

## NEWS RELEASE

# Zapiro, SA's most-awarded cartoonist, receives Honorary Doctorate in Education from University of Pretoria



*Jonathan Shapiro being hooded by Mr Wallace Isaacs at the graduation ceremony.*

PRETORIA - The University of Pretoria (UP) has conferred an honorary doctorate upon South Africa's most celebrated and multi-award-winning editorial cartoonist, Jonathan Shapiro – better known as Zapiro.

The Honorary Doctorate in Education was conferred in May as part of UP's Autumn 2025 Graduation season (2 to 29 May), during which more than 12 000 students will graduate.

"It's really pleasing for me to see my cartoons being used in our schools and universities as teaching aids and in exam papers and textbooks," Shapiro said during an interview from his home studio in Cape Town ahead of the ceremony. "It's therefore particularly special for me to be receiving an honorary doctorate in [Education](#)."

Shapiro, whose career as a cartoonist started in the mid-1980s, is regularly invited by universities to provide input on subjects including journalism, art, anthropology, literature, and international relations. "The cartoons link

different disciplines, which is very much part of the transdisciplinary discourse in higher education today.”

## **Early years**

He has been obsessed with cartoons and comics since childhood, and advanced his drawing skills during his degree in Architectural Studies at the [University of Cape Town](#) (UCT). But then his desire to be a cartoonist kicked in and he switched to Graphic Design at UCT, only for his studies to be interrupted by army conscription.

He refused to carry a rifle in the army, for which he was humiliated. Part of this humiliation included forcing him to carry a heavy lead pole everywhere in place of a rifle. He used it as a prop to parody what was wrong with the army and the apartheid regime. While still in the army he became a cartoonist-activist in anti-apartheid organisations.

In 1988, after being awarded a [Fulbright scholarship](#), he headed to the [School of Visual Arts in New York](#) – where he studied Media Arts, including satirical cartooning and caricature.

Over the past four decades, his cartoons have held up a compelling, insightful mirror to events taking place in South Africa, spanning the apartheid and democratic eras, with his work appearing in national and international publications all over the world.

## **A strong, critical voice**

His work has demanded incredible commitment and bravery, as his cartoons regularly cause reactions that swell into major confrontations. He was detained in 1988, was interrogated by apartheid security police, has had death threats to himself and his family, and has been the target of an assassination plot. He was also unsuccessfully sued by former president Jacob Zuma.

Former president Nelson Mandela reacted quite differently to criticism of his government and party, as Shapiro explains: “When the [Cape Argus newspaper](#) stopped publishing my cartoons in 1997, Mandela phoned me. At first I thought that it was friends messing with me, but I quickly realised it really was Mandela. He said he was upset that my cartoons would no longer be in the Cape Argus; that he liked seeing them every day. I told him I was amazed that he’d personally phoned me after seeing my cartoons becoming more and more critical of the ANC. Mandela responded, ‘That is your job’ – and in that moment it affirmed everything that I was, and am meant to do.”

Recently, Facebook and Instagram took down some of his cartoons, including one in response to US President Donald Trump withdrawing critical US aid agency funding. He drew Trump in a Nazi uniform sending out an AIDS vulture to kill millions of Africans.

This leads to a conversation about Harvard University refusing to relinquish freedom of speech to Trump. “Why does it take the richest university in the world – and why has it taken so long for educational institutions and other institutions – to say ‘No!’ to Trump?” he asked.

“The bullying and censorship going on in America that we are all seeing is so damaging and pervasive, and I would like to see some other big institutions following Harvard’s line. If they don’t, the Nazi-style purge of knowledge and the culture of diversity will extend to many more universities, museums and art institutions.”

## Continuing the fight

He continues to push boundaries every day through his work in the [Daily Maverick](#). “Fortunately the deadlines are less intense with online publishing compared to print when I started in the 1980s. You had to either drive to the newspaper or magazine’s offices to deliver your work or courier it up to Joburg... now we just send them over the internet.”

Despite all the technology available today, Shapiro continues to draw his cartoons with pencil and ink. And he doesn’t use artificial intelligence. “AI doesn’t fit into my creativity,” he said. “AI is breathing down the neck of every profession, and it is becoming more self-aware all the time. I think it’s still some way from producing the satire, humour and irony in editorial cartooning, which is all about surprise.”

Immediately after receiving his honorary doctorate, he is set to do some local school and university talks before flying to Australia for a screening of a documentary about his journey as a cartoonist. The documentary, titled *The Showerhead*, was directed by Craig Tanner, a South African human rights lawyer-turned-filmmaker who lives in Sydney. The film was released locally in 2024, with its first screening – at the [Durban Film Festival](#) – attracting a protest by Zuma supporters.

While the honorary doctorate he is receiving from the University of Pretoria will be his third, he says it’s particularly gratifying that this one is in Education.

To his fellow graduates he offered the following: “Being in the world is all about ways of seeing... Question what you hear, see and read. Not taking things at face value is an inherent aspect of free thought. Don’t rely on social media. Find proper sources and back up what you think. Don’t just swallow fake news and conspiracies. Be conscious of confirmation bias, be conscious of free thinking, and continue developing an independent way of thinking – with a lot of second-guessing.”

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>> [Watch Shapiro’s graduation speech here](#)

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## ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%),

NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP's Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to [www.up.ac.za](http://www.up.ac.za)