



# Putting in the time

**Prof Helena van Zyl has served as the director of the Business School at the University of the Free State (UFS) for 18 years, and is the longest serving member of SABSA**

Although she describes herself as a born-and-bred Namibian, Prof Helena van Zyl has made the Free State province of South Africa her home. She first arrived there as a student, over 40 years ago with a view to becoming a teacher. Quickly, though, she discovered high school education was not for her, and a fortuitous run-in with an economics lecturer sent her down a new path, registering for her Honours in ‘Money and Banking’ three weeks into the academic year.

This led to her joining the department as a junior lecturer in 1982, and in the long-run put her in prime position to apply for the directorship of the Business School. “The school was only two years old when I took over in 2002,” she says. “It is such a different world from the normal academic one, but I wasn’t an academic in the true sense of the word and I was looking to make a change.” It was a change that has shaped her life and arguably the UFS Business School in immeasurable ways.



## Leaders who are led

Van Zyl believes that her path was influenced by a great many mentors, and this is something she endeavours to pay forward too.



“When you look back, it is clear that you have taken something from a bunch of people, and all of them made a contribution at a point in your career. They’ve each been important in their own way, their

own time. I learnt from a lot of people, and I am still learning from people. The learning process never ends,” she says.

If she had to single out one person, it might be Buks Wessels. Prof Wessels was her Head of Department in Money and Banking when it was amalgamated to form the Economics department. “I’ve luckily never experienced some of the struggles that others sometimes describe. Obviously there can be challenges, and sometimes you need to make your voice heard, but Prof Wessels created an environment where I could develop and be myself,” she explains. “And I try to do the same, to create an environment where people can develop.”

Today she has three young mentees of her own, and she is keen to impress on them that success builds out of integrity. “When you invest in people, they invest in you. If you believe in them, they believe in you. I have learnt that if you create a platform of trust and belief in people, then they thrive,” she adds.

## Learning and collaboration

This is also the role that she believes the South African Business Schools Association (SABSA) can play for its members – one of learning and development. “I’ve always found it a valuable learning space, and one that encourages relationships between the schools and learning from each other.”

“I think I am the longest serving member of SABSA. I’ve seen it evolve from the early 2000s to where we are today. To my mind, it is a valuable organisation where the leadership of these institutions can interact and learn from each other, small and big schools alike.”

Typically, she explains, there is “unbelievable competition” in this space, “but when you get to the SABSA table, that competition is out of the door and people are



really exchanging views on important issues” applicable to the business school environment.





## Looking forward

Now, as Van Zyl looks to finish off her last few months in the School, she is reflecting on what she has achieved and what the future holds for her.

“I am very peaceful and calm about handing over the reins,” she says. “I know that new leadership means new ideas and fresh thinking for the school. I am at the point where I feel I can hand it over with gratitude in my heart, pride at what we have achieved, and knowing that it is someone else’s turn to develop into that role.”

As for 2021, she is hopeful that she will be able to travel again – as travel is something she describes herself as “addicted to” – in addition to watching sport, gardening and classical music. “And I am not going to stop working completely, but it is time to go and embrace new things. There is life after retirement,” she says.

If there is one thing she would like to be remembered for it is “sensitizing people to grab the opportunities in life, and to make a difference”. “Wherever you go, make a difference. That has been my whole approach to life and work.”



## Navigating 2020



No doubt the most pressing of those business school environment issues this past year has been pivoting and surviving the global Covid pandemic.

Van Zyl says there was only one intention in mind when the lockdown started: “to complete the academic programme of the year, to avoid any disruptions for the students”. It sounds simple enough, but involved new skills, new platforms, and new plans.

She is very proud of how the school performed in these incredible circumstances. “We needed to complete the academic programme as seamlessly as possible. So we went online with everything, and honestly it has been working unbelievably well. The students adapted, and so did the lecturers.”

She points to the example of the New Venture Creation module in the MBA course, where – through the hard work of the lecturers – in-person interaction with successful startup founders turned into a series of fruitful webinars.

“We actually had a very small, informal survey with our students the other day, and they said that although they miss contact time, they actually think we must continue to be more blended (online and face-to-face) in future. So that is something that will stay, after Covid.”

But embracing new technologies must not come at the cost of soft skills, she warns. “You still need a grounding in the fundamentals, and – increasingly importantly – a set of developed soft skills. How you are at dealing with conflict, at working with teams, and how do you approach a problem? These are also needed for success.”







## Quick-fire questions

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**Q. What are you reading at the moment?**

**A.** *"Yes to Life, in Spite of Everything" by Viktor Frankl*

**Q. What book (fiction, non-fiction, or business) had the greatest impact on you?**

**A.** *The best book I've ever read is "A little life" by Hanya Yanagihara. It is a very intense, but unbelievable book.*

**Q. Who is your personal hero?**

**A.** *Thuli Madonsela - she is the personification of strength and integrity.*

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

**A.** *Cooking for my sister and her husband, who join me for Sunday lunch every week.*

**Q. And where would you like to travel to next?**

**A.** *Id' love to go back to Rovaniemi in Finland, up near the North Pole.*

