

AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- UNESCO Confucius Award (2016)
- National Ubungweti GCIS Award for Kha Ri Gude (2009)
- Woman of the Year Award (Education) (2000)

DEFINING MOMENTS

Being appointed Chief Executive Officer of the literacy campaign and being appointed Dean of the University of South Africa, College of Education.

WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

As the Dean of the largest College of Education in the country, with 115 000 students, and with her background of having run massive campaigns and developing workbooks for schools, the distribution of which has exceeded 350 million books, she is addicted to scale. She sometimes jokes that it isn't really worth her while to get out of bed for fewer than 20 000 students.

ROLLING OUT LITERACY, EDUCATION AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT EN MASSE

With work spanning the education sector from preschool to post-schooling, Veronica McKay deals in big numbers. As the Dean of the largest College of Education in the country, at the University of South Africa (Unisa), she oversees more than 115 000 students from undergraduate to doctoral level. "Doing this at a distance is exciting and challenging and requires me to keep one eye on policy and the other on management," she says. "In between I find time for teaching my Master's and Doctoral students, and I still work in developing the new curricula as we prepare to offer new qualifications in line with the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications. I also keep a hand on adult education and oversee the work-integrated learning implementation in the College to ensure that our students get optimal teaching practice experience in one of the 27 000 schools across South Africa."

Despite these achievements, McKay feels her most important contribution was establishing the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) national workbook project, where she played a key role in coordinating and writing school materials for learners from Grade R to Grade 9. To date, the DBE has published and delivered 350 million books developed by her and a team of academics.

McKay started out as a teacher and then moved into academia. Her PhD in sociology focused on "people's education" in South Africa from a humanist perspective. She says she has not actually moved from teaching to research but has blurred the various roles and is fortunate to be in a space that in fact requires a combination of theory, research, pedagogy and practice.

In 2017, in acknowledgment of her substantial contribution to the development of lifelong learning on a global scale, she was made an Honorary Fellow of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. She is also a member of the South African UNESCO Commission.

Her passion for lifelong learning goes back to growing up on the mines of Johannesburg. "I could not understand why 'the big men who dug the gold out of the ground' would ask me, as six or seven-year-old, to read an address or a price or a letter or even to work out the change they should receive in a shop. When I did come to understand why, I realised that it was a result of what Professor Bhola refers to as 'the denial of an essential element of the human heritage and the imposition of an intellectual bondage', and I have always tried to bridge the gap through the work and the research that I do. This realisation and her attempts to address it, opened up a very meaningful career that often took her out of the mainstream of the university. Hence her academic career resulted in her working along the lifelong learning continuum, with her praxis interventions aimed at targeting deficits in education, through for example, large-scale educator development, campaigns or the development of school workbooks; and her research focused on informing her work in what has largely been uncharted terrain.

McKay has been at Unisa for 35 years, beginning her academic career as a lecturer in the Department of Sociology where she worked at the intersection of education and sociology, focusing on the sociology of education, gender and also on action-oriented research approaches. With the changes in the country in 1994, the university granted her permission to establish the Institute for Adult Education to provide qualifications for the professionalisation of educators in the broad field of adult education and literacy. Setting up the institute with few precedents required her to draw on theory, pedagogy and insights from research to be able to establish a new university department that



could embrace adult education across sectors and that could span formal and non-formal learning situations.

HELPING MILLIONS BECOME LITERATE

McKay researches education 'at the margins'. She works with those who are vulnerable and marginalised in what UNESCO defines as 'situations of acute and persistent disadvantage in education'. "Much of my work has been at the periphery of society, working with those left behind. In these involvements I was able to carry out reflective praxis focusing on the most pressing needs of the communities in which I worked and exploring ways to bring about social change and inclusion."

"The opportunity to lead two large-scale literacy campaigns, the South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI) in 2002 – 2003, and the DBE's National *Kha Ri Gude* (Let us learn) Mass Literacy Campaign in 2007 – 2012, jointly enabled five million adults who had previously been denied access to schooling or learning to become literate. In implementing these campaigns, we strove to ensure that learning played a seminal role in building resilience and agency among target groups, offering hope in otherwise hopeless situations. Much of the teaching and learning took place at the nexus of poverty and despair," she says.

Working in informal settlements, prisons and with learners in the streets allowed McKay to merge her theoretical, pedagogic and research knowledge and leadership understanding to work with large teams of up to 40 000 volunteers. Together they were able to explore, through collaborative research endeavours,

the range of possibilities for an expanded remit for community learning and for developing social cohesion and resilience at the individual and community levels. As there were no local precedents for large-scale learning campaigns in South Africa, it was necessary to research the situation as it was unfolding on the ground to allow them to continuously improve what they were doing.

"Much of my research has focused on the role of social networks and social capital as being critical for strengthening communal social infrastructure and for developing resilience," she says. She was able to see *ubuntu* in the social cohesion arising from organised learning, in the way learners interacted with one another as co-dependent beings, with compassion and trust and *letsema** as they offered reciprocal support. She has also been involved in many other large-scale projects such as the training programme for Community Development Workers which was implemented by Unisa – reaching some 4 000 community workers who were trained to assist those on the margins of society.

During the period when she was seconded to the DBE from 2007 to 2012, McKay was given another opportunity to engage in praxis at the margins when she conceptualised and coordinated a massive school workbook project. The project was intended to address the challenges of under-performance of learners, particularly those in low socio-economic communities. "The programme has been largely successful," she remarks, "I am presently researching and writing about the reception of the materials and their impact on the improvement in learning outcomes."

* Setswana for a group of people coming together for a common purpose.

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