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LEADING WITH STRATEGY, STRUCTURE AND SOUL

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DEAN & DIRECTOR PROFILE

DR GAVIN ISAACS
- DAVINCI INSTITUTE

Leading with strategy, structure and soul

Having capable teams to support, assist and provide strategic guidance has been the cornerstone of success for Dr Gavin Isaacs, Executive Dean: Learning, Teaching and Research (Head of Programme: Systems: Doctoral Programmes) at the DaVinci Institute.

A seasoned executive with over 25 years' experience in

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~Dr Gavin Isaacs

strategic direction and operational leadership, Dr Isaacs credits much of his success to the people around him.

“In every operational role I've held over the years, I attribute my success to the people aspect. I have been fortunate to work with capable teams who enabled me to achieve what I set out to do, both strategically and operationally. The quality of those teams has been the most important factor in everything I have experienced,” he says.

Dr Isaacs has held strategic executive roles at the South African Institute of Professional Accountants (SAIPA) and brings nearly 18 years of experience in the higher education sector, gained at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the UNISA Graduate School of Business Leadership (GSBL). He has over 13 years' experience in senior and executive management, including roles as Chief Operations Executive at SAIPA, Chief Operating Officer at GSBL and Acting Director at both UNISA's Directorate: Student Assessment Administration (DSAA) and The Unisa Centre for Lifelong Learning (UCL).

An advocate for lifelong learning himself, Dr Isaacs holds a Doctor of Business Leadership (DBL), a Master of Business Leadership (MBL), and a Bachelor of Music (BMus). He has served in management roles since January 2011.

Focus on operations

During my tenure as COO of the Graduate School of Business Leadership, it was vital to implement systematic changes to future-proof the institution in rapidly shifting higher education landscape, something I aim to continue at the DaVinci Institute.



A key focus was establishing efficient, well-documented processes. In many cases, processes either didn't exist or existed informally, often residing in individuals' heads. When those individuals left, operations could become misaligned. My priority was to formalise and document these systems to ensure continuity and consistency, making sure no task or responsibility relied on one person's presence, he says.

Dr Isaacs explains that institutional memory is an asset. I worked to capture and structure it in a way that benefits the organisation. This doesn't diminish the importance of people, on the contrary, it enhances their value. With clear, accessible processes, individuals are empowered to operate

effectively across the organisation, both vertically and horizontally. This promotes agility and equality, allowing staff to contribute confidently regardless of their role.

At DaVinci, my first goal is to ensure robust processes and clear structures are in place, not in terms of organisational design, but in terms of clarity around roles and responsibilities. "When people know what they are accountable for and when, the organisation becomes a well-oiled machine. This leads to effective service delivery, higher client satisfaction and crucially, staff satisfaction. If staff are not happy, clients won't be either and for me, ensuring both is non-negotiable."



In one of his operational roles, Dr Isaacs served as UNISA's DSAA overseeing formative and summative assessments, exam venues and critically, examination security protocols. He was responsible for ensuring the secure development, procurement and distribution of examination papers across South Africa, Africa and beyond. UNISA had over 200 international exam venues at the time.

"This presented a significant logistical challenge. Ensuring question papers arrived safely, on time and remained secure until the moment of the examination." He successfully led this strategic project from around 2013 to the end of 2015.

To safeguard the integrity of examination results, he introduced additional verification steps, ensuring multiple sign-offs in the results process. This helped minimise risks and reinforced transparency.

Systems in place were robust and carefully structured to support the scale of operations. Cross-functional collaboration was key, departments

including Printing, ICT, Logistics and Academic worked in tandem. Strategic and operational planning sessions ensured alignment and proactive problem-solving.

"It was never a one-man show. In a university of that size (UNISA is the only mega-university on the continent), coexistence and collaboration are essential."

This experience not only honed his ability to manage complexity at scale but also deepened his belief in the power of process, structure and teamwork, principles he continues to apply in every role he undertakes.

Reflecting on his time at SAIPA, Dr Isaacs says aligning institutional purpose with cross-border execution starts with understanding local dynamics something you cannot simply read about. "You need real engagement to grasp how organisations function in different countries," he explains.

For him, the most important lesson was securing buy-in from staff to board level. "Everyone must understand and accept the strategy, recognising it's designed for the benefit of the organisation and its stakeholders. Without that collective understanding, execution across borders becomes fragmented," he says.

He emphasises that no strategy should serve a single individual or agenda. It must serve the broader purpose. But strategy alone isn't enough, it must be agile. "We operate in an unpredictable world. Just look at how quickly Covid-19 reshaped everything. A good strategy must have dexterity, be light on its feet and able to shift with changing realities."

Preparing future-ready leaders in the age of AI

AI is reshaping business and business schools must adapt accordingly. "AI is here to stay. The challenge is not whether we use it, but how we use it ethically and effectively." Just as books and the internet didn't replace lecturers, AI won't replace educators, but it will redefine their roles. Schools must equip students to use AI responsibly while embedding digital dexterity and ethical reasoning into curricula.

From admissions to graduation, AI has the potential to streamline and personalise the student journey. Dr Isaacs notes the importance of seamless integration between platforms and stresses that academic and operational teams must work as one: "We serve the same stakeholder the student."

A future-ready leader, he argues, is agile, future-fit and future-proof. "We must move beyond bureaucracy and embrace AI to remain relevant. If we fail to adapt, we risk failing our students, organisations and society. Business schools carry that responsibility."

From classical piano to the boardroom

Dr Isaacs began his academic journey as a classical pianist and credits his arts background for instilling the discipline, patience and time management skills that shaped his leadership style. "In music, you prepare for months to perform for minutes. Music has taught me essential leadership skills - dedication, understanding, tolerance and respect for others' views," he says.

As Executive Dean at DaVinci, lifelong learning is not just a professional philosophy, but a personal one. "I still read, study and remain curious whether it's academic literature or global affairs. Lifelong learning isn't only about degrees, it's about staying engaged, inquisitive and open."

Outside of his strategic responsibilities, it's family that keeps him grounded. "My parents, siblings, wife and children are my anchor." He also finds calm in DIY projects, occasionally plays organ at church and dreams of more time to fish. "It's these simple, grounding practices that keep me centred and inspired in the work I do every day."



Snapshot Questions:

1. **What is your top strategic priority as Executive Dean at DaVinci Institute right now?**

To ensure we have an efficient academic project in place. That's it everything else flows from that.

2. **In five years' time, what would you like your legacy at DaVinci to be?**

That I have delivered on my strategic objectives in alignment with the institution's mission, improved throughput, maintained and enhanced quality and integrity of qualifications and embedded solid processes to support stakeholder experience. Above all, I would like to be remembered for building meaningful relationships with colleagues who know they can rely on me and on whom I can rely.

3. **What book or podcast is currently on your nightstand or playlist?**

I am reading several theses, academic articles and textbooks to stay current. Each morning, I begin with Bible readings, followed by news updates making sure I understand what happened in the world while I slept and what might lie ahead.

4. **What keeps you energised outside of your academic and leadership responsibilities?**

My family. We are all committed to work and study, which may sound exhausting, but for us, it's energising. That shared focus is our version of balance.

5. **What's your next travel destination and what's taking you there?**

We are planning a family vacation to Japan. The boys are huge fans of Japanese anime and several friends have highly recommended Japan for its great travel deals and stunning hiking trails

6. **If you weren't in academia, what alternative career would you have pursued and why?**

Construction. My father, a builder, put me through university with his hands. I still join him on-site when I can. It taught me discipline, environmental awareness and respect for doing things right the first time, lessons I carry with me every day.