



# Social enterprise in action

**Prof Piet Naudé highlights the dual needs of successful business today: financial acumen, paired with a social conscience**

Prof Piet Naudé is the director of the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB). Though he was born and raised in the Eastern Cape, Naudé has made an academic home for himself at Stellenbosch, where he passed all his degrees cum laude: a BA, Hons and Masters in Philosophy, as well as bachelors, licentiate and doctorate in Theology.

He cut his teeth lecturing at the university before taking on some different roles at the University of Venda, the then University of Port Elizabeth and later Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, before finding his way back to “Stellies” in 2014. He also worked as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. This history is indicative of a man of multitudes, whose conversation comes back time and again to the idea that there are multiple sides and matters to be considered, in everything.

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# Heroic love

Take for example, his position on heroes: “I don’t like to put people on pedestals,” he explains. But still there are many whose life and works make them stand out.



He says: “...Starting with my mom. She was widowed at the age of 40 with four small children, and had to

raise us by herself and with meagre income. From her, I learnt that it is not what you have that counts, but character. My grandfather on mother's side was a kind of father to me. He was a great leader himself but from him I learnt to not take yourself too seriously, and to let your deeds speak for themselves.

“In my academic life, I was enormously influenced by the philosophers I studied, specifically Socrates who made it clear that the biggest wisdom is to know that you don't know. **Plato learned that what you construct as reality might not be the truth.** You must not believe too much in your own paradigm.”

And last but not least: “I have great admiration for Jesus, as the founder of the Christian faith of which I am part. He showed us that the biggest power is love. Love dismantles other forms of power.”

# Degrees and dissention

You see that thoughtfulness and duality again when he reflects on his student years. **“My social conscience was formed in Stellenbosch.** It is a place that has a deep ambiguity in itself and its history. It was a closely linked with apartheid, but it also always had a dissenting voice. When I came to Stellenbosch in the mid 70s, those dissenting voices were growing stronger and I found them very enlightening.”

It’s a theme that carries into his characterisation of the role of a business school, like the USB. **“We have a very overt strategic goal around what we would call social impact.** That kind of impact is difficult for universities and academics to do.”

Nonetheless, it’s a task that must be tackled, Naudé argues, because **academics “must play a role in shaping the public discourse on economics, inequality, classism, racism,**

**sexism in our country.”** This is why USB tracks their media exposure. “Not in terms of cheap fame,” he says, “but to see that we are using our intellectual resources for good use.”

In the curriculum too, there have been many necessary changes. “We have redesigned

considerably, so that we know our students will leave us with a sense of history of social capital, of inequality, or the responsibility of business in a broader society beyond maximising shareholder value.”



## Covid-19 readiness

USB was, perhaps, half a step ahead of most campus-based education institutions when coronavirus and covid-19 made landfall in SA. Naudé explains that they had already started “blended learning” (face-to-face and online) back in 2016, so the technology platforms were largely in place and the investment in that had begun. “But what Covid-19 did,” he says, “is to contract the timeframe toward online learning from several years to just three weeks.”

“We had to spend enormous time on re-skilling staff, and they really stepped up to the challenge. This is a huge transition. It's not just a matter of taking your Powerpoint slides, putting them on Zoom, and calling that online teaching. We are developing sophisticated methods of interaction and breakaway. We are a graduate school of business. We are not teaching 1000 first years economics 101. We work with people who know as much or more as we do in certain areas, and we need to co-learn with them, and so we've had to develop a system for that co-learning to take place.



## SABSA membership



Co-learning and oversight is something he also sees as within the ambit of the South African Business Schools Association (SABSA), in supporting socially aware and contextual business education excellence.

### “SABSA provides an excellent network and sounding board.

The association is doing much better now to play a role on the national scene and influencing debates. When we do meet, both physically or online, it is fantastic to speak to someone from - for example - Polokwane, or Durban, or Mafikeng, etc. There are schools that are big with a long tradition and schools that are smaller and newer. It is the internal sharing of ideas that I have found enormously beneficial, and we pay our membership fees with a smile.”





## Quick-fire questions

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

**A.** *Fault Lines: A Primer on Race, Science and Society* edited by Prof Jonathan Jansen and Dr Cyril Walters. And *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari.

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

**A.** Besides the Bible I would say, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (in the original German!).

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

**A.** Jogging, and later enjoying wine or coffee with my wife, Elizabeth.

