**Professor Adam Habib, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of the Witwatersrand**by Lorlene Hoyt

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Professor Adam Habib is the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Professor Habib is an academic, activist, administrator, and renowned political media commentator and columnist. A Professor of Political Science, he has more than 30 years of academic, research, institutional and administration expertise. His experience spans five universities and multiple local and international institutions, boards and task teams.

Professor Habib’s professional involvement in institutions has always been defined by three distinct engagements: the contest of ideas; their translation into actionable initiatives; and the building of institutions. Transformation, democracy and development are fundamental themes of his research. He has written extensively on the need to create an inclusive society and to transform higher education in service of that goal.

According to Habib, Wits has embraced a holistic approach to engagement with society. Instead of “community service” being practiced in a narrow and parochial manner, with connotations of a self-actualised and self-sufficient university “serving”, and often doing extractive research that has no tangible benefit to the communities being researched, Wits tries to pursue a mutually beneficial approach, which seems to be better described by the term “engagement” rather than “community service”.

Therefore, at Wits University, partnerships with all sectors of society are seen as vital for the advancement of both the University and society in general. In this context, partnerships are understood as mutually beneficial, programme-based, purposeful and sustainable relationships that are largely embedded in the University’s academic and research programmes. They find expression in a variety of shapes and forms, ranging from volunteer activities to service learning and research programmes.

Volunteer activities are coordinated by the Wits Citizenship and Community Outreach office which serves as a supportive, facilitative conduit from University to community. It both meets the goal of being responsive to civil society needs and provides students with experiences that help to develop a consciousness for civic responsibility. “Volunteering plays a valuable role in shaping how students learn to interact with their community, define public problems, develop their social skills and value systems, and develop a sense of empowerment to take action on behalf of the common good. Volunteerism is necessary to become an active citizen,” says Professor Habib.

He finds it pleasing that, at a time when many institutions of higher learning are concerned that South Africa is experiencing a general decline in civic and political engagement, volunteering appears particularly strong among students within Wits University. Students are far more generous with their time and energy in benefiting community development than is generally acknowledged. Many students are motivated to meet identified community goals and this has led to a range of innovative student-led projects.

The most common form of volunteering is placement, where volunteers give their time on a weekly basis. The majority of these include working with youth and children at non-governmental organisations. For the volunteer who has difficulty with ongoing commitments, a day-long campaign, where a task is organised and completed, is popular. These are also popular service activities for clubs or societies. Work camps are residential trips to rural communities for smaller groups of students that give a more in-depth service experience.

Another important aspect of community engagement at Wits is service learning, which enables the University to continue to engage academically with broader society (government, business and industry, NGOs, communities) through community, public service and industry based programmes. Service learning modules form a crucial part of professional disciplines such as education, health sciences, engineering, social work, speech and hearing, psychology and law, and typically take place in non-profit organisations and public service, such as clinics and schools, with which the University has long-standing relationships. Most service learning activities take place in the communities, but an increased number are now delivered through three centres that Wits has set up specifically for service learning activities.

Professor Habib believes that the function of universities should be to create economic opportunity by developing human skills and enabling knowledge transfer, and not to be mechanisms to create elites. In line with this, at the beginning of 2014, together with the South African Minister of Basic Education, Wits announced the launch of the Wits Equality Scholarships which cover all tuition and residence fees, textbooks, food and a cost of living allowance for the top 10 learners from disadvantaged communities who choose to attend the University. “The Scholarships aim to create hope in society, and in so doing, to create meaningful transformation and change in South Africa,” says Professor Habib.

The scholarships have enhanced Wits’ suite of equity programmes, which promote access to higher education for talented learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. They include the Targeting Talent Programme, which identifies and nurtures talented learners from Grades 10, 11 and 12; the Carnegie Bale Scholarship Programme, which provides financial, academic, social and psychological support to young women in the higher education system; the Go to University to Succeed (GUTS) outreach campaign, which supports the aspirations of Grade 11 and 12 learners who would not normally consider higher education as an option by providing them with mentors from similar backgrounds; and the Leadership, Education and Development Programme (LEAD), which immerses high school learners in career opportunities in health sciences, engineering and business, so that they are able to make better informed decisions.

In the South African government’s White Paper for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997) “responsiveness to societal interests and needs” is considered as one of the three roles of a university, and one which should be fully integrated with mainstream teaching and research.

This is congruent to Professor Habib’s belief that no student should graduate from university without a strong sense of the ways in which he or she can actively contribute to development of society, through the considered exercise of his or her rights and responsibilities as a citizen.

*Professor Habib has served as the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand since 1 June 2013. Prior to this, he served as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, Innovation, Library and Faculty Coordination at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). He was instrumental in transforming UJ following the nationwide mergers of tertiary institutions in 2005 and played a key role in increasing research output at UJ. He also served as the Executive Director at the Human Sciences Research Council and as a Research Director on Governance and Democracy. He has held several academic, research posts at the University of Natal, including serving as a Professor in the School of Development Studies and as Research Director of the Centre for Civil Society. Professor Habib holds qualifications in Political Science from three universities including the University of Natal and Wits. He earned his masters and doctoral qualifications from the Graduate School of the City University of New York.* *His latest book,* South Africa’s Suspended Revolution: Hopes and Prospects*, launched in August 2013, has made huge waves both locally and internationally. The book focuses on South Africa’s transition into democracy and its prospects for inclusive development.*