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Stuart J. Saunders (1931–2021): Mover and shaker, mostly behind the scenes, and key South African vice-chancellor of his time

One of the unresolved questions of a free society is how to remunerate citizens in proportion to the contribution that they individually make. Top business executives, bankers, footballers and pop stars are very well rewarded because one can supposedly clearly quantify the financial benefits they generate by simply doing their jobs, although the so-called externalities are ignored in publicly making the calculation. Top teachers, researchers, thinkers and reformers are at the opposite end of this spectrum – the visible and direct financial difference they make is minimal, and everything lies in the hidden externalities.

Thus it is that the contributions made to South Africa's national competitiveness in science and technology by Stuart John Saunders, a canny doctor of humble origin who became a productive researcher in liver disease and then vice-chancellor of a university and still-active sage of a higher education system, have not been widely enough appreciated. This is because they were intrinsic and systemic rather than overtly financial, and because his were focused and well-timed interventions that took time to bear fruit. (It is interesting in our present context that many top businesspeople seemed to appreciate quite readily that he was their equal, which made him a master fundraiser and influencer.)

Saunders was born in Cape Town on 28 August 1931 of English immigrant parents, both of whom had known financial hardship and career disappointment. His schooling was in the same city and he studied medicine, graduating with distinction, at the University of Cape Town (UCT). His subsequent work towards specialisation in internal medicine led to a fellowship that allowed him to obtain the specialist qualification of MRCP at the first attempt, and to establish himself as a researcher in London at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School at Hammersmith, and at Harvard University. He returned to Cape Town, completed the research-based MD degree at UCT in 1965, and became professor and chair of Medicine in 1971. Together with surgical colleagues, he established a combined service and research centre for basic and translational research on liver disease. Over his relatively short major-time research career he became a well-recognised and well-connected scholar in his field, with about 200 publications to his credit as author or co-author. Together with the parallel focus of eminent researchers at the University of the Witwatersrand, these activities contributed significantly to South Africa's well-deserved international reputation for clinical research on the liver.

Saunders became the vice-chancellor of UCT at the beginning of 1981, the third medical scholar to achieve this distinction. (Significantly, no fewer than five of the ten vice-chancellors of the university so far have been medically qualified. In his case, it was reflected in the fact that he had an intense and principled interest in people and their welfare, without sentimentality but with a practical and realistic approach to doing what, in his view, was needed.) As related in his autobiographical book *Vice-Chancellor on a Tightrope – A Personal Account of Climactic Years in South Africa* (David Philip Publishers, Cape Town, 2000), he fearlessly took on the hostile apartheid government by making moves that were difficult to counter that would open the institution fully to black students, by resisting state defunding and other threats skilfully in the courts, and even privately by personal contacts with powerful people made possible by application of his considerable professional skills. He opened the residences, ended the racialised training of registrars, and began an 'academic development programme' to assist underprepared but talented students. He strove for academic freedom as a necessary prerequisite for excellence in teaching and scholarship.

Internally, Saunders left an indelible legacy on the academic process and research at UCT. The current high ranking of the university in Africa and the world at large can be ascribed in no small part to his insistence on chairing every selection committee for a university chair, making no concessions to special pleading or parochialism. His emphasis on research as the decisive 'edge' of the institution in its quest for academic excellence was a hallmark of his leadership role at UCT. Significant internationalisation took place. He took the lead in garnering support from overseas foundations, and raised significant funding for the university by establishing dedicated trusts for this purpose in the USA and the UK.

Saunders's overall emphasis on academically informed leadership of a university helped to shape the country's entire university system. This assessment does not take away from the achievements of other vice-chancellors who headed institutions in South Africa in the last two decades of the 20th century, but it was a constant inspiration and stimulus for them to know that liberal, values-based leadership was not only viable but could be very successful, and he was steady as a rock on basic principles. Not everything that was needed could be done in his 16 years at the helm, and it was left to his successors to restructure the faculties and try to address the basic pedagogic issues that affected the coherence and appropriateness of the general undergraduate curriculum, to modernise and consolidate the postgraduate model, to reach critical mass in research groups, and to introduce postdoctoral fellowships as an indispensable element of high-level university-based research. (Wise national policy in the introduction of well-supported centres of excellence and research chairs was also enormously helpful, as well as the pouring in of international grants to counter the twin epidemics of HIV infection and tuberculosis.) But Saunders had laid the groundwork for strong research development through his emphasis on quality and his sheer force of character. South Africa's relatively strong presence in most long lists of the world's best universities owes a lot to him. It is now one of the plusses in an otherwise somewhat patchy national performance dashboard.

After Saunders's retirement in 1996 he set out on a path that would turn him from the 'very model of a vice-chancellor' into the 'very model of a retired vice-chancellor'. Apart from continued active roles in UCT's convocation, legacy society and fundraising trusts, and a 9-year period of service on the Council of Higher Education, he was the senior advisor of the New York based Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, where he advocated a major expansion of grant-making in South Africa, particularly in the arts, humanities and the interpretative social sciences. For example, there has to date been support for 250 scholars through faculty development awards, and 1840 scholarships (1700 at graduate level and 140 postdoctoral fellowships) to cultivate future generations of arts and humanities scholars. Library resources, digital collections, and information and communication technology facilities have been strengthened at higher education institutions. A major transformative contribution has been made to opera, helping to harvest a rich vein of talent in the population. Digitisation of historically significant 'rock art' has made thousands of rock art paintings accessible [online](#), preserved for future generations. All this came from the personal chemistry of the relationship between Saunders and Dr Bill Bowen, president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation at that time.

Another major contribution made by Saunders was his role as the essential midwife of TENET (originally the 'Tertiary Education Network' for South Africa). When the unsuccessful government-run Uninet was closed down, the vice-chancellors of the universities and the then technikons decided to form a company which would set up and supply bandwidth to all institutions as well as the research councils. They asked Saunders to take overall responsibility for this project, partly on account of his close involvement with the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which had also invested in the computerisation of university libraries and was concerned about the high costs of bandwidth. He established a task team to investigate options, and it was decided to form a non-profit company with a board of directors chaired by Saunders. TENET was incorporated in August 2000 and has continued since then to play a crucial role in ensuring an adequate and uninterrupted supply of bandwidth to the higher education and research council system. The importance of these far-sighted arrangements cannot be over-emphasised in the light of subsequent developments and the COVID-19-induced extension of online learning, teaching and research.

Saunders's other post-retirement activity of significance to the country's knowledge system was his active involvement in the rapid expansion of postdoctoral fellowships in the research landscape. As an influential member of the board of the Claude Leon Foundation he focused on the

higher education component of its grant-making in South Africa. Since 1998, over 500 multi-year postdoctoral fellowships were awarded across the system – a very significant fraction of the total awarded in the country as a whole. The critical gap in bursary support for honours students has also been met to some extent.

The total 'value-added' of Stuart Saunders's career cannot be calculated in rands and cents, or even in buildings, new institutions or donations. Yet I venture to assess it as systemically immense within our country, and wholly inadequately reflected in the personal memories of those of us who knew him as a friend and colleague, a companionable and funny yet deadly serious and purposeful individual. Many millions of citizens who have never heard of him are the real beneficiaries of his remarkable life.



Photo: UCT News