



**An obituary for Prof David Kaplan – a lifelong engaged academic
(25 March 1948 – 26 December 2025)**

Raphael Kaplinsky (Emeritus Professor, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex) and

Mike Morris (Emeritus Professor, PRISM - School of Economics, University of Cape Town)

Dave spent most of his professional career as an economist, primarily basing himself at the University of Cape Town, with sabbaticals at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, the Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto. After graduating from the IDS, he spent two years as a teaching assistant in the Economics Department at the University of Massachusetts. After moving residence to Paris in 2015, he maintained his association with the Economics Department at UCT.

Throughout his professional career Dave maintained an abiding interest in innovation, in the roles played by states and markets in economic growth and in the distributional outcomes of growth. He addressed these issues through a multidisciplinary lens, combining insights from economic history, economic theory, political economy and innovation studies. But most of all, he was an 'engaged academic', making a significant contribution to the development and implementation of policy in relation to industrial development, international trade, labour markets, science and technology and innovation, primarily but not exclusively in South Africa.

Completing his BA/BCom degree at the University of Cape Town in 1970, Dave graduated with an MA from the University of Kent in 1972 and a D Phil at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex in 1978. He was immensely proud of his role as a research assistant to Professors Hans Singer and Scarlett Epstein during his graduate studies at the IDS. He returned to South Africa in 1980 and was employed in the Faculty of Economic History at UCT, becoming the Head in 1989. In 1990 he moved to the Economics Department with a joint professorial position in the Graduate School of Business. Dave remained an active member of the Economics department at UCT until his passing. He regarded this as his academic home. Dave was a devoted and rigorous teacher. His lectures were eagerly attended by students at UCT, and he was a dedicated and rigorous supervisor of many postgraduate dissertations.

The role played by states and markets was a central thread during Dave's professional career. His voluminous D Phil dissertation *Class Conflict, Capital Accumulation and the State in 20th Century South Africa*, focused primarily on the positive role played by the state in the development of South Africa's considerable industrial development. But as the Apartheid state became increasingly predatory and obstructionist to economic growth, Dave shifted to a more critical analysis of the state. His growing interest in innovation from the mid-1980s, evidenced in his book *The Crossed Lines* (which focused on South Africa's telecoms sector) led him to argue that the key to productivity led growth lay in a dynamic private sector, working together with state, business services, educational and research institutions in an efficient National System of Innovation (NSI). His many publications analysed the way in which the considerable strengths of South Africa's NSI were disabled in the post-Transition era by a predatory and often incompetent state. His underlying hope was that, in time, the South African state would provide the framing environment for a productivity enhancing private sector.

Notwithstanding this focus on innovation and productivity, Dave recognised the crucial role which employment played in the distribution of the fruits of growth. Perhaps surprisingly given his secondment as the Chief Economist at the Department of Trade and Industry (2000 – 03), and later (2004 - 10) as part time Chief Economist to the Western Cape Department of Economic Development and Tourism (DEDAT), his independence of thought led him to argue that South Africa's employment challenge could not be met only through industrial development. It also necessarily required substantial public-private sector collaboration.

Dave increasingly felt that his professional contribution to economic development lay less in producing academic publications and more in the design and execution of policy. He came to argue that top down state directed economic policy was at best ineffective and at worst damaging; the primary driver of growth was the private sector working in a collaborative partnership with government and institutions in the NSI; the role of the state and public policy was to provide the framing conditions which enabled growth; and this depended on having suitably capacitated, independent institutions comprised of private and public representatives to enable effective implementation. This required efficient markets, appropriate human resources, independent institutions, and incentives to promote investment in productivity enhancing technological progress.

This focus on the institutional determinants of growth arose from Dave's extensive experience in working with stakeholders across society. He was a member of the Economic Trends group established in early 1987 to advise COSATU on development policy. In 1990, he co-founded the Development Policy Research Unit (DPRU) at UCT which addressed a range of economic policy agendas, particularly with regard to the labour market and policies to strengthen science and technology capabilities and to enhance innovation and productivity.

In the early 1990s, Dave co-directed the Industrial Strategy Project (the ISP). Working in concert with COSATU, this large multi-year programme produced a policy blueprint designed to deliver a more dynamic and inclusive post-Apartheid industrial sector (*Improving Manufacturing Performance in South Africa*). Perhaps more significantly, the ISP provided the training for a number of young academics and policy practitioners who subsequently came to play an important role in post-Transformation South Africa. Soon after the ISP project was completed, Dave participated as a prominent member

of the Presidential Labour Market Commission, established in 1995 with the objective of developing the human resources and policies required to promote a more employment intensive growth path.

After his stint at the DTI, frustrated by policy failures at the national level, Dave then turned his attention to policy design and implementation at the regional level. In his role as Chief Economist within the Western Cape's DEDAT he was tasked with developing industrial policy for the Western Cape government primarily through developing and implementing a provincial industrial strategy. This resulted in the Western Cape Micro Economic Development Strategy (MEDS), which involved substantial engagement with a multiplicity of private sector actors, and the establishment of relatively effective independent public/private institutions across a variety of sectors.

In 2006 Dave assisted in founding the Policy Research in International Services and Manufacturing (PRISM) unit within the School of Economics which was committed to using academic research to engage with governments and industry on various policy frontiers across Africa. Dave remained an active member of PRISM until 2025.

Dave had a long-term interest in science, technology and innovation, sparked by his book on telecoms which was published in 1990. During the mid-1990s he coordinated the Task Team producing the Green Paper on Science and Technology for the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. He was also a senior Advisor in the writing of the Green Paper on Telecommunications Policy. Over the past decade, he played an active and senior role in the National Council on Innovation (NACI) and was a founding Board Member of the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA) and devoted considerable energy in steering it through choppy waters.

In the immediate period before his death, Dave became increasingly involved in the development of policies facilitating the growth of venture capital backed innovative enterprises. Whilst in Paris he extended this focus on science and technology beyond South Africa, working as a consultant and advisor to the International Science Council. On the international stage he played an important role as a member of the Scientific Committee and a mentor in the global consortium of researchers (GLOBELICS), and particularly in its African sub-division (AFRICALICS).

We met in the late 1980s and Dave has been a colleague, mentor and friend. We worked together in the Economic Trends group and later the Industrial Strategy Project. This led me into research and policy work on the automotive industry from which I have never quite escaped. He was also my PhD supervisor. Since his passing, I have been reflecting on how our work overlapped over a span of decades and the deep influence he has had on my career. (Anthony Black)

I remember Dave as a warm, kind and generous mentor who welcomed me wholeheartedly when I first moved to UCT and South Africa. He was instrumental in making sure I connected with the right people and obtained the resources I needed to get started as an emerging researcher in the area of industrial policy and development. I cannot imagine my early days at UCT without Dave. I know that all of us in the academic community in Southern Africa will miss him sorely, not just as a stellar researcher, academic and thought leader, but as a genuine and caring person. His

*passing is an unimaginable loss and my deep condolences to his friends and family.
(Asha Sundaram)*

I had the fortune of working alongside Dave throughout my academic career. As a young idealistic academic in the School, he was both inspiring and intimidating in the discussions during staff lunches at the Robertson Room. But he respected ideas, took one's view seriously and was supportive. I still have a bottle of wine for him stored in my cupboard for acting as a reviewer for my promotion. I learnt many things from Dave. One was the passion for ideas. Another is the importance of thinking carefully through incentives when designing policies. A further was the optimism that you could change policies for the better. Most recently, my colleagues and I had the opportunity to work closely with Dave on some projects for the National Advisory Council on Innovation. Dave was incredible in these projects – he really opened the window to new ideas and insights for us. This was his happy space. (Lawrence Edwards)

Although I did not know Dave for long, the few interactions I had with him were sincere and left a lasting impression. He was always warm, generous and welcoming, and he never hesitated to take the time to chat or to share his knowledge on a wide range of topics. He will be deeply missed within PRISM and the School. (Jing Chien)