

Jonathan David Jansen
for the DEd (honoris causa)

Professor Jansen graduated from UWC with a BSc in 1979, following which he pursued a career first in science at secondary school level, later as a university researcher in curriculum studies, and further as a university leader and influential public commentator on education in South Africa. His doctorate is from the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University, and he is currently a distinguished professor in the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University. His scholarly output is prolific, and demonstrates both his attention to engaging with praxis, and to caring about living a critically engaged life.

As the first black Dean of Education at the University of Pretoria, and the first black Rector at the University of the Free State (UFS), Professor Jansen rose to prominence by inserting a thoughtful voice into national debates on both school and higher education, and on racial reconciliation and social transformation. At some personal cost, he held to a reconciliatory approach at UFS to the leadership challenge presented by the race-based dysfunctionality at the institution at the time. In avoiding a push for retribution, he chose instead to build bridges and facilitate communication among students who had come to think of themselves as intractably in opposition.

Since his early period as a high school teacher, through to the present day, Professor Jansen has been acutely aware of the need to improve education at all levels. He has been dedicated towards encouraging “courageous conversations” on what the state should do to advance education, what the public can do to hold the state to account, and what each person can do to understand better the complexities of living in a fractured and mistrustful society. As part of this, he has made his academic work relevant to the community at large through frequent columns, numerous books for public audiences, and the generous use of his time in giving public talks and working for the betterment of South African education through membership of various professional boards and charities.

Role models who demonstrate that it is at least possible to overcome adverse circumstances and become an international thought leader, and a transformative voice in society by pursuing one’s academic aspirations, are rare and deserving of recognition. In South Africa, it is difficult to think of a scholar who has done more to effect public thought and debate on social justice in education than Professor Jansen has. In showing how one can use academic knowledge and authority in the service of transforming lives, he offers us an exemplar for the public intellectual, and is thus deserving of recognition from UCT in the form of an honorary doctorate.