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**Prof. Paula
Barnard-Ashton**



Here to be Innovative

From occupational therapy to digital transformation: The Wits professor shaping the future of healthcare education

As a qualified occupational therapist and member of the leadership team at the University of the Witwatersrand's Faculty of Health Sciences, Prof. Paula Barnard-Ashton's passion for her profession and her students is impossible to ignore.

Prof. Barnard-Ashton proudly describes herself as a "Witsie for life". Having qualified as an occupational therapist in 1994, she completed her Master's degree in 2009 and earned her PhD in 2018, fully embracing a journey of lifelong learning.

Yet, this career evolution was far from linear. Unexpected personal health challenges forced a fundamental re-evaluation of her path.

"As an occupational therapist running my own practice, I was working with children in a very physically-demanding field. However, in 2006, I was diagnosed with Ankylosing Spondylitis, an autoimmune condition, and I had to completely reimagine my career."

While navigating her diagnosis, she turned her attention toward entrepreneurship – specifically exploring the delivery of content through dynamic digital channels, including websites and virtual learning environments, working closely with health sciences lecturers to develop blended learning as early as 2009.

Recognising that healthcare and technology had become inextricably linked, she spearheaded the rollout of Wits' first "E-Zone," a pioneering training venue that fundamentally transformed how health sciences education was delivered. Modelled on international best practices, she introduced smart boards and interactive tech, creating an innovative learning hub that quickly became the benchmark for the entire university.

This hands-on experience laid the groundwork for a pivotal moment in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Virtually overnight, university lecturers and students were forced to transition to online learning models. For Prof. Barnard-Ashton, this crisis aligned seamlessly with her digital background, and the health sciences faculty was well prepared.

While South Africa's healthcare challenges remain well-documented, Prof. Barnard-Ashton remains focused on solution-driven transformation and structural impact.

"If we want to build a country that works, we must recognise that a strong education base is critical, and that requires meaningful partnerships between the public and private sectors," she concludes. "If I have one message for our stakeholders, it is this: we have an abundance of talented young women in healthcare. Help us unlock this talent and allow them to guide policy, research, and innovation in the sector."

**Your
story
matters**

