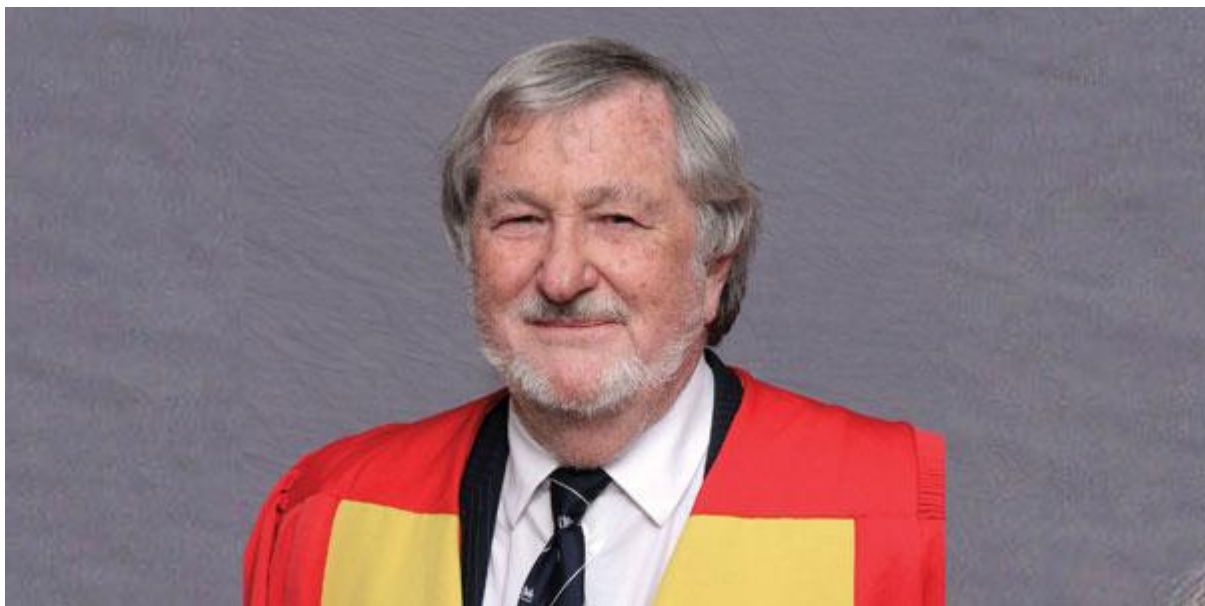


Wits mourns the loss of Professor Eddie Webster

6 March 2024 - Wits Communications

It is with great sadness that we learnt of the passing of Professor Edward (Eddie) Webster (82), who passed away yesterday after a short illness.

We extend our heartfelt condolences to Professor Webster's family and friends during this difficult time. Tributes are pouring in from Professor Webster's many colleagues, friends, students and acquaintances, who acknowledge the immense contribution that he made as a scholar, activist and friend right until the end. May he rest in eternal peace.



Exit, voice and loyalty – these were the three interchangeable concepts described by Professor Webster as a way to illuminate a wide range of economic, social and political phenomena in South Africa, in a speech that he delivered at a graduation which focused on inequality in the Wits Great Hall in 2018.

These three ideas illuminate some of Webster's characteristics – he was a humanitarian who used his voice and agency to effect real change in the world, to speak truth to power, to openly protest, and to engage in critical debate, without fear. An outstanding academic, he was loyal to labour activism, good scholarship, equality, social justice and the advancement of the public good.

He made an immeasurable contribution to the labour movement through the establishment of the Sociology of Work Programme at Wits University, and more recently as the first interim director and then distinguished research professor at the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies. For his scholarly contributions, commitment to and advancement of democracy through labour activism, and the nurturing of several generations of leading labour sociologists, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Wits in 2017.

Professor Webster made an impression on generations of scholars, activists and workers, and even though he now exits the stage, he leaves behind an immeasurable intellectual legacy told through his life story, some of which is captured below.

The Legacy of Professor Edward Webster

Edward Webster was born on 29 March 1942 and educated at Selborne College. He obtained a BA Honours degree and University Education Diploma from Rhodes University, an MA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from Oxford University, and a Bachelor of Philosophy from York University. He obtained his PhD from the University of the Witwatersrand.

Professor Webster established the Society, Work and Development Institute at Wits. He was recognised locally and internationally for his significant contribution to scholarship, especially in the field of Industrial Sociology. His book *Cast in a Racial Mould* (1985), showing how the labour movement in South Africa was shaped by changes in the labour process, remains a classic.

His book with Rob Lambert and Andries Bezuidenhout *Grounding Globalization: Labor in the Age of Insecurity* was awarded the prestigious American Sociological Association award for the best scholarly monograph published on labour in 2008. He is the author of several books and over 100 academic articles, as well as numerous research reports.

He pioneered the academic study of the sociology of work and labour in South Africa. As Head of the Department of Sociology at Wits University for ten years (1988 - 1995; 2000 -2002) he focused on the transformation of the curriculum and staff development (particularly of young, African scholars). Webster transformed it into the leading department of sociology in Africa. He introduced a Masters by coursework, and an Honours programme in Industrial Sociology which has produced many of the key industrial relations scholars and actors in South Africa.

He also developed the discipline of Sociology through his active membership in the South African Sociological Association of which he was President for three years. Through the creation of working groups on the public issues of the time, such as education, labour, gender, militarisation and the state, he gave the association new energy and direction.

Professor Webster was active in attempts at transformation of the University since his appointment in January 1976. He led the historic research report by Wits academics in 1986 *Perspectives of Wits*, which was aimed at changing the university from a bastion of white privilege to a more open and inclusive institution that would produce a new generation of black sociologists committed to serving society. He served as the Senate representative on the University Council for eight years and contributed to the resolution of many highly contentious issues and debates.

In 2008, SWOP was recognised as a strategic area of Wits University's research and granted Institute status and as a model of what has been termed "Public Sociology".

Webster also established an ambitious research programme to train young students, attaching them to research projects on the transition to democracy.

An internationally recognised sociologist, Professor Webster was rated in 2004 as the top sociologist in South Africa by the National Research Foundation for his scholarly work. He had connections to several research institutes locally and around the world.

He was a Visiting Professor at many local and international universities and was the first Ela Bhatt Visiting Professor of Development and Decent Work at the International Centre for Development and Decent Work at Kassel University in Germany from 2009 to 2010. He also served as a Senior Fulbright Scholar at the University of Wisconsin, Madison from 1995 to 1996.

Webster served on the International Advisory Board of the Economic and Labour Relations Review, Labour, Capital and Society; Work, Employment and Society; Social Forces and the Labour Studies Journal. He was founder and Editor-in Chief of the Global Labour Journal, a joint venture between Wits University and McMaster University in Canada. He also served as the President of the Research Committee on Labour Movements of the International Sociological Association between 2002 and 2006.

He was the Founder and Chair of the Global Labour University at Wits, a global initiative by the International Labour Organization that connects universities in Germany, India, South Africa and Brazil. He was also a founding member in 1974 of the South African Labour Bulletin, South Africa's premier journal of labour. He co-founded the first workers' college in South Africa - the Institute for Industrial Education in 1973. He was a Non-executive Director of the Development Bank of Southern Africa, a Board Member of the Chris Hani Institute, the Labour Job Creation Trust, and the Human Science Research Council. He also served on the Human Resources Development Council of South Africa.

In 2017, Webster was appointed as the first interim director of the then newly established Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, where from 2019 until 2023 he served as distinguished research professor. At the SCIS, he played a key role in a south-south interdisciplinary research project examining how India, Ghana, Brazil and South Africa are responding to the growing informalisation of work. He was the leader of the catalytic research project titled Hidden Voices: Left thought under Apartheid in the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Professor Webster enjoyed interacting with students and supervised almost fifty students. He will be dearly missed by the Wits community, by colleagues in the higher education sector, by comrades in the labour movement, by students, friends and family, and many, many people who feel honoured to have made his acquaintance. Go well, Prof. Eddie!

Reference:

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University of Witwatersrand. (2024). [Wits mourns the loss of Professor Eddie Webster](https://www.wits.ac.za/news/), 6 March 2024 (online). Available at <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/>. Accessed 25 May 2026