

Obituaries

Peter de Villiers Booyesen (1930–2004)

Peter Booyesen, academic, administrator and vice-chancellor, associated with the University of Natal for 40 years, as well as a rugby man of note, died in February, 2004.

Born in Graaff Reinet, Booyesen matriculated from Kingswood College, Grahamstown in 1948 and came to the University of Natal the following year as an undergraduate to study agriculture. He gained his BSc (Agric) in 1952 and his MSc (cum laude) two years later. That same year he was appointed as a lecturer in Pasture Management and Soil Conservation. From 1959, the year he was promoted to senior lecturer, to 1962 he was a research assistant at the University of California while on study leave from NU, during which time he did research for his PhD in plant physiology, awarded in 1963.



Peter Booyesen

Returning to Natal, Booyesen quickly rose through the ranks. Promoted to professor and head of department in 1973, he was dean of the faculty of agriculture from 1975 to 1977 winning an international reputation as an agricultural scientist. He was president of the Agricultural Scientific Association of Natal in 1966 and president of the Grassland Society of Southern Africa in 1969.

As an academic, Booyesen was the sole or joint author of 58 publications in the fields of morphology, ecology and physiology of range and pasture plants and range and pasture management. Of these, 47 are published in scientific refereed journals, six are of a popular nature, two are in books and three are chapters of a book.

Rugby was an important part of Booyesen's life. He captained both his school rugby First XV and the University First XV, for which he played for seven years. He represented Natal on various occasions during the period 1952 to 1954. Playing days over, he was coach, vice-president and president of the University Rugby Club in sequence during the period 1956 to 1974. He served as a council member of the Maritzburg Rugby Sub-Union and of the Natal Rugby Union, of which he was also president for three years from 1981. He was a Natal selector, and a Natal representative on the South African Rugby Board.

In 1977 Booyesen moved into academic management with an appointment as vice-principal of the Durban campus. In August 1984 he was installed as vice-chancellor, which post he held for seven years until his retirement in mid-1991. His period in office was a challenging one with continuing cuts in government subsidies to all universities, the advent of a non-racial student admission policy (the principal predicted that by 2010, 70 % of the university's students would be black), as well as political tensions in the country which made their influence felt on the university community. The attempted imposition of ministerial conditions on the councils of South African universities was another highly contentious issue, one where the university took the minister to court, and won.

In 1988 Booyesen was thrust into the headlines when he was sharply criticised by the then minister of education (and later state president) F.W. de Klerk for his links with a 'terrorist organisation' after he led a three-person delegation to a 'Lusaka Indaba' to meet with the banned ANC to discuss the country's educational concerns. Ahead of the times, his initiative demonstrated afresh his determination to get on with the job. His response to the publicity was quiet background consultation with all the key constituents of the university - and a low media profile.

On retirement Booyesen returned to the Eastern Cape from which he had come 40 years before. He died in February, 2004 at his home in Kenton-on-Sea of a brain tumour, leaving his wife Beulah and three children.

Retired Professor George Trotter who, as registrar of the University of Natal, worked closely with Booyesen for many years, said of him: 'Piet Booyesen was an outstanding vice-chancellor. He was a wise and thoughtful man, scrupulously fair and even-handed in all his interactions with staff. He had a delightful sense of humour, and was courteous to a fault. As I recall, he was held in the highest regard by staff at all levels, by students and by the general public.'

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