

## **Rhodes: into 2007 and beyond**

### **Introduction**

Arriving on 1 June 2006 at Rhodes, I noted that as much as texts, reports and policy documents were necessary reading and illuminating, they only partially revealed the hue, texture, spirit and life of Rhodes University as an institution, and that to really discover these one had to be at Rhodes, to become immersed in its day to day life, and to interact with the various constituencies and members that constitute its community.

I indicated that until the end of 2006 my priority would be to meet, formally and informally, through scheduled meetings and, where necessary, special meetings, a wide cross-section of the university community - academics, students, administrators, service staff, alumni and trustees, to listen to the issues that they deemed important, to engage around the issues that in my view could need attention, and to explore the ways that we could, together, further develop Rhodes University.

The first ten months at Rhodes have been hugely stimulating and rewarding, if hectic and demanding. For one they have provided a degree of familiarization with the thinking, concerns and approaches of a wide range of constituencies. Second, they have helped to clarify more the academic, administrative and other strengths of the institution and the opportunities that may exist to build on these strengths to further enhance institutional and academic quality and excellence. Concomitantly, they have also helped to reveal ways of thinking, approaches and issues that will require attention, especially if Rhodes is not to function in a purely 'maintenance' and reproductive mode but is to engage with the challenges of transformation and development that confront all South African universities.

### **Rhodes today**

There are a number of extremely admirable and positive features to Rhodes University that provide solid foundations on which to build in the years to come.

1. In a world where universities may be in a danger of losing their identity, it is inspiring that there is a high degree of understanding of what it means to be a university and a strong

commitment to Rhodes striving to remain true to the fundamental purposes and functions of a university.

2. We can take pride in the strong commitment to academic quality and excellence, and the solid academic foundations of Rhodes – in the fact that we have among the best undergraduate pass and graduation rates in South Africa. We are also highly successful in producing postgraduates, have the best research output per academic of any South African university, and our academics are at the cutting edge of knowledge and discovery in a number of scientific fields.
3. We must warmly embrace the commitment of Rhodes and the efforts of academics and administrators and support staff to provide students with an overall environment – intellectual, social, physical in which they can develop and realize their potential. Almost 50% of our about 5 800 students, and especially young undergraduates, live in 42 University residences that are attached to 10 halls – they are a vital element of the academic and institutional success of Rhodes.
4. We must welcome that some 25% of our students are from 57 countries in the rest of Africa and other parts of the world. They enrich our educational and cultural life and through them we contribute to economic and social development in other parts of Africa. Our increasing numbers of academics from the rest of Africa is also a source of vitality. They enhance the quality of our academic programmes, challenge us to think more critically about our curricula, connect us to knowledge and expertise networks on the rest of the continent, and help us to overcome our previous isolation from the rest of Africa.
5. We must also deeply appreciate the high level of institutional loyalty that exists among staff members, many of whom have wonderful values, serve Rhodes with often extraordinary commitment, and are committed to progressively realizing the values, ideals and goals of the University.

There is, thus, much to build upon!

### **Rhodes into the future (and getting there)**

The eminent sociologist C Wright Mill made the important point that 'the future of human affairs is not merely some set of variables to be predicted. The future is what is to be decided - within the limits, to be sure, of historical possibility. But this possibility is not fixed, in

our time the limits seem very broad indeed'. In our submission to our forthcoming meeting with President Mbeki, as Vice Chancellors we express the similar view that: 'never have our institutions had (the) freedom to imagine as well as to determine our futures and in such variegated forms. This has to be seen as an opportunity where our institution are not curtailed by historical inevitabilities but are invited to assume new, more powerful identities shaped by existing and potential strengths within the institution, as well as by the contexts within which each must operate'.

It goes without saying that as we move into the future we must necessarily and wisely build on the positive features and current strengths of Rhodes. Nonetheless, there are a number of issues that must occupy us in the coming months and years.

1. Where do we wish to be and what do we wish to look like ten years from now? We are clear that we are determined to be a university in the best sense of the word and, by and large, agree on the values that must characterize Rhodes University.

However, in a number of areas we need to clarify and make explicit our goals. For example, we say that we are a 'liberal arts' institution yet, as the institutional audit of Rhodes by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education has noted, there is little institutional definition of 'liberal arts'. Further, we have a wonderful slogan, "*Where Leaders Learn*". However, it is clear that the meaning of the slogan needs to be more fully explicated if its exciting possibilities are to be harnessed.

We have to also decide on our preferred 'shape' and 'size'. The issues here include:

- How large an institution (currently 5 800 students)?
- What rate of annual institutional growth and with growth determined by what factors?
- How many and what kinds of academic faculties (presently 6)?
- How many and what kinds of academic departments and disciplines and fields (currently 34) and research institutes and centres (presently 16)?
- What distribution of students between undergraduate and post-graduate studies (currently 76% and 24 % respectively), and between faculties?
- What distribution of local and international students (currently 75% and 25 % respectively)?

During 2006 all academic departments were invited, with a view to maintaining and/or enhancing academic excellence, to consider their shape and size and to make proposals on possible new academic and research programmes. The submissions have been collated and will during 2007 be discussed by the appropriate planning structures, faculties, the University Senate and Council with a view to decisions on the overall preferred shape and size of departments, faculties and the university.

2. It is acknowledged that we have significant equity challenges at the levels of both academic and administrative staff, and students. We need to creatively innovate the mechanisms and strategies that will put us on a trajectory of becoming more demographically representative and also enable us to pursue equity with quality and quality with equity.
3. Rhodes is acutely aware that it must improve its student equity profile. In as much as there is the will to do so, the amount of funding that we are currently able to devote for financial aid to socially disadvantaged students is a severe constraint. Here, it is pertinent to note that being a strongly residential university means that our students face higher costs.

In 2007 we will commit some R16 million of our own funds (excluding the National Student Financial Aid Scheme grant, and other earmarked donor bursaries and scholarships) to student financial aid - an increase of 31% over 2006. Annual increases of such a magnitude, however, are not sustainable and the increase for 2007 is already putting pressure on other areas of the University's needs.

In reality, we find ourselves in a vicious cycle: we get little funds from the NSFAS, which means we can make only a limited number of awards to needy black students, which means that we are not able to change our equity profile at a faster pace, which means that we remain with a relatively poor equity profile.

If we are to break out of this vicious cycle and significantly improve our student equity profile, we need some supportive finance mechanisms. In this context the new Jakes Gerwel RU Scholarship Fund established through a salary and benefits sacrifice by the new Vice Chancellor (about R 250 000 in 2006-07) and the proposed RU Board of Governors Scholarship Fund could with strong support from business, alumni and other donors become important supportive finance mechanisms

4. It is also recognised that with the changing social composition of the student and staff bodies, we have to develop and institutionalize a culture that embraces difference and diversity, and sees these as strengths and wellsprings of personal and institutional development.
5. As a university, the retention and attraction of outstanding academics and the cultivation of a new generation of potentially outstanding academics by drawing on talented postgraduates are all critical to our future. Moreover, there are also challenges of retaining and securing specialist technicians who are vital to the functioning of many scientific institutes and projects.
6. A related challenge is ensuring that our academics are adequately remunerated and that they can secure appropriate and affordable housing in Grahamstown.

Already, as a first phase, task teams have been established to investigate academic remuneration and accommodation – both the facts, and the options (and their implications) that are available.

7. Of course, the issues of adequate remuneration and affordable housing also affect constituencies other than academics. Task teams will also be established to investigate remuneration and accommodation issues related to administrative and support staff.
8. The future of Rhodes University is inextricably bound with the town of Grahamstown and the wider Makana Municipality. If anyone doubts this, this has become abundantly evident during the past five months when weaknesses in institutional capacities at the level of the municipality combined with an ageing infrastructure have severely impacted on Rhodes through disruptions in electricity and water provision.

Community engagement is widely accepted as an important activity of universities. One thrust has to be a principled partnership with Makana Municipality in which we draw on our knowledge and expertise to critically support the municipality in its efforts to enhance opportunities for local economic and social development and to provide effective basic services to all citizens.

A second thrust is an iRhini/Grahamstown schools partnership that involves Rhodes University, the historically disadvantaged schools, the 'Model C' and private schools, non-government

organisations, the Department of Education, the teacher unions and donors. Its goals would be to systematically build the capabilities of the historically disadvantaged schools so that they can realize the potential of their students, and graduate significantly larger numbers of students that can attend universities, including Rhodes.

9. In a number of areas there are acute backlogs in Rhodes' physical infrastructure and also impending infrastructural needs.

Given the current trajectory, over the next five years we will require:

- R49.0 million for teaching and research facilities
- R108.0 million for refurbishing and extending the current library, which has seen no major development since 1961
- R16.0 million for each new 75-bed residence without a new dining hall, and R20.0 million for each new 75-bed residence with a new dining hall.

It is deemed desirable that every first-year undergraduate is housed in a university residence. However, currently some 300 first-year students cannot be accommodated and there is thus an immediate need for four new residences.

10. Finally, we need to develop an overall institutional plan as a compass for the pursuit and progressive realization of our goals and preferred 'shape and size'.

The institutional plan must bring closer together and align the current student enrolment planning, academic and administrative planning and reviews, physical planning, and institutional budget. It must explicate strategies for the pursuit of specified goals, indicate financial commitments, lines of accountability, and mechanisms for monitoring and reviewing progress and outcomes.

We are in any event required to formulate and submit an 'improvement plan' to the HEQC in response to its various recommendations arising from the Rhodes institutional audit. The improvement plan instead of being a separate plan can be a component of the overall institutional plan.

## **Conclusion**

It has been noted that visions and goals are utopian not because of what they seek to achieve but only when they are conceived of outside of the human beings to achieve them. In the coming

months we have to give close attention to putting in place both the necessary structures and processes and also mobilising and making effective use of available institutional expertise and colleagues to enable us to formulate our goals and strategies, allocate resources, and then efficiently implement agreed strategies.

This may necessarily entail certain restructuring at the senior academic and administrative management levels, the redefinition of the purposes and roles of some units, the streamlining of some committees to eliminate unnecessary duplication, and the reformulation of the roles of some senior staff members in order to ensure the effective pursuit of institutional goals and strategies.

South African higher education is entering a post-merger period, in which the issue of the institutional national landscape is largely settled and there is likely to be much more continuity and consistency of national frameworks and policy of higher education. In addition, there are promising signs of additional finances becoming available to universities to enable us to play our vital role in knowledge production and dissemination and to contribute to human understanding and economic and social development through research and the development of high quality graduates, intellectuals and citizens.

Rhodes' future is by and large in our hands. We must now with a profound sense of our own worth and identity as a university and with self-confidence and self-assurance proactively shape our future.