

STOP, COLLABORATE, AND LISTEN

As the new dean of the Johannesburg Business School, Randall Carolissen is looking to bring a multidisciplinary view and systemic thinking approach to UJ and the business community

Dr Randall Carolissen has had a rather varied background before joining the University of Johannesburg (UJ) as the dean of the Johannesburg Business School (JBS).

Starting off his career as an industrial engineer, Carolissen's path took him through nanophysics and academia, earning a Masters (cum laude) and PhD along the way. Next came an MBA (cum laude) specialising in International Finance from the University of Stellenbosch, a turnaround tour at the South African Bureau of Standards, before joining SARS to operationalise their modernisation program. In a subsequent restructuring, the then commissioner requested him to initiate a modelling and forecasting division. This division, he proudly says, was rated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as one of the best in the world, and based on the success achieved by the annual tax statistics bulletin was requested by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to assist in Africa with the development of a continental program. A firm believer in lifelong learning, he completed an MCom in International Tax during his tenure at SARS.

His next big challenge was being seconded to sort out systems at the beleaguered National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). He needed quite a lot of persuasion to take on this role of administrator, but ultimately it was his own fervent belief in the importance of education as a catalyst for societal change that saw him say yes. He spent 30 months there overhauling the payment systems and ensuring monthly payment flows to students, effectively turning around the institution and restoring some stability to the higher education sector.

"I had cancelled irregular tenders and stepped on so many toes in my efforts to root out corrupt practices, that my family had to live under protection as a result of sustained campaign," Carolissen explains.

At the end of his secondment, he was set to return to SARS. He says: "I felt there were things I had left, exciting research projects at SARS, and had enjoyed my time there. However, the idea of going back into academia grew on me. I wanted to share some of my experiences with younger people, to publish some of the things I'd seen first-hand."

"More importantly, I became aware of how far behind we had fallen as a country in grappling with disruptive technologies, the fourth industrial revolution (4IR), AI and robotics. As a country, we can't afford to remain this far behind. This digital divide will be the new form of colonialism, if we are not careful."

Connecting Systems

Carolissen explains that he began to see the advances made by UJ in embracing 4IR, and how this would make it an ideal institution, and ideal role that would allow him the space to bring his myriad and varied skills together, to apply a systemic way of thinking and a scientific perspective to some of the challenges we see in business and management.

One example would be applying a nanophysics view to the typical business school issues. He explains: “Management educators and practitioners have been trying for years to move leadership pedagogy from the clockwork Newtonian physics of the 18th century, to incorporate the counter intuitive hallmarks of quantum physics – characterised by uncertainty, complexity and probabilistic theories. Leadership development must include integration of discipline, systems thinking, and an understanding of chaos theory, as this is what constitutes the real world.”



All the moving parts

When appointed, Carolissen says his first order of business was applying his mind to “how to reposition the school, to prepare students to effectively employ rapidly evolving disruptive technologies to respond to pressing socio-economic imperatives, while ensuring that we do not succumb to a new wave of technological colonisation”.

“In the real world, you have to draw from a range of disciplines instinctively. You have to look at a system as a whole, knowing that one change will affect other elements. There is no single recipe – or discipline – that has the answers to our problems or on how to lead. I believe that the business leaders of the future will have to be systems thinkers, and agile enough to adjust continuously.”

This mindset, and a deep appreciation for the socio-economic context in which we are operating must combine in the graduates of a business school, he cautions. “Imagine, for example, a fresh graduate facing a hostile union in a dispute over the impact of the 4IR on employment and potential job losses. How are we equipping new business leaders for that?” he asks.

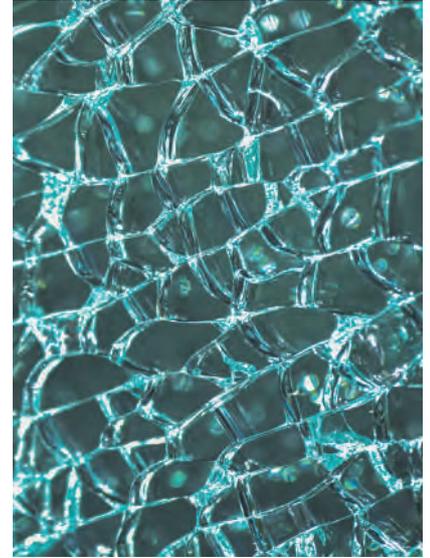


The future is here

The initial positioning of the school, he says, was to focus on entrepreneurship and small and medium enterprise (SME) development. In this area of specialisation, he says, JBS have performed remarkably over a very short space of time, introducing novel features like real-time mentoring of SMEs by MBA students. During the pandemic, when the entire sector had to go online, success rates remained high. “JBS will be integrating the segment into an MBA in digital transformation. We intend to offer specialisation expanding the 4IR suite within various sectors.”

The key to that, he argues, is in bringing disparate disciplines, separate entities, and broad backgrounds together – “collaborating and appreciating the value of science in humanities thinking, of humanities thinking in science”.

“Other African countries are or have overtaken us in embracing technology. The world of trade is changing so rapidly. Our previous porous borders are disappearing through the application of the disruptive technologies like the Internet of Things. These are things happening today, not in the future. We have challenges, yes, but we can leapfrog where we have fallen behind – if we as a continent so rich in resources are smart about it.”



Quick-fire questions

Q. What are you reading right now?

The Second Life: Memoirs by Christiaan Barnard.

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

Of business books, probably The Fifth Discipline by Peter Senge

Q. Who is your personal hero?

Neil Armstrong

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

Trying to play golf or walking, hill training.

Q. What travel would you like to undertake next?

I want to go to some of the top schools who lead the way in the journey we're on, like Berkley and MIT.