

AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Laureate Award from the University of Pretoria (1998)
- Co-authored the book, *Graphical Exploratory Data Analysis* (1986)
- President of the Human Sciences Research Council

DEFINING MOMENT

When he came to the full realisation of the injustices of the apartheid system. This occurred thanks to work-related interactions with struggle activists during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

He is a keen hiker and has hiked the Grand Canyon. He met his wife Adrienne (Adie) while taking a church group on a hike in the Transkei in 1975.

COMFORTABLE IN THE DEEP END

Rolf Stumpf has been described as a man with a head for figures and a heart for people. His sense of being is shaped by his belief in honest relationships, a respect for others and remaining apolitical. This has carried him through the various parts of his career as statistician, lecturer, administrator, university leader and higher education consultant. It is also perhaps why there is little in the line of controversy about him on the Internet or in newspapers. "I'm hopelessly too German and too focused on getting things done to look for the limelight," he says in his no-nonsense way.

Stumpf was born on 6 November 1945 in Vryheid in KwaZulu-Natal. His German parents instilled in him a lifelong passion for education and music. Upon his father's appointment as a school inspector, the family moved to Pietermaritzburg where the trilingual Stumpf matriculated at the Afrikaans-medium Voortrekker High School.

Stumpf came top of his class and after doing his military service attended the University of Pretoria (UP) on a bursary. He combined BA subjects (including English, history and economics) with a few BSc subjects like statistics and mathematics, because he wasn't quite sure what to study. Ultimately, he received a PhD in Statistics (Analysis of Qualitative Data) from the University of

South Africa (Unisa) in 1984, after also completing a diploma in theology from the Johannesburg Baptist College in the late 1970s.

Stumpf has never spent more than seven years in any position. He has also never applied for a job of his own accord. He has however often been asked to take up specific positions and was consequently often thrown into the deep end. The first such instance was as a young lecturer at UP in 1968. He was expecting to teach statistics, but instead was put to the test from day one: "I had to present classes on financial accounting, a subject I had never heard of," smiling as he remembers the shock he received. In true character, Stumpf got himself up to speed as soon as possible and made the best of things.

His next challenge came in 1981 when he was asked to develop financial models for the national Department of Education. He wasn't too enthusiastic about working for the nationalist government and made a point of underlining his political independence to his would-be superiors. By the early 1990s, Stumpf had risen to the position of Deputy Director-General and had established a good rapport with ministers, trade union leaders and education leaders from the African National Congress fold. "I immensely enjoyed building bridges between people, and bringing them together."

Stumpf became President of the Human Sciences Research Council in 1993 and subsequently transformed the research culture of an organisation once known to be the National Party's research arm. In a potentially career-limiting move, he even suggested that its board should resign as part of this transformation process. In 1998 Stumpf, his wife Adrienne and three children moved south for him to become Vice-Rector (Operations), and then Vice-Rector (Teaching) at Stellenbosch University (SU). A key contribution was a new information management system for university data.

MERGING PORT ELIZABETH INSTITUTIONS

In the early 2000s, the higher education landscape was dominated by the mergers of the universities and technikons. After narrowly losing to Professor Chris Brink in 2002 to serve as SU's Vice-Chancellor, Stumpf was asked to apply



to lead the then University of Port Elizabeth, now Nelson Mandela University (NMU) and to consolidate it with Vista Port Elizabeth and Port Elizabeth Technikon. And so began his famous 'tea and scones sessions', during which he invited staff to air their views on their experiences of the merger process.

By 2005, the task had been completed and Stumpf became the first Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive Officer of NMU and its six campuses around Port Elizabeth and George.

In 2009, Stumpf wrote about the experience in the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper: "The managerial and operational challenges facing merging institutions varied from the sublime to the ridiculous ... On the human side, the mergers were difficult if not downright horrible exercises to manage."

He also wrote in an alumni newsletter of the university: "However, the merger gave us an unbelievable opportunity to start over and to re-brand ourselves as a university. It's been a hard, but wonderfully exciting time".

During his tenure, Stumpf also played numerous roles within South Africa's higher education community at large. He chaired the 2007 Higher Education South Africa investigation into student tuition fees.

In 2007, he stepped down from NMU, having slashed the university's long-term debt by two-thirds. He had never intended to stay on because he believed that the person driving a merger should not lead the new institution for too long.

He then started his one-man higher education consultancy – a job he still does with diligence well into his seventies. He has worked for many South African universities and government departments, the World Bank and for institutions in Botswana, Namibia and Lesotho.

After years as a board member of Unisa, the Laurea University for Applied Sciences in Finland and the Council of Higher Education, and as Chair of the Higher Education Quality Committee, Stumpf is trying to scale down. He is still a Research Fellow of Universities South Africa, chair of the National Intellectual Property Management Office Full Research Cost Committee and a member of the Department of Higher Education and Training task team that is developing governance indicators. He serves as board Chair of STADIO investment holding

company, which started off as a subsidiary of Curro Holdings and subsequently listed independently on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

Stumpf counts himself lucky to have been able to work alongside people from across the political spectrum. "Life is all about the relationships between people, and about having respect for one another," he concludes.



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