Being an academic at Rhodes University:
Scholarship in a context of transformation

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Introduction

It is a great pleasure to welcome you, our new colleagues, to Rhodes University. I very much hope that each of you will have a long and productive, and intellectually, academically and personally enriching and rewarding experience at Rhodes University.

I have been requested to address the topic of '**Being an academic at Rhodes University: Scholarship in a context of transformation'.**

The topic can be approached from 4 perspectives: what it means to be an *academic*; the *Rhodes University context*; the question of *scholarship*, and the question of *transformation*.

It is not possible to cover all four issues –all of these will undoubtedly be recurring themes during the course of the week.

I will, therefore, confine myself to the issue principally of **scholarship in the context of transformation at Rhodes University and social transformation more widely**.

Scholarship

Along with Ernest Boyer (1990) we can think of scholarship as comprising

- The scholarship of *integration* – which involves academics synthesising information within their disciplines or fields or across disciplines or fields, as in interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary investigations. The intention is usually to establish and convey what the state of knowledge is on a particular question or issue, and how this may have developed over time. This kind of scholarship is reflected in literature reviews that are necessary components of research projects and in textbooks. Of course, they are also a critical dimension of the preparation of lectures at universities.
- The scholarship of *discovery* – which encompasses research of a kind that advances knowledge of our natural and social worlds.
- The scholarship of *teaching and learning* – which is the theorising and empirical investigation of issues connected to teaching and learning, curriculum and pedagogy processes; and
- The scholarship of *application/engagement* – which is theorising and work related to the social responsiveness of universities to the intellectual, cultural, economic, social and political development needs of society, and to the community engagement and service-learning activities of universities.

The question of **scholarship** in the context of transformation necessarily entails engaging with how the kinds of scholarship that you embrace – and given the nature of Rhodes University you must embrace one or more of these kinds of scholarship – connects with and contributes to transformation at Rhodes University.

Transformation

Turning to ***transformation issues and challenges*** at Rhodes University, as a university previously reserved for white South Africans, has in various respects a shameful past of exclusion with which it must necessarily grapple.

Our public acknowledgement in 2008 of shameful past actions under colonialism and apartheid and our public apology has set us on a path to a different future. We expressed our commitment to remake and renew Rhodes as a small but outstanding African university.

The key transformation issues and challenges are threefold.

1. **Social equity** - becoming demographically representative of the South African population:
   - At the level of student – becoming more representative of the demographics of the South African population and especially ensuring access and opportunity for students of working class and rural poor social origins
   - Especially at the level of the 'race' and gender composition of the academic staff body and especially senior academic staff
   - At the levels of senior and middle-level support staff.

Transformation is much more than about changing demographics, numbers and proportions, and pursuing and achieving 'race', gender and disability equity goals, as important as these are. Another key transformation issues at Rhodes includes:

2. **Institutional culture** – creating an enabling environment and developing a new institutional culture which is free from prejudice and intolerance in which there is genuine respect for and appreciation of difference and diversity: whether class, racial, gender, national, linguistic, religious or sexual orientation in nature

   The challenge is, first, to learn to change how we think – about ourselves, about others, about our institutions and about our challenges and possibilities. For this we need the capacity 'for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions' (Nussbaum, 2006:5). It includes the 'ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have' (ibid, 2006:6-7).

   The second challenge is to have the courage to act in new and different ways. Here, the task is to understand that we are 'as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern' – which necessitates knowledge and understanding of different cultures and 'of differences of gender, race, and sexuality' (Nussbaum, 2006:6).

3. **Intellectual and academic culture**

   Intellectual discourse, teaching and learning and curriculum and texts in African universities were strongly shaped by racism, patriarchy and colonialism and resulted in historical "legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation" (Du Toit, 2000:103). Du Toit notes 'that the enemy' in the forms of colonial and racial discourses 'has been within the gates all the time', and argues that they are significant threats to the flowering of ideas, discourse, discovery and scholarship. These discourses are, of course, also threats to the cultivation of graduates as critical and democratic citizens. Very importantly, du Toit links institutional culture to academic freedom: cultures characterized by colonial and racial discourses endanger 'empowering intellectual discourse communities,' and 'ongoing transformation of the institutional culture' is therefore a 'necessary condition of academic freedom.'

   Recently, Mahmood Mamdani has written that 'the central question facing higher education in Africa today is what it means to teach the humanities and social sciences in the current historical context and, in particular, in the post-colonial African context.' Moreover, what does

it mean to teach 'in a location where the dominant intellectual paradigms are products not of Africa's own experience but of a particular Western experience' (Mamdani, 20111).

There is evidence that discourses associated with and dominant under apartheid continue to shape knowledge production and, potentially, also the preparation of new graduates and new academics (Herman, 2008). Given this, and the imperative of social inclusion and justice in and through higher education, teaching and learning has to engage with the challenges of intellectually and academically decolonizing, de-racialising, de-masculanising and de-gendering the inherited "intellectual spaces" of South Africa's universities, and contribute to re-orienting universities to serve new constitutional, economic and social development needs (Bentley et al. 2006: 23). This means robust questioning of the roots, objects and content of disciplines and disciplinary traditions in universities, the epistemologies, ontologies, methodologies and concerns, issues and questions that have been dominant, and have perhaps constrained, and even suffocated, intellectual and scholarly thought and writing, and creating the space for other approaches, knowledge's and concerns.

Scholarship and transformation

How do the challenges of social equity, institutional culture and intellectual and academic culture relate to scholarship?

Beginning with the *scholarship of teaching and learning* and the *scholarship of integration*, we need to appreciate our goals and commitments, the diverse social backgrounds of Rhodes students and what these mean for curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and teaching and learning more generally.

How do we ensure that our students can think imaginatively, "effectively and critically"; that they "achieve depth in some field of knowledge"; that they can critique and construct alternatives, and communicate cogently, orally and in writing?

How do we provide them "a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times"; ensure that they are "able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it", and that they have "some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems" (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000:84).

Given our commitments, what is to be the meaning and content of the liberal education we wish to be characterised by, how do we ensure that the development of Rhodes graduates is simultaneously the cultivation of humanity, how do we give substance to the slogan 'Where Leaders Learn', and build a commitment to Africa?

We are a research-oriented university and undergraduate learning and teaching should be different from that at other kinds of universities. So, how do we ensure that our students have a "critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves"? How do we induct them into the intricacies of knowledge making?

The 'race', class, gender, ethnic, national, linguistic, cultural and religious composition of the Rhodes student body which is changing and will continue to change given social equity and social justice imperatives, means that are profound new teaching and learning challenges for academics and universities.

As at other universities we have challenges related to throughput, graduation and success rates. Only 36% of students at Rhodes will graduate in the minimum time of three or four years – the best performance in South Africa. White students continue to perform better than black students, which means that equity of opportunity and success is still racialised.

We must recognise that Rhodes, like all South African universities, experiences challenges related to the 'under-preparedness' of students for higher learning. This necessitates giving attention to teaching and learning. There is, however, "the danger of labeling, and thus pathologising, the students as underprepared", avoiding any "focus on the 'underpreparedness'" of universities and academics.[i] Under-preparedness on the part of students, however, occurs "within an epistemic context that is in some way or another opaque or inaccessible to" them. It "is not some abstracted psychological condition" that students possess, "but is a relation between a familiar cultural context, which (they have) internalised, and the unfamiliar cultural and institutional context (a university environment), which (they have) not yet internalised. *All* students experience disadvantage when they enter into university learning practices, but some struggle more with it as a consequence of their specific learning histories" (Moll, 2005:11; emphasis in original).[ii]

We must think deeply about curriculum, as it is critical to transformation and social justice. A responsive curriculum has to address simultaneously "economic, cultural, disciplinary and learning-related" issues. 'Economic responsiveness' entails the curriculum being "responsive *to* the prevailing labour market *by* incorporating the necessary high level qualifications, knowledge and skills demanded by a modern, diversified economy"; 'cultural responsiveness' means that the curriculum "is responsive *to* the cultural diversity of students and society *by* incorporating multiple cultural reference points that acknowledge diversity and constitute various alternative learning pathways for students" (Moll, 2005: 4, 5). 'Disciplinary responsiveness' refers to responsiveness of the curriculum "*to* the nature of its underlying knowledge discipline *by* ensuring a close coupling between the way in which knowledge is produced and the way students are educated and trained in the discipline area" (ibid.,:7). The curriculum "is responsive *to* the learning needs of students *by* teaching them in terms that are accessible to them and assessing them in ways that they understand" (Moll, 2005: 8). The "various realities" that curriculum responds to "articulate with each other and constitute affordances and constraints for each other" (ibid.,:8). Moreover, in practice, addressing simultaneously economic, cultural, disciplinary and learning-related issues means that the curriculum can "lead to tensions between various imperatives associated with it" and "to multifaceted practices that combine various accounts of the concept" (ibid.,:2).

Delpit writes that: "we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness" (Delpit, 1988: 297; cited in Moll, 2005:11). For learning of this kind to occur, it necessarily entails curriculum change; but is also requires changes in "the institutional culture" as well as "individual change. It entails the transformation of individuals in relation to the institutional and cultural context, or, in a word, it entails *learning*" (ibid., 11; emphasis in original).

We must be clear that the misguided naturalisation and associated neglect of teaching and learning is untenable and that this domain requires more serious attention. Given the range of challenges and tasks, the approach to teaching and learning that is required is not a mere focus on the improvement of 'skills' or 'tips for better teaching', as much as rigorous theorisation and deep reflection on contextual realities.[iii] Such a theorised approach to teaching and learning, which also seeks to advance social justice, however, is not possible without scholarship and research on teaching and learning; otherwise we fall prey once again to the commonsense notions of teaching and learning. In any event, scholarship and research are constituent of the identity of academics,

and core to any critical reflexivity on educational approaches and practices; and it is also scholarship that distinguishes universities from other post-school educational institutions.[iv]

Turning to the *scholarship of discovery*, as a research-oriented and strongly postgraduate university, we seek to *produce knowledge*, so that we can advance understanding of our natural and social worlds and enrich our accumulated scientific and cultural heritage. We seek to "test the inherited knowledge of earlier generations", "reinvigorate" knowledge and we share our findings with others.

We undertake research into arcane and abstract issues and the "most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge". At the same time we also strive to apply our discoveries for the benefit of humankind. We "operate on both the short and the long horizon". On the one hand, we grapple with urgent and "contemporary problems" and seek solutions to these. On the other hand, we "forage" into issues and undertake enquiries "that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit" (Boulton and Lucas, 2008:3).

Our research agendas and programmes should be shaped by the four-fold development challenge that confronts South Africa: how do we pursue *economic development*, with *social equity*, and do so in a way that is *environmentally sustainable* and also recognises the need to extend, deepen and consolidate *democracy? And crucially, how do we do all of this simultaneously and not consecut*ively or sequentially?

Our research interests must necessarily intersect and effectively engage with the economic and social challenges of the local, national, African and global contexts - the imperative of economic growth and development; the ability to compete globally; job creation and the reduction of poverty; the effective delivery of social services; the threat of HIV/AIDS; and also the imperatives of equity and redress; social justice; the building of a substantive democracy, including a culture of human rights and a vibrant civil society; and a culture of vigorous and critical intellectual public discourse.

It should be evident that given our equity, institutional culture and intellectual and academic culture challenges we need imaginative scholarship on Rhodes itself. What kinds of knowledge approaches and research programmes, methodologies, issues and questions can excite and attract black and women postgraduates and potential next and new generations of academics to Rhodes?

We need to be a powerhouse of knowledge production and the formation of new generations of thinkers, scholars and actors.

With respect to the scholarship of *application/engagement*, one of our important roles is to undertake *community engagement*. On the one hand this involves voluntary participation in community projects undertaken thorough our Community Engagement office. On the other hand, it involves service-learning, in which through academic courses academics and students take part "in activities where both the community" and *we* benefit, "and where the goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance our *learning* through rendering this service" (CHE, 2006:15).

Commitment and passion are essential for community engagement but, as befitting a university, so too are theorisation, research and dispassionate reflection. It is vitally important to adequately *theorize* community engagement, and develop a scholarly knowledge-base through rigorous scholarship to ground an adequate community engagement *practice*. Campus Compact has noted that

> research on engagement differs fundamentally from engaged research. Rather than a community-engaged approach to research, it is scholarly inquiry with a specific content focus: diverse forms of civic life, democratic citizenship, and community engagement…. For research on engagement to be taken seriously at research universities, scholars must have strong peer reviewed publication outlets for their scholarship." (Campus Compact, 2007; cited in Hall, 2010:41).

In developing community engagement at Rhodes, critical engagement with a number of issues is unavoidable: the idea of the *university* itself and its core purposes, responsibilities, and functions; notions of *knowledge* and how it is constructed; the rationale for undertaking community engagement, and the expectations of its benefits; the value basis of community engagement (maintenance of the status quo or reforming/transforming the social order); understandings of *engagement* – a one-way process or a two-way flow; how *'community'* is to be defined – is there a single 'community' (defined geographically or socially) or a multiplicity of communities that require different kinds of interactions. There are also other questions. First, how are we to conceptualize community engagement and what are the merits and implications of different approaches to community engagement? Second, while learning and teaching and research are indisputably core purposes of universities, is the same status to be accorded to community engagement? Third, in so far as there is a relationship between learning-teaching and research, what, if any, is the relationship between community engagement and learning-teaching and research? Fourth, what are the necessary conditions for the effective undertaking and institutionalization of community engagement, and what are the implications of institutionalizing community engagement for different arenas of the university?

The idea of learning through community engagement has important implications for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and for knowledge production with respect to the purposes, aims and objects of research.[v] In as much as specific disciplines or fields may shape the form and content of community engagement, community engagement may in turn affect the form and content of teaching and learning and research in disciplines or fields.

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[i] My thanks to Dr. Sue Southwood for this important point

[ii] This draws on the work of Slonimsky L.F. (1994) Beyond a Descriptive Reading of Educational Disadvantage. Unpublished Masters Research Report, Faculty of Education, University of the Witwatersrand.

[iii] My thanks to Prof. Mckenna for emphasising this issue

[iv] My thanks to Prof. Mckenna for raising the important issues in this paragraph

[v] 'To demonstrate curricular engagement', Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching requested universities, 'to describe teaching, learning, and scholarly activities that engage faculty, students, and the community in mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration, address community-identified needs, deepen students' civic and academic learning, enhance the well-being of the community, and enrich the scholarship of the institution'. Driscoll, A. (2008) *Carnegie's Community-Engagement Classification: Intentions and Insights*; page 40; http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/sites/default/files/elibrary/Driscoll.pdf; accessed 31 March 2013