

Business School
for Sustainability

ETHICS | ECOLOGY | EQUITY
to management education

ECONOMY

Sustainable organisations require managers who understand and relate the external and internal context to the needs, interest and expectations of all stakeholders.



BUSINESS SCHOOL UBUNTU

Rhodes Business School director Owen Skae talks about the strength that lies in saying yes, collaborating with others, and a connected, conscious business school culture – both macro and micro.

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When Owen Skae took over the directorship of the Rhodes University Business School, he was – in a sense – coming home. Skae took his undergrad and masters at Rhodes in the 80s before reading for an MBA at Durham University (England).

It was a fascination with the subject of business administration and a push from his professor, Gavin Staude, that clinched his decision all the way back as an undergraduate student, he says. Lecturing the Business Administration first years, Staude told the class that no matter who was in charge of the country, there will never be

enough managers to do what the country needs. At the time, South Africa was moving towards an inevitable transition of power, and Skae says Staude’s words have stuck with him ever since.

“It was such an incredible time, in the midst of the state of emergency. Students in Grahamstown – as it was then known – were very politically active and thinking about the future of the country. It was a profound time, and I am grateful for tremendous teachers and being involved in student leadership then.”

Moments in time

Skae was head of the university rag committee, which many students opposed as a frivolous event, given the political mood. “This role brought me into contact with the black student movement. It was a great political learning for me, and I came to understand that the politics and economics of the country were so intertwined that if you didn’t understand the political dynamics, any economic ideology you put forward wouldn’t be able to make a contribution,” he says. “These were watershed moments in my life.”

Another such moment was finding himself in Europe when the Iron Curtain began to crumble. He was in Durham studying towards his MBA, when his wife Vera (then fiancé) was in Berlin visiting relatives urging him to join her as the Berlin Wall was being dismantled. Feeling torn, Skae told a classmate his conundrum.

“She said to me, ‘you must be completely crazy. Of course, you need to go, and I will cover for you. I’ll make sure you get what you need to catch up.’” So, he did. And this, Skae explains, led to another great realisation of his – that the MBA was a bonding experience for a class, that they had banded together because of what they were experiencing.



New chapters

After his MBA, Skae returned to South Africa and took a job as a strategy consultant with Ernst & Young. This put him in direct contact with parastatals and a sector that was floundering in the midst of political change. "It was a daunting but learning time for me. I was dealing with all these people whose whole world was changing," he says. This was followed by a

position in a family business based in Zimbabwe, which did trade in SA as well as Botswana. Relocating the business to Durban, meant that a former Rhodes University academic, Professor Rob Jackson who was in the Department of

Accounting at the then University of Natal, reached out with an exciting but urgent opportunity: he had been let down by a visiting lecturer, and needed someone to step into a lecturing role with an immediate start.

"I realised very quickly, that this was what I really wanted to do," Skae explains. He became a non-executive director at the business, with a view to helping on the financial side, but shifting back

into academia. Through this "I was able to still maintain a relationship with the business environment," he adds. He also served as secretary to the bargaining council in their industry, which gave him union exposure and a deep respect for the idea of negotiating in good faith. "We could come to the table, sit on different sides as it were, and still operate with respect and

up becoming an associate professor of management accounting, despite never studying that. I think this speaks to who I am and some of the things that have shaped my career: I am always willing to put my hand up, willing to say yes, to contribute. I am very transparent, and I look for ways to collaborate and solve," he says.



A combination of referrals and 'putting his hand up' then led to experience like research into small business linkages, the International Trade Centre, the joint agency of the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation, to working in

post-conflict countries such as Liberia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. It has also, he explains, put him into contact with some major business and political leaders, which in turn helped shape his own view on leadership, leadership that is service-driven rather than rooted in ego.

openness. It needn't be about one-upmanship; You could do the right thing, and try to achieve consensus. It was gratifying for me, when the union requested that the minutes I drafted served as the minutes for both parties."

Between this experience, lecturing, and marking assignments for another academic contact, Skae's different experiences and careers began to meld into one. "I ended

"I like to approach matters with transparency, fairness, giving people the benefit of the doubt, trying to see the big picture, and bringing a solution to it."

Rhodes is calling

Despite the travel and excitement, Skae, his wife and children always missed South Africa. They took the decision to return, and around the same time he learnt that Rhodes was looking for a new Business School director.

Fast forward to the present, and Skae is now in his eleventh year in the city now called Makhanda.

He speaks with pride about the school they have become. “We have dedicated academics. We are well positioned around sustainability and responsible leadership, governance and ethics. And I think that we have a reputation for being authentic in that regard,” he says.

“We may not have the reach of

the bigger schools, but we are making a difference. In many ways, Makhanda is a microcosm of South Africa with tremendous socio-economic inequality. We try to ensure our students appreciate this and that they ask how we can resolve those issues. That is one of the roles of a business school, and of business itself.”

Business and ubuntu links

This emerges as a theme throughout our discussion, that there is power in embracing this interconnectedness, in bringing disparate groups together to collaborate, in ethical business and leadership. It is also one of the benefits of SABSA, he suggests – that the sense of collegiality that has been created in the current iteration of the organisation has strengthened the space as a whole.

Skae served on the SABSA executive for nearly five years, serving as Chairperson in 2015 and 2016. He continues to share his knowledge spearheading the

strategy of SABSA around thought-leadership.

“I’ve always fundamentally believed,” Skae says, “that we need to work together, and this is something I really tried to solidify during my tenure as SABSA chairperson. The pandemic has also created opportunities for coming together through webinars and other online events.”

“The profiles too!” he adds. “We are bringing good archival material together because of Covid, and it is going to give us insight to draw from in future.”

“We [in the business school space] have a lot of respect for each other, and SABSA supports that. I think we can be very proud of the fact that we have outstanding business schools in this country.”



Quick-fire questions

Q. What are you reading at the moment?

A. Several things. I’m a voracious reader, of books and news. It is a non-stop exercise for me. I cannot go to sleep if I haven’t read something.

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

A. Probably *Guns, germs and steel: The Fates of Human Societies* by Jared Diamond. Another one is *Bran the Bronze-smith: A Tale of the Bronze Age in the British Isles* by Joyce Reason. And lastly, I’m a fan of Spike Milligan, notwithstanding his faults. He wrote one of my favourite quotes which I tell my MBA students, “nothing is

organised, so nothing can go wrong”.

Q. Who is your personal hero?

A. I can’t say I have a particular personal hero although there are many people I think who have done incredible things. I especially look up to people who do the right thing, like Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Advocate (now Professor) Thuli Madonsela.

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

A. On my mountain bike.