ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE, COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND ADMINISTRATIVE EFFICIENCY

Dr. D.S. Henderson

Vice-Chancellor
Rhodes University

8 July 1979

According to the programme, one of my tasks is to consider ways in which constructive and effective contributions can be made to the problems that were identified in the earlier sessions of this Conference. The programme also lists some questions. I want to address myself particularly to the question of the most effective way for interaction to occur within a university between the academics, the students, and the administration. The last-mentioned are a university's civil service; or, as I prefer to call them, the Vice-Chancellor and his team. This is a very general description of the ground that I wish to cover. I believe, however, that I can most clearly bring my own point of view to the fore if I state a number of propositions under the following four broad headings: academic standards, university autonomy, and social problems; the idea of a university college; university research and community problems; and some ideas about university administration.

I

Academic standards, university autonomy and social problems

I agree wholeheartedly with Professor Gerrit

Viljoen that the primary service that a university can
offer to its community is to be a university that maintains
a high standard of academic excellence. The university
should not be conceived of as a branch of a country's so-
cial service apparatus: nor should it be called upon to
solve virtually all the social ills that we, in these days,
have inherited. I think people who adopt this point of
view selfconsciously or unselfconsciously operate with a
model of the university that is somewhat akin to the place
that the medieval church played in the middle ages. Per-
haps it is evidence of a general lessening of the position
of faith that in our day the faith that was transferred to
the medieval church has a tendency to be transferred to
the university. We look therefore upon the university as
some sort of universal saviour.

I also agree with all those people who believe
that the university must keep its objectivity and emotion-
al distance from the problems that it handles. If the
university is to be able to carry out its proper functions,
then it must be allowed its appropriate degree of autonomy;
that is, the autonomy which it needs to carry out these
functions. If one destroys this autonomy - or even if
one attenuates it to the extent that I suspect some people
wish to do - then we are really destroying the university
as we know it today. A corollary of this is that those
people who advocate a radical change in what a university
should be trying to do must, in my view, endeavour to con-
vince, rather than to bludgeon, a university's delibera-
tive bodies into bringing about the changes that they would
like to see. Furthermore, they ought to convince them
by the normal processes of academic argument. This is
important because, if they do succeed in compelling change
rather than engendering change, what we shall have before

us is a new and equally restrictive orthodoxy.   In other
words, we must avoid a state of affairs that, in principle,
is no different from the orthodoxies which the critics
claims are presently imposed upon universities by an unholy
combination of government and big business.

My second major point is about a university's
social responsibility.   I do not wish to question the
need for action on urgent problems.   The point has been
very eloquently made by various people.   In fact, I think
it is almost a matter of common cause that these problems
are real, and that it is imperative to have some action
in these areas.   For example, we have considered the need
for crash courses to produce more teachers; the need for
good adult education and vocational training; the need
for courses that will enable university students to make
good any deficiencies that they have experienced at ear-
lier stages of their education; and so on.   Several
people have dwelt at great length on the cardinal problem
of the shortage of teachers, a problem that needs to be
solved before we can make up the enormous educational back-
log that exists in this country and in all third world
countries.

One of the points that we have missed and that
has not been emphasized is that, perhaps, some much ma-
ligned technology can come to our assistance in this pro-
blem area.   A good deal of progress has been made in the
field of educational technology.   We have television
tapes and playback machines and computer terminals where
we have developed some quite sophisticated software for
assisting in the teaching process.   I think a good deal
can be done with this type of equipment.   Although I am
sometimes accused of doing so in certain quarters, I am

not advocating the complete replacement of teachers by
hardware.   I do believe, however, that when hardware has
been properly applied it certainly enhances the scope and
effectiveness of teachers.   We should not overlook this
aspect of modern technology as a help towards a solution
of our problems.   On the other hand, I am not suggesting
that we go quite as far as the author of one of the papers
in a festschrift to Professor B.F. Skinner, the famous
Harvard behavioural psychologist.   At the head of his
chapter in this book he quoted the following little rhyme:

> Word has come down from the Dean
> That with the aid of a teaching machine
> Young Oedipus Rex could have learned about sex
> Without ever bothering the Queen.

That is perhaps taking the virtues of technology a little
too far.

II

The idea of a university college

Both Professor F.R.N. Nabarro and Professor
Gerrit Viljoen have drawn our attention to the fact that
universities are already doing a great deal to address them-
selves to the various problems that we have considered.
Nonetheless I am sure that one must question very closely
any suggestion that there should be a massive reallocation
of resources into this direction from the more traditional
pursuits of a university.   Where are these resources?
Has any university in South Africa got this level of re-
source to spare and to spend on making this type of new
undertaking a major focal point of its activities?   A-
gainst this background I want to reinforce a point that
Professor Viljoen has made, but which I had also intended

to raise. He drew our attention to the particular part which the junior or community college plays in the spectrum of American educational institutions. I think that a major effort should be made to persuade the powers that be that there is a very solid case for introducing this type of institution into South Africa. This would be a very practical step that we could take towards a solution of many of the problems we have discussed.

About seven or eight years ago I visited one of these institutions in America, the Miami-Dade Community College in Florida. I have some very vivid memories of that visit. One of the points that was made very forcibly to our visiting party by the person who took us around, was that their students are useful to the employer on day one. He seemed to think that this was a very considerable virtue of his institution. Amongst other things, they provided opportunities for vocational retraining. If people were in occupations which were becoming technologically obsolescent, they had an opportunity here to retrain for some other form of employment. The College offered both day and evening classes. It was possible in certain subjects to transfer a carefully controlled proportion of the credits that could be obtained at the Community College to a university. I think that this is a very important point in the whole idea of a community college.

Another important characteristic of a community college is that it does almost no research. As a result such colleges can be more "efficient" than a normal university because the teachers have to carry something like a 20 hour contact load per week. This, of course, is only one way of looking at these colleges which exist in a particular context where other factors also contribute to

their usefulness and importance. On the other hand, we ought not to lose sight of the fact that when it comes to the kind of social problem with which we have grappled in this Conference, then these community colleges can be much more cost effective than a university can be. I would say that because of this loading of teaching at the expense of doing research, an institution of this kind must be at least twice as cost effective as a university.

I therefore want to emphasise the importance of the question, 'Should our universities become seriously involved in the business of tackling all the social problems that have been discussed in this Conference?' My own feeling is that if we really debated the question and thoroughly thrashed out what was involved, then we would probably come to the conclusion that this question deserves a negative answer. On the other hand, I think that a community college can do the work that we have tended to allocate to the university far more effectively than our universities can. I therefore believe that this point should be considered very seriously; it is a very constructive and positive contribution to the debate about a university's social responsibilities. One can envisage that in the Witwatersrand, for example, there would be a series of these colleges in all the major centres like Springs, Brakpan, Benoni and Randfontein. If any of the students in these colleges have in fact done work that is judged to be of a university standard, then they could migrate to the universities. If this is what they want, then they could complete a university type education in the central focal point. I think that an embryo of such a college already exists in Boksburg. I am referring, of course, to St. Anthony's, which is probably ten times as cost effective as any university could be in the field in

which it operates.   For all these reasons, therefore, I
believe that we ought to explore the whole idea of a com-
munity college in much more detail, and with much more
seriousness, than has so far been the case.

III

University research and community problems

A great deal has been said about the need to
focus a university's programmes so that they have greater
applicability to local problems.   I think there is a
great deal of merit in much that has been said on this
point.   Only a few centres in South Africa can afford to
go in for really big science.   The country can only af-
ford to have a few centres where millions of rand are
spent on accelerators, coveys of electron microscopes, and
all the other apparatus that goes with fundamental inves-
tigations into the more expensive branches of science.
Nevertheless, applied research is important.   Once again
I want to argue that universities themselves should be
persuaded, rather than bludgeoned, into this kind of action.

At Rhodes University we have quite consciously
directed a good many of our research interests towards the
needs of the community.   For example, we have been study-
ing the peculiar biological habits of ticks;   the problems
of the leather industry, of pineapple farmers, and of fish
culture.   We have worked on the microbiological conver-
sion of noxious wastes, the control of jointed cactus, and
the production of alcohol - not for human consumption, of
course.   A good many of these problems are of direct re-
levance to the communities which support us.   Furthermore,

we have not neglected the applied side of cultural stu-
dies. We are making a major effort in the direction of
the teaching of English as a second language. Some of
the courses that we offer are, at least to some degree,
orientated towards such topics as the question of an in-
digenous English literature in Africa, Nguni history, Afri-
can music and praise poems, and the like. At another
level we have gone into the question of how the poorer
sections of the Grahamstown community actually survive as
distinct from how, theoretically, they are supposed to
survive. Similarly, we hope to discover how migrant la-
bourers actually view their circumstances rather than how
we think that they view their circumstances.

I therefore agree that those who argue, on the
basis of the normal ways that a university tries to per-
suade people, that research ought to be more closely fo-
cussed on the problems that affect our own communities are
making an important point. However, what I think is en-
tirely out of court in a university environment is the
kind of argument that one sometimes hears and that wants
to conclude that research is a luxury which we will have
to do without for the next ten years because of these very
pressing practical problems. To ask academics and other
university personnel to cut out research is rather like
asking a monk to cut out prayer. You really are trying
to destroy one of the central strands of his existence.
And so I would maintain that in the university environment
research is not a luxury; it is a very basic necessity.

IV

Some ideas about university administration

I have made some comments on various problems that have already been discussed. I now want to turn to the other task that was given to me and to make a few remarks about university administration and about the interaction between the various parts, the various components, that go to make up our academic communities. In thinking about the questions in this area I have, in my own mind, always used the American constitution as a model. As you all know, there you have two legislative chambers and then you have an executive president. I think this is quite a fruitful model to use in the university sphere. We have a Senate and a Council. They form a bicameral legislative system and, although they do not have overall control of everything, they do have their respective port-folios. In addition, I think it is a profitable way of looking at things to regard the Vice-Chancellor or Prin-cipal as the chief executive officer; as someone who, in a minor key, has a role which is analogous to that of the American President.

As I therefore see it, if the Senate and the Council are working properly, their duties are legislative and not executive in nature. Either of these two bodies can initiate legislative programmes. In addition, as in the case of the United States government, the President, or his analogue, the Vice-Chancellor, can also initiate legislative proposals. Before these legislative propo-sals can be regarded as the official policy of the univer-sity, however, they have to be debated and passed by the appropriate legislative apparatus. I believe that as

long as the various components of the system stick to their particular roles, then we have a university that works very satisfactorily.

Unfortunately, it is one of the great failings of most university's Senates that they tend to forget that they are required to be legislators who lay down broad policy principles. What they tend to do instead is to become involved in the minutae of the executive action that must flow from these principles. Perhaps the other side of this same coin is that they show a distressing lack of ability to delegate responsibility. I think that if Senates could take their courage in their hands and appoint people that they really trust, if they could appoint a Vice-Chancellor whom they can trust, then they can give him a policy and let him get on with its implementation. Similarly, Senates ought to delegate matters of detail to Faculty Boards, and Faculty Boards in their turn ought to delegate matters of detail to Departments. Once these bodies, and especially the Senate or a Faculty Board, have laid down the policy, they must not interfer in detail with the carrying out of these policies by the Vice-Chancellor and the Deans, respectively. I think that a great deal of the unhappiness that occurs in a university is due to the lack of willingness on the part of these academic bodies to do what I have just described. In fact, university Councils perform this task very much better, perhaps because they contain a good proportion of businessmen who understand and know how essential it is to delegate responsibility. They lay down the policy, and they very seldom question the actual executive decisions that flow from that policy; unless, of course, they believe that the executive decisions have in fact overreached the policy decision.

There has also been a good deal of discussion about students and members of the wider community having some form of representation on the deliberative bodies of the university. I do not think that 'representation' is the right word to use in this context; what we are talking about is membership. If we regard these people as representatives rather than as members, then we are suggesting that there are mandates that their communities can impose on the people who serve on the university's deliberative bodies. On the other hand, membership is something that is very different from representation. A member must act independently and in his own right. He must consider the issues on their merits and must not feel bound by a mandate from a constituency. Now if we understand the matter in this light, then I can see positive advantages rather than disadvantages from having students sit on a university's Senate and, possibly, even on its Council. In fact, some time ago the Rhodes University Senate agreed that it should have three student members and that they should be full members of Senate. Unfortunately, this decision could not be implemented without an amendment to our University Act. I am sure that you are all aware that no amendment to a University Act will get through Parliament unless it enjoys the blessing of the Minister of National Education. In our case, the Minister of National Education pointed out to us that the idea of student membership on a university's Senate or Council was against the gospel according to Van Wyk de Vries. We therefore found ourselves up against a solid wall, and all that we were able to achieve was to have student observers with speaking rights in Senate.

The idea of having black community leaders on a university's Council is an excellent one, and there does

not seem to be any legal impediment to its implementation.
The way to accomplish this is to persuade either the alum-
ni, or the donors, or some other body that has the right
to elect members to your university's Council to nominate
this type of leader for election.   We tried at Rhodes Uni-
versity recently, but the particular nominee was not the
person who won the election.   There is thus no principle
that prevents this from happening, and I think that I
would tend to agree that this would be a very valuable
contribution to a university's relationship with a parti-
cular community.   Serving on a university's Senate or
Council has an enormous educative effect on people because
they soon see that the decisions of these bodies are not
arbitrary and that minds have been applied to the problems
concerned.   They therefore come away with a much greater
appreciation of the full gamut of considerations that had
to be borne in mind when the Senate or the Council reach-
ed the conclusions which they did reach.   Finally, and as
far as the membership of university Councils are concern-
ed, I think that most universities are still somewhat male
chauvinist.   One member of the Rhodes University Council
is a woman.   In general, it is extremely rare to have
women members on a university's Council

        I would like to work towards a conclusion by
commenting on the need for administrative efficiency.   In
these days of diminishing resources, it is absolutely es-
sential that the university should run as efficiently as
possible without destroying the essential academic fabric.
Fortunately, there is a great deal that can be accomplished
in matters such as maintenance, conservation of energy,
financial organization, purchasing arrangements, cleaning,
catering, the deposition of clerical labour, and the like.
I would say that in a typical South African university,

careful thought with respect to these matters can save anything between 10 and 15 per cent of the university's available resources. I therefore think that it is very short sighted to dismiss all of this as an unwelcome intrusion of American management methods into the university. I do not believe that this aspect of a university's life can be cavalierly dismissed. On the contrary, it is absolutely essential that the university's resources should be husbanded so that they can be applied where they are needed most.

V

Summary and conclusion

By way of summary and conclusion I want to suggest that the most effective way in which we are going to achieve change in the university environment is by continuing the dialogue which we have been having during this Conference. In this dialogue we have the Nabarros, the Viljoens, and possibly the Hendersons ranged on the one side; and on the other we have the Prices and the Tutus and that ilk. This kind of careful dialogue and discussion and sifting of ideas will eventually bring us to conclusions that will make some significant difference. There is a great tendency on the part of reformers to be impatient. This is understandable. One simply has to accept that when one is dealing with a large organization there is a time constant of something like two years involved in all attempts to bring about change. The idea of a time constant belongs to the technical terminology used by electronic engineers. What it boils down to is this: if you stimulate an organization like a university, you can ex-

pect results only two years or so afterwards. I can remember many occasions, both at the University of the Witwatersrand and at Rhodes University, where the initial reception to an idea that I had raised was extremely hostile. Two years later the idea was passed and regarded as orthodox. If you are disappointed at the long time that it takes for a university to accept new ideas, then it is worth remembering that this is positively indecent haste when one compares it with how long it takes for government departments and other organizations to make their decisions.

Finally, it is absolutely essential when one is presenting arguments to back up the rhetoric with a solid battery of facts. I can remember a discussion that I had about seven or eight years ago with a fairly radical student. It changed my outlook about quite a few things because he actually had the facts that he needed to support his argument. He began by making what I thought was simply a rhetorical statement when he claimed that the real income of black mine workers had remained constant between 1911 and 1970. I told him that I simply did not believe him, and that he was indulging in empty rhetoric. When he was able to pull out a table of the actual facts I found that far more impressive than any rhetoric that he had marshalled before. Similarly, when the idea of student representation on Senate was first raised at Rhodes University, I prognosticated that a great many members of the Senate would find it a distasteful idea. Nonetheless, I told the students to do their homework, to present a reasoned case, to give us a comparison of what was done at other South African universities and at other universities in the English speaking world. Because they did produce a closely reasoned and well presented case, they were able

to dispose of the opposition to this matter very speedily.
I therefore believe that in the final analysis we must re-
member to be persistent; results have already come and
they will continue to come.   Do not be despondent if
battles are lost as long as the war is won.