

BY KATE FERREIRA

Trailblazer in Business Education, Rooted in Community

Dr Randall Jonas

has education in his blood. As head of Nelson Mandela University business school and chairperson of board of the South African Business Schools Association (SABSA), he's on a mission to ensure that business education has a much broader reach.

It's unexpected to find a high school teacher at the helm of a business school, but that's where Dr Randall Jonas finds himself today, after four decades of working in education.

"My whole professional career has been in education in private and public-sector institutions," he says. "I started as a high school teacher, and after about nine years, I became the principal of that school during a period of great educational change – the introduction of outcomes-based education.

"I also spent 11 years as CEO of a private training company, the only remaining regional training centre in the country. There were nine of them under the old Manpower Training Act dispensation, and this is the only one that still survives. I think it is one of the most well-known and with one of the most diverse technical training offerings. It's also a trade test centre, with workshops designed to blend theoretical and practical in simulated learning.

"And now, as I sit here at the university's business school, it's been an amazing journey to serve in these positions as the leader of these three types of institutions."

Brokering change

Jonas has been at NMU's relatively young business school for three years now. While his predecessors were tasked with establishing the school, he is responsible for its growth and transformation.

"Business education globally has taken a huge knock," he says, "thanks to the ethical decline we've seen through the Enron's and the Lehmann Brothers, and KPMG and Steinhof more recently. This has resulted in people looking at business schools that produce these kinds of business leaders. "I came to sit in this chair at a time when business schools were challenged. The MBA as a prestigious qualification has been questioned, as has the role of business schools."



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Jonas has big dreams for the school. "My vision is to lead this business school to become locally and globally recognised, and one of the top three business schools in Africa. We are currently rated fourth in Africa for our MBA, we're internationally accredited by AMBA, and we are preparing as we speak, for our international re-accreditation."

He adds that when he began his tenure as



director, NMU was undergoing a name change and rebranding. "As a business school we also re-calibrated our vision and strategy, with a view to not just changing the world, but being a school that must lead the change. In other words, we must be trailblazers in business education, be at the cutting edge while remaining socially relevant."

Widening impact

In terms of adding broader value, Jonas says the school has conceptualised 'Strategic Development Projects', aimed at impacting the local economy, which they purposefully placed in the context of the township economy.

"I don't want to be a business school director who sits in the flashy boardrooms only," he says. "I want to transition between the boardroom and the township, so that business really understands its true mission. You cannot have prosperity on the one side of town, while on the other side people are going hungry and are unemployed.

"So, we are trying to drill down to the informal economic sector to develop and take our programmes in new venture creation and developing young entrepreneurs in the townships. We're also looking at greenfield economic sectors – emerging sectors within the green economy like waste management, aquaculture, agro-processing, and so on. We're trying to bring in experts to open up these opportunities and to bring the marginalised into these new opportunities.

He adds that the school works closely with the local business chamber. "We've just hosted our third 'How to build a city' series – it's a quadruple helix partnership between the university as the knowledge partner, the



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organised business chamber in our city, the community, and government.

Finally, he says, the school's academics are also entrenched in local and regional businesses, where they consult and assist with research.

Leadership ethos

In the midst of these shifts – within the school and the broader business education field – Randall took the reins at SABSA in September 2018. Here too, he says, there has been a necessary recalibration. "SABSA has taken a fresh look at the business of business schools. The challenges for our members in an emerging economy are compounded and entail balancing relevance, legitimacy, value, and reputation – in the context of deficits in ethical leadership and responsible management, and in a country facing profound socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, poverty and inequality."

It is SABSA's strategic intent to strengthen ties with business and civil society, he explains, so collectively "we must tackle issues like the exclusion of many from tertiary education, technology, socio-economic problems, democracy, and the leadership ethos."

At the 2018 September Indaba, Jonas says,

members reaffirmed the social mission of business schools: "Inspired by a narrative of business for good, the consensus among members was that social impact is a golden thread: business success must evolve to social prosperity and the common good must be reflected in our curricula and school leadership".

Looking to the future

Back at NMU, Jonas knows that no business school can afford to ignore the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), and his team are putting things in place to ensure the school stays at the forefront of change.

"We've introduced a new module called 'Future Studies and Business in Society', which looks at the impact of technology and tech-enabled business processes. In addition, the business school is currently busy with its Digital Transformation Programme.

"We've also looked at how we can adapt our modules and content to align with the newer needs of the world of work. One of the challenges we will have is to seamlessly integrate the critical soft skills in 21st century learning paradigms – creative, innovative thinking, design mind-set, computational sense-making, numerical capabilities, contextual intelligence – those kinds of things. There's also a need to cover how you lead and manage technology in an organisation."

Leaving a legacy

Jonas says any legacy he is leaving has been largely unconscious up till now. "I think legacy evolves in such a way that you don't even know that it exists sometimes," he says. "I have inadvertently received feedback about my legacy in education, in my community as a role model, and come to realise that the community out there is taking notice. And really, I just came with honesty and humility and dug down into the work, into what I needed to do to get the job done.

"So, my legacy when I leave this business school is to leave an institution that is at the cutting edge, at the coalface of the new learning paradigms; to be a torch bearer."



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Quick-fire Questions

Q. What are you reading at the moment?

A. *The Techno-Human Condition* by Braden R. Allenby and Daniel R. Sarewitz, and my leisure read is *The Reckoning* by John Grisham.

Q. What book has had the greatest impact on you?

A. Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*

Q. Who is your personal hero?

A. My mother.

Q. Where will I find you on a typical Saturday morning?

A. Driving my wife and daughter around.

Q. Your next travel destination is ...?

A. I'd love to go to China - and the Holy Land.

