

WBS

## A TIME TO RETURN

The new director of Wits Business School is veteran businessman Maurice Radebe, who is keen to see African business schools join forces, reclaim their place in building a global body of knowledge, and take South Africa forward.





Mid 2020, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) announced the appointment of Maurice Radebe as the new head and director of Wits Business School (WBS). Radebe is a thirty-year veteran of the energy sector (chiefly) and South African business – having worked at Shell, led Exel Petroleum, managed Sasol Oil, and ultimately served as executive vice

president for energy at Sasol Group – among other roles.

Instead of a relaxing retirement working on his golf game, Radebe explains, he saw the WBS opportunity as a chance to help the school grow its research and publication footprint, and contribute to his life's greatest passion: developing young leaders. "This role is aligned

with my life's purpose. I believe that in the first 30 years of our lives we learn, the next 30 we earn, and then next 30 - at least of my life - is the time to return," he says.

"I am here to live that purpose, to return the expertise and insights that I gained in my corporate career, and plough it back into the next generation."

## Learning on your feet

**In his own life, Radebe says, he first learnt about business and ethics from his grandfather: “He was an entrepreneur. He started a small shop in Katlehong, and I saw him build that small business into a big general dealer.”**

**He continues: “From the age of seven, he roped me in to work with him at the shop. After school when other children were going to play, I was working. He taught me everything about business, how to sell, how to serve customers. When he went to the wholesaler to order stock, I went with him. I learnt pricing, merchandising, etc. On top of that, he was a man of integrity and strong character, passionate about his community in the township, and a family man. I learnt many of my values from him too.”**



## Focused energy

Radebe officially started his tenure in January 2021, but was already a familiar face at WBS, having participated in public lectures and events at the school. He was also influential in starting up the African Energy Leadership Centre (AELC) at WBS, and is himself a graduate of the school.

Independently, he established the Unleashing Leadership Potential (ULP) foundation some ten years ago, which cemented his belief in youth development. “I’ve always been very passionate about developing young leaders, especially those who strive to be ethical and authentic, and have a passion to make the world different, in a better place than they found it.”

“I was looking forward to spending time face-to-face with younger people, but now we have shifted online,” he says, acknowledging that he started at WBS in an unusually challenging time, owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. “The challenge we face now is how to run a business school in a post-Covid world, a digital world, and a fast changing one.”

To this end, WBS is experimenting with hybrid learning, but this isn’t just a matter of waiting out the pandemic: “Hopefully this will help us leapfrog, not only as a school, but also in terms of economic development and recovery for the country.”

## Big goals

Looking to that future, Radebe says he thinks business schools will play an important role in post-Covid recovery, and helping South Africa be more globally competitive – especially in the areas where he says WBS already has the advantage, such as energy leadership and digital business.

His second big goal for the school is to ensure it is “deeply rooted in Africa”. “We can play a key role in addressing issues like poverty, the continent’s health challenges, and countering social ills. I want WBS to be at the epicentre of dialogue and problem solving with regards to the issues facing our continent, especially in trade, economic development, and regional integration.”

And thirdly, he says, WBS must be ranked among the best in the world. “We are working flat out on our “quadruple crown” accreditation plan, to be accredited by all the significant bodies. We want to ensure that we continue to offer the highest quality teaching, and re-establish ourselves in research, publishing, and developing African case studies.

“We tend to read a lot about success stories from the western world, but we have so many of our own, here in Africa. So we must produce quality research and take our place in contributing extensively to global problem solving and debates around, for example, the purpose of the company, reimagining capitalism, rethinking how we organise the economy to address inequality and poverty. Our faculty must play a role in public discourse, influencing public thinking and policy – on the continent and in the global community,” he says.

## Putting out fires

The matter of problem solving is a skill he would particularly like to see us develop locally. It is the “single most important skill that took me to the top of my career”, he explains. So much of business success, he contends, is about being able to identify problems, quickly analyse them, and rapidly develop a solution.

“And then, critically, act,” he adds. “Even without 100% information to hand, we must be able to act. Sometimes analysis can paralyse. We need to be able to take decisions, to see as we go whether the decision was correct or not, and change very quickly - that is agility.”

This alongside “grit and resilience” is how you deliver results, Radebe says. And contributing to the development of these characteristics and skills is how business schools help in building a capable business sector and state in SA.

“One of our biggest challenges is service delivery. However, we don't lack plans in South Africa, just the ability to execute.”

This is the role that he wants to see WBS step into – bringing groups together to tackle our problems, sector by sector.

## The power of unity

Collaboration is a recurring theme with Radebe. He sees the power of coming together also at the association level, with the South African Business Schools Association (SABSA).

“I am new here,” he admits, “but I know what an industry association can do. I think SABSA can add immense value, speaking with one business school's voice in dealing with national problems. This is how we raise the standards of education, so we know our business education is equal to any country in the world, if not better.”



## Quick-fire questions

**Q. What are you reading right now?**

*The Unending Struggle for Relevance by Thabang Motsosi.*

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

*I read True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership by Bill George quite early in my career and it really shaped my thinking on purpose.*

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

*My grandfather, as I said, and probably Nelson Mandela.*

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

*Eating breakfast with my wife, and thereafter usually spending time with my grandchildren.*

**Q. What is a bucket-list destination for you?**

*I've been lucky enough to see most of the seven wonders, but I still want to see the pyramids in Egypt and China's Great Wall.*