

AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Chancellor's Honour's Award from the University of the Western Cape (UWC) (2014)
- Honorary Doctorate in Education from Coventry University, England (2002)
- Silver Springbok Award from Scouts South Africa (2000)

DEFINING MOMENTS

There have been three major defining moments in his career: the first was when he left engineering and returned to education in 1980. The second when he challenged Kader Asmal's merger of the Peninsula Technikon and Cape Technikon and handed in his resignation in December 2004 after 25 years of service. The third was in 2009 when Naledi Pandor appointed him as the candidate for election as the South African representative on the Executive Board of UNESCO.

WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

He is very proud of his two children who are well-balanced, responsible adults with good careers.

COMMUNITY LEADER AND ARCHITECT OF TRANSFORMATION

Brian Figaji unlocked the secrets to good leadership, honesty and integrity as a result of his involvement in Scouts South Africa. These skills, honed early in life, have served him well in his professional achievements as an educator, consulting civil engineer, student-focused academic leader, country representative to UNESCO in Paris, and as one of the architects of the initial blueprint for higher education transformation in the democratic South Africa.

After obtaining his BSc at UWC in 1969, Figaji continued his studies and completed a Diploma in Tertiary Education (with distinction). He is also a graduate of Harvard University, holds other degrees from South African universities and is the recipient of several honorary doctorates.

EARLY CAREER

In the late 1960s, Figaji chose a career in science, somewhat by accident, at a time when promising young black students faced many challenges in getting

a good education. "I enjoyed science at high school and thought of studying medicine, but there were very few bursaries available in that field and I ended up getting a bursary to study teaching instead. I selected mathematics and physics as my majors."

After qualifying, he started work as a science teacher. "While I enjoyed teaching, I realised that the system did not welcome young people who were a bit rebellious. I had youthful exuberance and after having been the President of the Students' Representative Council at the UWC, I wanted to change the world. In my first year of teaching we had a visit from the education inspectors and I had a little clash with them," he says mischievously, "so I changed careers. Despite knowing very little about engineering, I took a job working in civil engineering surveys."

While working as a civil engineering technician, he managed to secure a bursary at the University of Cape Town (UCT) to study engineering. He was one of two black students in a class of 70. He completed the degree with honours – despite being excluded from working on certain sites because of his race. He then worked for ten years as a consulting engineer.

SHAPING HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

When called upon to return to the education sector in 1980, Figaji joined the Peninsula Technikon (now the Cape Peninsula University of Technology) as Head of Engineering, and soon rose through the ranks at the institution, eventually serving as Principal and Vice-Chancellor from 1994 to 2004. During this time he made provision for significant expansion of the computer facilities on campus in an effort to realise the dream of the Peninsula Technikon of becoming the Massachusetts Institute of Technology of Africa.

He was appointed to the National Commission on Higher Education in 1995 by President Nelson Mandela to develop a framework for the transformation of higher education. "In drafting the blueprint, tough decisions had to be made, but this gave me access and opportunities to look at other systems internationally. We had to report to the Minister, Professor Sibusiso Bengu, and this gave me good exposure and recognition." But Figaji left higher education in 2004 as a result of his opposition to the merger of institutions as proposed by then Minister Kader Asmal.



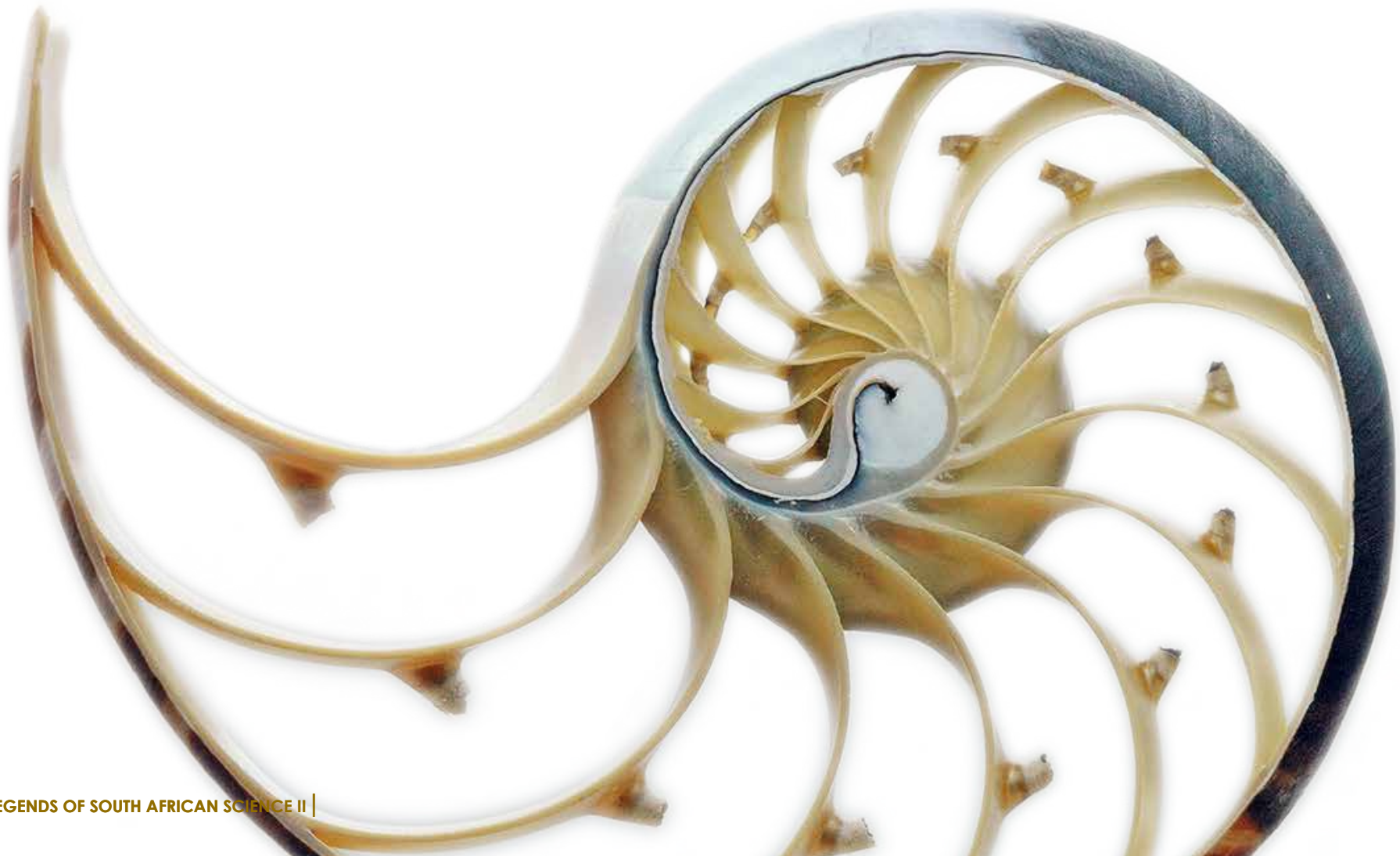
BRIAN FIGAJI

A passionate community leader, he has played an important role in the transformation of South Africa over the past 20 years. He was a Director of the Youth Development Trust, a member of the Engineering Advisory Committee, a member of the Desmond Tutu Trust and President of the Boy Scouts in the Western Cape.

Figaji became a Director of the Nedbank Group in November 2002 and retired from this position after serving the required period of appointment. He was a

board member of the Development Bank of Southern Africa and currently he still serves as the non-executive Chair of Irvin and Johnson (Pty) Ltd. He is still an active member of several boards and continues to serve the community in his retirement.

Figaji is a Fellow of the SA Institute of Civil Engineers, a Fellow of the SA Society for Professional Engineers, a Fellow of the Academy of Engineering and a Member of the Academy of Science of South Africa.



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Legends of South African Science II

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

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