

AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Three honorary doctorates – from the University of the Free State (UFS) for outstanding achievement in the shaping of policies and practices of the higher education environment (2004), from his *alma mater* York University (2008), and from Rhodes University (2015) for his outstanding contribution to higher education in South Africa over 25 years
- The Inyathelo Exceptional Philanthropy Award in recognition of Excellence and Leadership in Personal South African Philanthropy (2008)
- Hubert Humphrey Fellowship at Boston University (1995 – 1996)

DEFINING MOMENT

In December 1980, when his Economic History Honours supervisor Daniel North-Coombes implored him to choose the University of Cape Town (UCT) to pursue his Masters. North-Coombes believed Badat's scholarly and intellectual interests would be better nurtured there than in KwaZulu-Natal. The move to Cape Town in 1981 was a defining moment in his life and for his career.

WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

He was a provincial junior tennis champion, representing KwaZulu-Natal. He also has a soccer coaching certificate from the English Football Association.

COMMITMENT TO KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION

If the 1976 Soweto uprising first sparked Saleem Badat's political consciousness, the long periods of detention, solitary confinement and brutal torture at the hands of the apartheid security police in the 1980s entrenched a life-long commitment to social justice and transformation in and through education. He has spent his personal and academic life seeking to understand how social structures, policies and actions sustain inequalities and injustices, in universities specifically, but also in society as a whole.

"My principal concerns have been thinking about, designing and implementing strategies, policies and mechanisms to advance social justice in and through universities," says Badat, who has been hailed for his outstanding contribution to higher education in South Africa over nearly three decades.

In June 2006, he became the first black Vice-Chancellor in Rhodes University's (RU) 102-year history, and today he heads up the Andrew W Mellon Foundation's International Higher Education and Strategic Projects (IHESP). The move to New York wasn't on his agenda, he says, but like all his other commitments which have taken him around South Africa and the United States, he followed where his career led him. "The wonderful thing about my life has been having people around me who encouraged me to take on new posts and responsibilities; almost like guardian angels guiding me in the direction of what was meant to come next for me. Their nudging got me to move out of my comfort zones, which is a very important thing for growth and development," he says.

POLITICAL AWAKENING

But first came Badat's political awakening thanks to the Soweto uprising, which developed into activism during his student days. He joined the Release Mandela Committee and was chairperson of the Student Wages Commission. He became more deeply involved in the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s when he faced the wrath of the security police, spending 42 days in solitary confinement in Pollsmoor Prison in 1985, followed by 83 days in a single cell, during which time he embarked on a five-day hunger strike. The following year a banning order saw Badat go into hiding, then leave the country.

"My activist history might have taken me on a different path, perhaps into politics, but my dream of becoming a scholar never died. Knowledge and action, theory and practice are in my blood. Like many other people in the liberation movement who had plans to become film directors or writers and the like, dreams had to be delayed and aspirations put on hold. But I never forgot my dream. I did not subscribe to the credo of liberation before education," Badat explains.

His move to Britain in 1986 – he earned his PhD at the University of York – is a period Badat refers to as "powerfully formative". It was here that he met one of his most important intellectual mentors, Professor Harold Wolpe, when he worked as a research assistant on the Research in Education in South Africa project at the University of Essex.



His return to South Africa, along with the ten “immensely happy, stimulating and productive” years that followed at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), were critical turning points. UWC was particularly important for his development as a scholar thanks to the space, opportunity and support the institution afforded him. Badat spent much of the early 1990s conducting policy research on higher education and science and technology for the mass democratic movement and was an integral part of the National Education Policy Investigation that informed democratic South Africa’s national education policy.

COUNCIL OF HIGHER EDUCATION

He went on to become the Chief Executive Officer of the new Council on Higher Education (CHE) in 1999. He was the only staffer when it began, but when he left seven years later the council had a staff of 55 and was tasked with providing policy advice to the Minister of Education, undertaking quality assurance in higher education issues and helping to monitor policy. “I had always said that after the CHE was firmly established I’d return to a university,” and he did, in 2006, when he became Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University.

Transformation, along with a need for modernisation, was top of his agenda. His goal was to steer an institution shaped by colonialism, apartheid, racism and patriarchy to becoming equitable and inclusive internally, while also contributing to equity, development and democracy in South Africa. During his eight-year term at RU, Badat saw a rise in overall student numbers from 5 900 in 2006 to almost 7 500 in 2014, the number of black students increasing from just under 3 000 (about 51% of the total student enrolment) to more than 4 700, or 64% of total enrolment. The university also notched up a 70% increase in the number of postgraduate students by 2014, with 60% black students and 48% women. He also facilitated a threefold increase in the number of postdoctoral students, from 19 to 68, and increased the staff complement of black academics from 16% to 25%.

“I worked 80-hour weeks and it was very tough, but I’m proud to say that it was during that time that I published my book, *The Forgotten People* (2012), a history of those banished from South Africa during the apartheid era.” He also managed to add to his extensive output of books, book chapters, articles, conference papers, keynote addresses and guest lectures.

Universities are still top of his agenda at the Mellon Foundation in New York, the move to which was a “major matter” as it entailed leaving not only a prominent university, but also his beloved South Africa. “But I stay close to South Africa and to its universities because my programme supports seven universities here, along with one each in Uganda, Ghana, Egypt and Lebanon, as well as three pan-African and pan-Arab higher education institutions. I’m still giving effect to my belief that universities can be vital institutions in the effort to build prosperous, just and democratic societies in which all citizens can lead rich, rewarding and productive lives.”



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