Welcome & Opening at The Association of University English Teachers of Southern Africa Annual Conference

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Introduction

The Chairperson and officials of The Association of University English Teachers of Southern Africa, distinguished guests, presenters and participants from local and international universities, colleagues, molweni, good evening, goeie naand

It is a great privilege to host the annual conference of The Association of University English Teachers of Southern Africa at Rhodes University, and a great pleasure to welcome you all to Rhodes, to Grahamstown, to the Makana region and to the Eastern Cape province.

To those of you who are from universities from other countries, a warm welcome also to South Africa.

Thank you for entrusting Rhodes with this conference, and for travelling considerable distances to grace us with your participation.

For transport, logistic and costs reasons, compared to universities in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, Rhodes academics have to work hard to attract and host national and especially international conferences.

That we do so with considerable success is testimony to the quality of the scholars and scholarship that is associated with Rhodes University and the recognition that the University enjoys nationally and internationally.

As a 107-year old institution, and the smallest university in South Africa, we take pride in a number of features of Rhodes. 59% of our 7 300 students are women; 26% are postgraduates and 21% are international students from some 45 countries around the world.

Among South African universities we possess among the best pass and graduation rates and among the best research outputs per academic staff member. Proportionally, our students consistently win more prestigious national and international scholarships than any other university.

Some like to say that our successes have to do with our location in a quaint small town and that there is very little to do in our town. This is hardly the case! This is an intellectually and culturally vibrant town in which there is lots to do, if you are enterprising.

We like to think that our successes and achievements have to do with the fact that as Rhodes we have a good understanding of what it means to be a university, that we take learning, scholarship and knowledge very seriously, and that we work hard to create a vibrant and critical institutional culture that embraces academic freedom, intellectual autonomy and debate.

It is especially appropriate that a conference which brings together English teachers and researchers based at higher education institutions is being held at Rhodes University.

At Rhodes we boast outstanding departments of English and English Language and Linguistics, and are the home of the well-known Institute for the Study of English in Africa, with its new Masters programme in Creative Writing, and **to** the Dictionary Unit on South African English.

We undertake innovative research and teaching in English-language education in our Faculty of Education, while academic literacy and its acquisition by especially socially disadvantaged students is a strong concern of our Centre for Higher Education, Research, Teaching and Learning.

Finally, we have a strong relationship with the National English Literary Museum that is located here in Grahamstown. For all these reasons, we like to think that we enjoy a long and prestigious track record and are an intellectual and scholarly force in English teaching and literature.

Permit me to make six observations that it seems to me are pertinent to this gathering and English literature and English teaching in South Africa.

The first observation is that it is vital that our concern as scholars and administrators encompasses what Andre du Toit calls the historical 'legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialization.'[1]

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.[2] 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.'[3]

My **second** observation relates to recent comments by Mahmood Mamdani and certain Stellenbosch academics.

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.'[4]

A recent article by Stellenbosch academics argues in relation to the Western Cape that 'its universities, it artists and its centres of higher learning could play a major intellectual and cultural role in uncrippling the region's imagination and creativity, providing the Cape with critical vocabularies and concepts to transcend insularity, provincialism and nostalgia for a shameful and costly past.'[5]

They suggest that 'a first step in this direction would be to take the study of Africa more seriously than has been the case so far. Part of this process requires…thinking with the rest of South Africa and as an integral part of this country as well.'[6]

My **third** observation is that our societies require graduates who are not just capable professionals, but also sensitive intellectuals and democratic and critical citizens.

Martha Nussbaum captures our tasks well when she argues that we are charged with the 'cultivation of humanity,' which means the development of 'three capacities.'[7] 'First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions.'

Second, is students seeing themselves '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.'[8]

Third, it is, however, more than 'factual knowledge' that is required. Also necessary is '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.'[9]

My **fourth** observation is to pose whether we are engaging sufficiently with important epistemological and ontological issues that are associated with research, learning and teaching, curriculum and pedagogy.

For example, our tendency to reduce 'teaching to that of simply "conveying knowledge"…fails…to acknowledge the need to develop a citizenry which can be critical of knowledge which has been produced and which can contribute to processes of knowledge production itself.'[10]

Observation **five** is that today the competition for and concentration on economic advantage means that certain kinds of knowledge and research, especially that generated by the natural, medical and business sciences and engineering are privileged. The humanities and social sciences are the objects of either benign tolerance, or neglect or outright hostility.

However, as Thandika Mkandawire argues, 'attempts to improve Africa's prospects by focusing on scientific advances and the benefits accruing from them have all too often overlooked the important perspectives which the humanities and social sciences afford.'[11]

He is absolutely correct that 'it is vital that the social sciences and humanities are granted their rightful place…if Africa's development challenges are to be fully and properly addressed.'[12]

My **final** observation is that the dominant economic and political orthodoxies of recent decades have been hugely harmful to how we today think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about scholarship and knowledge.

They have emphasized practical utility, professional, vocational and career-focused programmes and 'skills,' and have sought to reduce the value of higher education to its efficacy for economic growth. The idea of higher education as invaluable for understanding and democratic and critical citizenship has become disdained, denuding higher education of its wider social value and functions.

It is critical that as academics and university administrators we defend and reclaim scholarship and knowledge as fundamental cornerstones of human development; that we restore to universities their social purposes of producing knowledge and understanding and cultivating minds, instead of their reduction to instruments of the economy and vocational schools; that we recover the vital public good functions of higher education, as opposed to the ideas of higher education as a market, universities as 'firms' and students as 'customers' and 'clients.'

This is fundamental if our universities are to play a pivotal role in helping us to think critically and imaginatively about issues and to address the historical and contemporary challenges of our society and continent.

Our higher education 'requires bold visions of internationalism, of alternative globalization, that transcend the edicts of market accountability and narrow commercial calculations and embrace the ethics of social accountability and an expansive humanism.'[13]

Like Paul Zeleza, I believe that, 'we will have failed the future if we do not vigorously pursue the dreams of university education as an ennobling adventure for individuals (and) communities,… if we do not strive to create universities that produce ideas rather than peddle information, critical rationality rather than consumer rations, and knowledge that has lasting value.'[14]

Inherent in the six observations is a concern whether as universities, scholars and administrators we are grappling adequately with critical issues of intellectual and institutional transformation, and of the African university, as opposed to the university in Africa.

Inherent in the observations are also challenges and questions that include:

- How do we 'decolonize', 'deracialise,' demasculanise and degender our inherited 'intellectual spaces?'[15]

- How do we open up spaces for the flowering of epistemologies, ontologies, theories, methodologies, objects and questions other than those that have long been hegemonic, and that have exercised dominance over (perhaps have even suffocated) intellectual and scholarly thought and writing?

- How do we build new academic cultures and, more widely, new institutional cultures that genuinely respect and appreciate difference and diversity – whether class, gender, national, linguistic, religious, sexual orientation, epistemological or methodological in nature.

There has to be thoughtful open-ended engagement and disputation on these critical issues, including by The Association of University English Teachers of Southern Africa if it indeed 'to promote…the free and open study of the English language, of literature written in English, and other related areas of concern;' if the Association is to 'strive for the elimination of discrimination on the basis of race, gender, class or creed both within and outside institutions of education and research, and to 'promote and defend academic freedom and autonomy' in the current context.

It seems to me that the Association and Language and Literature, with their sensitivity to language, culture and context and issues of social inclusion and exclusion, are well-positioned to help our societies and also our universities to advance social justice and more inclusive social and academic cultures.

Of course it means being open, as befitting scholarship and universities, to issues of epistemology and ontology, including our sometimes very traditional, parochial, outmoded and unacceptable ways of thinking about knowledge and issues and about other people.

I am most pleased that there are postgraduate students at this conference. Our postgraduates are the potential much needed next and new generations of scholars and intellectuals. They are precious talents and must be given every opportunity to succeed.

In closing, I wish to thank colleagues in the Department of English and in our Conference and Events Office for their efforts in organising and hosting this conference, and I trust that you will enjoy a stimulating and productive conference and am enjoyable stay at Rhodes and in Grahamstown.

[1] du Toit, A. (2000) 'From Autonomy to Accountability: Academic Freedom under Threat in South Africa. *Social Dynamics*, 26, p.76-133
[2] Ibid.,
[3] Ibid., page 103
[4] Mamdani, M. (2011) 'Africa's post-colonial scourge. *Mail & Guardian Getting Ahead*, 27 May - 2 June
[5] 'Scandal of beauty: The Cape must embrace it rich mix.' *Cape Times*, 7 June 2011
[6] Ibid.
[7] Nussbaum, M. (2006), page 5
[8] Ibid., page 6
[9] Ibid., pages 6-7
[10] Boughey, C. (2008) Private communication
[11] Mkandawire, T. (2009) 'Preface' in *The British Academy and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (2009) The Nairobi Report: Frameworks for Africa-UK Research Collaboration in the Social Sciences and Humanities*. London: The British Academy and the Association of Commonwealth Universities, page vii
[12] Ibid.
[13] Zeleza, P.T. (2005). Transnational education and African universities. In Association of African Universities, *Cross-border provision and the future of higher education in Africa*. Accra: Association of African Universities, pages 54-55
[14] Ibid., page 55
[15] Bentley, K, Habib, A and Morrow, S. (2006) 'Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy, and the Corporatised University in Contemporary South Africa'. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education