

AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Created a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in the Queen's Birthday Honours (2018)
- Appointed Convenor of the Implementation Group for the 2020 Research Assessment Exercise in Hong Kong (2017)
- Freedom of the City of Newcastle upon Tyne (2016)

DEFINING MOMENT

When he overslept but his kindly professor nevertheless allowed him to write his first-ever postgraduate examination in philosophy.

WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

He was a fairly skilled knife-thrower as a youngster.

QUALITY NEEDS DIVERSITY

Chris Brink is clear about what an involved, civic-minded university should be: it is about academic excellence, but it is also about playing a definitive role in civil society. He has perfected these ideas while working on four continents and notably as Rector of Stellenbosch University (SU) and Vice-Chancellor of the The University of Newcastle in England.

He believes universities should ask two questions: "What are we good at? And what are we good for?" Most universities easily answer the first, but many have difficulty with the other equally important question about how to contribute to the city, region and society they find themselves in, explains Brink. He elaborates on these questions in his most recent book, *The Soul of a University: Why Excellence is Not Enough* (2018).

EARLY YEARS

Brink, who comes from a long line of builders, was born in Upington on 31 January 1951 and matriculated from Upington High School in 1968.

"I'm the black sheep for not having followed in my family's footsteps," jokes the man who rates thinking as his top pastime and hates stereotypes. He

has however regularly applied a builder's sense of logic, problem-solving and practicality to challenges.

Without having seen a computer before, Brink went to the then Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit (RAU), now the University of Johannesburg, to study towards a BSc in mathematics and computer science. At the time, there was only an IBM 1130 at the university, holding a meagre 16Kb of memory.

Through postgraduate studies at Rhodes University (RU), he could improve his English and combine mathematics with studies in philosophy and logic. He received an MSc in mathematics with distinction in 1974 and was the top student in his 1975 MA philosophy class. The Elsie Ballot Scholarship opened doors to Cambridge University and ultimately a PhD in algebraic logic in 1978. Later, in 1992, he completed an interdisciplinary DPhil at RAU about power structures.

From 1979, Brink lectured mathematics at SU and founded the student mathematics society, *WiskUS*. A sabbatical in 1986 at the Australian National University's Automated Reasoning Project introduced him to the basics of artificial intelligence. Other research positions and visits to Australia, the United Kingdom and United States followed.

During his time at the University of Cape Town (UCT) from 1987 onwards, this former President of the South African Mathematical Society received his A-rating from the NRF. He invented algebraic structures called Boolean Modules and worked on program semantics in computer science, logic and philosophy. He spent three years commuting between Cape Town and Canberra as a part-time senior research Fellow at the Australian National University.

LEADER

Between 1991 and 1999 Brink led UCT's Department of Mathematics, and later also the merged Department of Mathematics and Applied Mathematics. He participated in the institution's Academic Support Programme for disadvantaged students, headed the Laboratory for Formal Aspects of Computer Science, and founded the Numeracy Centre. He was Vice-Chancellor Dr Mamphela Ramphele's Coordinator for Strategic Planning before becoming



pro Vice-Chancellor (Research) and mathematics professor at the University of Wollongong in Australia in mid-1999.

Back in South Africa in 2002, Brink became the first Vice-Chancellor and Rector of SU to be appointed from beyond its own ranks (or those of the Afrikaner Broederbond). "Through Vision 2012, I committed SU to a diversity of people and ideas, playing a constructive role in the development of South African society, and contributing to scientific and technological capacity-building in Africa," explains Brink, who introduced a new language policy committed to multilingualism.

His idea of "quality needs diversity" did not always find favour, as the British newspaper *The Guardian*, summarised in 2005: "Brink's five years at Stellenbosch were spent pushing a university that had been the intellectual heart of apartheid into opening its doors to black students. Unsurprisingly, his drive to multiply several times over the number of black students, and for classes to be conducted in English rather than Afrikaans so that blacks could participate, were often misconstrued as ringing the death knell for Afrikaans."

The book, *Chris Brink: Anatomy of a Transformer* (2007), contains tributes by Stellenbosch colleagues and students. It includes his speeches, essays and documents, along with many extreme responses, the latter often elicited in especially the Afrikaans media. In the book, his wife Tobeia describes Brink as an extremely dedicated, thorough man who is precise in meeting goals and deadlines, someone who is passionate not only about "doing things right" but primarily about "doing the right thing", and someone "who belongs to himself".

During his tenure, SU was positioned as one of the three top academic institutions in the country. The African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS) and the Stellenbosch Institute of Advanced Study (STIAS) were launched with his

support. Within five years "other-than-white" students rose by 70%, and to 28.3% of the overall student population. African black students increased by 91%.

He initiated a regional development project called Reinventing Stellenbosch, but political shifts within the Stellenbosch Municipality saw his hopes of better relationships with surrounding communities only partially realised.

HIS NEWCASTLE YEARS

Brink's ideas about civic universities crystallised between 2007 and 2016 while he was head of the The University of Newcastle in England. Key partnerships helped establish the urban sustainability hub, Science Central, the Campus for Ageing and Vitality and a national centre for offshore and sub-sea engineering. Brink sat on numerous boards within the United Kingdom higher education community, co-authored a Newcastle Fairness Commission report and joined a peace initiative in the city.

The university's international footprint was extended to branch campuses in Malaysia, Singapore and London. It twice won the national *Times Higher Education Leadership and Management Award* (THELMA), and its advancement of gender equality was acknowledged. Upon his retirement, city leaders hailed Brink as "an exemplary vice-chancellor" who helped Newcastle regenerate itself from an old industrial city into a sustainable science-driven one.

Brink has recently finished his latest book in his new Boland hometown of Franschhoek. He was a critical reader for South Africa's then Department of Science and Technology, now Department of Science and Innovation, and chairs the implementation panel of the 2020 Research Assessment Exercise of Hong Kong's eight public universities.

2020

Legends of South African Science II

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