science Students (IAPSS) President Colby Gauthier (2026) poignantly reminds us that “The last few years have been characterised by “democratic backsliding,” with states across all continents, cultures

rolling back, minimizing, or eliminating democratic mechanisms and practices. With unrivalled inequality, historic highs in political polarisation, climate disasters, and more, these last few years have been plagued with uncertainty, economically, politically, and socially". The combination of these misfortunes and others not mentioned here wilds a dangerous potential to reverse the gains of sustainable development that have been achieved in the new democratic dispensation. Individually and collectively, the emerging issues present a serious challenge to Public Affairs scholars and practitioners to tap from their empathy, critical thinking, logic and scientific tools to bridge the gap between theory and practice as we navigate our shared path towards the improvement of humanity.

As I conclude, I wish to recall that the current provincial conference is one of the main build- up activities towards the oncoming annual national conference. I am happy to invite you to the annual national conference of SAAPAM to be held during the last week of September 2026 in Durban, South Africa. Our clear transformative agenda promises to also make such a conference to become yet another festival of complex but policy relevant ideas, enabling home for developmental scholarship and an un-matched platform of higher-level networking within public administration fraternity. For more details about the conference, you are advised to visit our association's website. We wish you all the best with the 1st Mpumalanga conference.

Thank you!

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