

Dr Derek Swemmer: An institution within an institution

27 October 2010

“The conscience within the University”

These are some of the terms used to describe Dr Derek Swemmer, who took early retirement from Wits University after serving this institution for 25 years. The 2010 Senate and Council dinner on Saturday, 23 October was dedicated to Dr Swemmer, as he served as Secretary to both these institutional governance structures for several years.

“Derek can be described as the conscience of both these structures and he has, over the years frequently reminded both Senate and Council of their respective roles and responsibilities as a social conscience for the University and of society,” says Ms Miriam Abrams, Special Advisor to the Vice-Chancellor and Principal, who worked with Dr Swemmer for many years. “He has supported five Vice-Chancellors and numerous Deputy Vice-Chancellors during his tenure, and he will be remembered for encouraging individuals and the institution always to draw on the collective wisdom of Wits to solve its own problems.”

Dr Swemmer played a significant role in establishing the University’s transformation forum (Forum for Further and Accelerated Comprehensive Transformation), which was later adopted and incorporated in the Higher Education Act, and was one of the early pioneers to implement strategic planning at the institution. His colleagues, employees and members of the Registrar’s Academic Group recall their annual retreats fondly, and especially Dr Swemmer’s mantra “Vision, Mission, Objectives, Strategy...”.

“A stalwart of the University”

A pillar of the University, steadfast and symbolic of upholding the values of truth, justice and democracy, Dr Swemmer’s contribution will be forever engraved in the history of Wits. Mr Rob Sharman, who has also known Dr Swemmer for decades, explains the importance of a Registrar to the University: “Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Heads of Schools come and go, but Registrars remain. The next Registrar, will need to have his/her finger on the pulse and his/her hand gently on the tiller. S/he will have to be the next voice of reason of this great institution and will be responsible for everything at this University. I wish him/her well.”

Yesterday and Today

“The institutional memory and wisdom of Wits”

His career at Wits began in 1985, when Dr Swemmer was appointed as the Personal Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor and Principal, where he soon became an extension of the arm of the head of the institution.

“I recall the real political difficulties that we experienced in the latter half of the 1980s, when we were bullied by government,” recalls Dr Swemmer. “We would have to sweep the 11th Floor every six months, and without a doubt we would find listening devices planted in the offices. Any meetings of a sensitive nature, in particular with anti-apartheid activists like Eric Molobi, took place in the washroom on the 11th floor, where the white noise from the taps and the toilets drowned voices. Meetings with the likes of Roelf Meyer from the National Party also took place without the permission of the Head of State Security or the Premier at the time. ”

Dr Swemmer recalls how students would lead demonstrations based on issues of the day. “Academics and students would march to the edge of the streets for good reason and would confront the apartheid police. Lots of teargas was fired to the extent that I would keep an extra suit in my office, just in case I had to change through the day. Our students and staff were often incarcerated, and were it not for our links with the late Helen Suzman and Justice Richard Goldstone, we may never have known the whereabouts of these Witsies.”

Wits was a hotbed of political activity in the 1980s and the 1990s. “We were once threatened by the National Party to expel 34 students from Wits for their role in political activity or face having the subsidy to the University cut completely. After holding a General Assembly, the University under the leadership of Professor Karl Tober and Bob Charlton, told government to back off, and instead worked with other higher education institutions in South Africa and abroad to influence the diplomatic corps in South Africa to threaten the government with further sanctions and other international political repercussions if they did not leave higher education alone,” comments Dr Swemmer. “I believe that this was the turning point for higher education in South Africa, and perhaps even for the country.”

“The Vice-Chancellors, Chancellors and Chairpersons of Council from Wits and the University of Cape Town held regular summits. Before CUP meetings they were joined by Natal and Rhodes Universities and later the University of the Western Cape to form a united front. They would caucus before meeting with representatives from other universities every six months. Out of these caucus meetings in consultation with the HECC developed the Education Policy Units at three institutions, funded by the Scandinavian government, which later developed the ANC’s education policy blueprint,” adds Dr Swemmer.

”Wits had many firsts – we were the first higher education institution to apply equity principles long before they became popular, we developed courses specifically so that Black students could register at the institution as they were not taught elsewhere, we knowingly broke the rules of the apartheid government or worked around them, we spearheaded racial integration in our residences before any other institution, we were one of the first to appoint a female Deputy Vice-Chancellor in the country, and a black Deputy Vice-Chancellor at one of the Open Universities. We have a way to go to realise Wits’s 2022 vision, but we have come a long way in leading both Wits, and South Africa to where it is today.”

On proud moments

“A giant of the University”

He recollects several of his favourite memories and shares two, which he remembers distinctly. “It was really a proud moment for me when we held an Open Day at Wits after a gap of almost 20 years and more than 12,000 learners exploded onto campus. We repeated the exercise a year later and the numbers doubled and continued to grow astronomically year on year.”

”Another fond memory relates to my role in founding and establishing the International Education Association of South Africa in 1995/7. Having just hosted our 14th Annual Conference at Wits, I think that it is a wonderful achievement for Wits and higher education in South Africa in general.”

He adds: “What makes Wits distinct is its openness to diverse ways of thinking, its commitment to resolving problems through its collective wisdom and experience, its demand for academic and research excellence and its courage to tackle burning societal issues. This is why I have been proud to serve Wits for so many years.”

On the man

“Wise, intelligent, visionary, creative and tactful”

“I am sure that anyone who has worked with him will attest to his collegial, conciliatory, supportive approach, the gentle, firm and respectful manner with which he treated students, staff, visitors and VIPs alike,” adds Abrams.

“Committed to cultural diversity”

Says Sharman: “Derek has been present at every Walter Milner Memorial cricket match, Raikes Memorial rugby game, and major cultural event on campus and he leads by example. He is also committed to celebrating diversity and is probably the only person to keep a tally of the number of different languages spoken on campus.”

On education and work

Dr Swemmer holds a Higher Diploma in Teaching from the former Johannesburg College of Education – he is a former Knockandian! – and holds a BA, BA Honours and a Masters degree in English from the University of Pretoria (UP) and a doctorate from the University of South Africa.

He worked as a part-time student assistant at the University of Pretoria and spent a year teaching at Christ's Hospital Public School in England. He returned to UP and in 1976 was employed as a junior lecturer, and then a lecturer. He joined the University of South Africa as a lecturer in 1981, where he worked until he joined Wits in 1985 as the Personal Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor and Principal. He was appointed as the Deputy Registrar (Research) in 1989 and then as the Deputy Registrar (Academic) in 1992. In 1994 he was appointed as the Acting Registrar (Academic) and then as the Registrar (Academic) a year later, a post that he held for four years. He occupied the Registrar's post from April 1999 until the 30th of September 2010, when he took early retirement from Wits.

The Registrar's Division in 2010 is comprised of the following units: Student Enrolment Centre, Postgraduate Unit, Financial Aid and Scholarships Office, Schools Liaison Office, Academic Information Systems Unit, Central Records Office, Examinations and Graduation Office, University Secretariat, Academic Administration Unit, Wits Theatre Complex, Wits Planetarium and the Disability Unit. Dr Swemmer also held the functional responsibility for Faculty Offices, and for several years also had senior management responsibility for the Division of Student Affairs.

Dr Swemmer has served on the Senior Executive Team for the last 15 years and has acted as the Vice-Chancellor and Principal on at least eleven occasions. He chaired or served on more than 30 standing committees during this period.

On achievement

There are many awards, professional achievements and caps on his roll of honour, but Dr Swemmer is perhaps more well-known for his association with the International Education Association of South Africa, the Golden Key International Honour Society, the English Academy of Southern Africa, the Girl Guides Association of South Africa and the Boys Scouts Association of South Africa. He was awarded an international travel scholarship by the Witwatersrand Council of Higher Education, and a Rotary International Group Study Exchange scholarship. He has co-authored or co-edited five books and has published in both journals and magazines. He has served as a consultant in the higher education arena and over the years has regularly presented at conferences, meetings, schools and educational institutions in at least 50 countries.

The farewell – A tear and a smile

“Parting is such sweet sorrow,” said Dr Swemmer at a breakfast held in his honour recently. “I have served my time and dedicated 25 years to Wits – that’s almost a quarter of the University’s existence, and it is time to move on. It has been an overwhelming, wonderful experience and I am grateful to everyone that I have worked with and known at Wits over the years, for making my experience at Wits a life-changing one. I can depart with confidence, knowing that Wits has certainly given me the edge.”