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Brian O'Connell (1947–2024): A visionary, inclusive and caring educationist

Brian O'Connell started his career in 1970 as a teacher at Florida Secondary School, Ravensmead in the Cape Flats, 10 years later rising to the position of Principal of Kleinvlei Secondary School. With a deep-seated interest in tertiary education, he moved to the University of the Western Cape (UWC) as Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education where he served from July 1985 to March 1988, then moving to the position of Rector of Athlone College of Education. In April 1991, he joined Peninsula Technikon as the Director of the School of Education.

In October 1995, Brian O'Connell was appointed head of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) as Superintendent General of Education in the Province. His primary goal was to elevate the provincial education system to fully serve the people of the Western Cape, especially those who were severely disadvantaged and impoverished during apartheid. In carrying out his mandate, he experienced many challenges. None was as large as the task of communicating to the educators in the schools the possibility of job losses. The rationalisation into a unitary education system within democratic South Africa's transformation and redress agenda pointed to job losses for some teachers. As the Western Cape was better resourced than most of the other provinces in the country, the impact was expected to be more severe therein than in others. How does one communicate such distressful news to the teachers and the wider community? Brian O'Connell was a strong proponent of inclusivity and engagement. He held 24 meetings across the Province with teachers, school governing bodies (SGBs) and the wider community. He wanted to engage with them to unpack the reality of the situation, despite its harshness, motivated by the need for sense-making and understanding. Not unexpectedly, the atmosphere at the meetings was hostile and he was verbally attacked in his capacity as the messenger of unpleasant news. But the truth of what was to soon happen had to be shared with the community; his conscience would not allow him to do otherwise. Through these meetings he was able to get the communities to understand the actions that were to follow and the need for them.

In his capacity as Superintendent General of Education, his strategy was to empower the educators within the Province. He focused on developing the leadership skills of school principals and their management teams, as well as the SGBs so that they would take ownership of their schools and lead them onto successful growth paths. He introduced a shift from centralised responsibility to shared responsibility within a devolved management model. This approach, while welcomed by the school principals and SGBs, unfortunately led to a fierce conflict with the MEC for Education in the Western Cape. Not prepared to compromise his stand on inclusivity and community development, Brian O'Connell decided to give up his post, explore other opportunities or go into retirement.

At that point in time, he was encouraged by a staff member of UWC to apply for the then vacant post of Rector and Vice Chancellor. He did so, was interviewed and offered the post. In November 2001, Brian O'Connell entered as Rector and Vice Chancellor of an institution in dire straits, confronted by a crippling financial crisis including a huge debt, a disillusioned and demoralised staff complement still reeling from the trauma of retrenchments, coupled with an academic project facing collapse as student numbers dwindled by a third to less than 10 000. O'Connell faced an institution with an uncertain future. With a unique sense of care and compassion, self-belief and unflinching hope for the future, he presented a bold but carefully constructed vision for the revitalisation of UWC and emphasised the importance of its role in South Africa's reconstruction and development. Such was the vision and his humble yet strong leadership style, that he was able to galvanise all UWC stakeholders into believing that a better future was indeed possible through a collective effort. With the support of his Executive and middle managers and students and staff across the Institution, O'Connell initiated an open and transparent process towards strategically rebuilding UWC.

A short while after Professor O'Connell took office, a national working group, established by the Minister of Education to advise on the restructuring of higher education in South Africa as part of the necessary rationalisation within our new democratic order, recommended that UWC be merged with Peninsula Technikon. Not unexpectedly, the response from staff was to embark on protest action. O'Connell convinced them that an intellectual response to the possible merger was the route to follow. He responded to the ministry by presenting his vision for UWC to state officials, accompanied by a strong argument for why it was necessary for UWC to remain as a stand-alone institution for the country's transformation and redress programme as well as for its socio-economic development agenda. Government was persuaded and UWC did not merge with Peninsula Technikon. The focus now was to realise his vision in transforming UWC into a financially viable academic institution underpinned by excellence and impact in teaching and learning, research and innovation, and community engagement, that would revitalise the University's promise to work towards a post-apartheid future.

Professor O'Connell had a deep understanding of the daunting challenges facing South Africa's fledgling democracy and the importance of the role of universities as the originators of new knowledge and thought processes. He constantly articulated the need to make sense of the situation as depicted in the picture below, which he used consistently to remind the UWC family of the institution's greater purpose.

The challenge was to find the middle road that would address the dire needs of the 85% of our country's population who had previously been severely disadvantaged, while at the same time not putting fear into the 15% who were advantaged during apartheid.

When Professor O'Connell retired at the end of 2014, just 13 years after taking office, UWC had exceeded expectations. An expansive scholarly project placed it at the cutting edge of debates about social transformation. Its financial



SENSE-MAKING



Source: Bharuthram et al.¹ (reproduced with permission)

The O'Connell Sense-Making Scenario: The divide between the advantaged (15%) and disadvantaged (85%).

well-being was restored and the rewards of years of committed attention to the task of reorienting the University towards the task of consolidating post-apartheid freedom helped to rebuild the teaching and research capacity of the University. Within a relatively short period, it was recognised as one of the leading research-led universities in South Africa and the continent. This was confirmed by the 2015 *Times Higher Education* ranking of African universities that placed UWC 5th in South Africa and 7th in Africa. The academic landscape of UWC had dramatically transformed with an expanding set of scholarly undergraduate and postgraduate programmes accompanied by the building of modern infrastructure, which served a student population that grew from just under 10 000 in 2001 to 22 000 in 2014. UWC was described as a “shining star” by representatives of the state and members of public institutions when reflecting on what is possible with visionary leadership.

Professor O'Connell's commitment to “empowering our people” went beyond academia. He also took a bold stance in combating ignorance regarding HIV/AIDS, regularly engaging communities and their organisation on the importance of disciplined behaviour. The immense passion with which he did this earned him the role of chairperson of Higher Education South Africa's Strategic Advisory Committee on HIV/AIDS.

While his achievements at UWC would be judged by many as the highlight of his 44-year-long career, his deep commitment to community development and his overall contribution to education in South Africa as a teacher, lecturer, school principal, Rector of a College of Education, Superintendent General of the Provincial Education Department, to Rector and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Western Cape over a period from 1970 to 2014, did not go unnoticed.

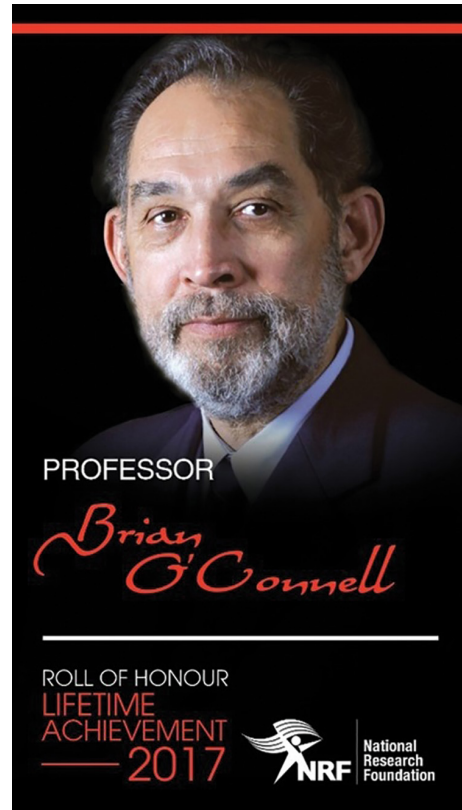


Image: Bharuthram et al.¹ (reproduced with permission)

Professor Brian O'Connell received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Research Foundation in 2017.

Apart from receiving several honorary doctorates, Professor O'Connell was bestowed an order of knighthood (Commander of the Order of Leopold II) by her Royal Highness Princess Astrid of Belgium in 2013 for his contribution to higher education in the global space. In recognition of his immense contribution to education and development in South Africa, “driven by a passionate commitment to development in South Africa and a deep desire to make a contribution to that development”, in 2017, Brian O'Connell received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Research Foundation.

Reference

1. Bharuthram R, Pokpas L, editors. From hope to action through knowledge: The renaissance of the University of the Western Cape, 2001–2014. Cape Town: UWC Press; 2020.