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Universities South Africa's Board of Directors pays tribute to the late Professor Brian O'Connell

The Board of Directors of Universities South Africa (USAf) joins the community of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in paying tribute to UWC's former Rector and Principal, Professor Brian O'Connell, who passed away on Sunday night at the age of 77.

"We pay tribute to a giant who personified university autonomy in his lifetime," said Professor Francis Petersen, Chairperson of USAf and outgoing Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Free State. "In 2005, he successfully dissuaded government from merging UWC with the Peninsula Technikon. He also resisted government's plan to merge the Dentistry Faculty of Stellenbosch University with UWC's. Much against popular inclination in some of UWC quarters to oppose government's proposals with hostility, he chose to engage and persuade the State peacefully, advancing an argument of preserving the historical identity of the UWC as the seat of political opposition, and using that identity to achieve a firm academic purpose. His views prevailed."

Professor O'Connell would go down in the history of the Board of Higher Education South Africa (HESA) as the man who spoke truth to power and never held back on what he truly believed.

"While many of us were still wrapping our heads around transformation in higher education, Professor O'Connell attracted significant funding for his institution. This enabled him to develop state-of-the-art research facilities evident in UWC's Life Science Building, the School of Public Health and Chemical Sciences buildings, thus transforming UWC into a leading research institution and keeping his vision alive, of turning UWC into the knowledge and research powerhouse it grew to become." Professor Petersen says it was under Professor O'Connell's watch that the UWC had developed a strong engagement culture with the unequal world of Cape Town, thus ensuring that UWC undertook research projects that responded directly to the apartheid-created reality surrounding it.

At the time of his retirement, he was not only a HESA board member; he played a pivotal role in processes that would see the Higher Education HIV and AIDS facility (HEAIDS) undergo due diligence and other processes that would lead to HEAIDS breaking away from the then HESA into the stand-alone subsidiary of USAf, now known as Higher Health. Even past his retirement, Professor O'Connell would continue providing counsel to the executive leadership of Higher Health.

To date, UWC has built itself a footprint in its neighbouring schools in Cape Town, imparting Information, Communication and Technology and entrepreneurial skills, to name but a few, in true embodiment of Professor O'Connell's commitment to community service, education and development of UWC's immediate context.

"The Board of Directors of USAf is proud to have been associated with such a calibre of a man. We convey our condolences to his beloved wife, children, the UWC community and the entire sector, knowing that he left South Africa's Higher Education sector a better place than he found it.

“Rest in perfect eternal peace, Professor Brian O’Connell.”

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