

**Signposts for building a career at Rhodes
University: VC's welcome**

**New Lecturer's Orientation
Rhodes University**

26 January 2010

Introduction

Molweni, Good morning

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, productive and intellectually, academically and personally enriching and rewarding stay at Rhodes University.

The theme of *Building a Career at Rhodes University* emphasises, at least to me, the idea of constructing in a careful, considered and active way one's development and trajectory at Rhodes in the years to come. This, it seems to me, is wise counsel, especially the idea of assuming active agency in mapping one's own future.

Of course, in building your individual career's there will necessarily be an interplay between your own aspirations, goals and needs and the institutional context, be it at the level of the Academic Department, the Faculty or University as a whole.

It is to be expected that the structure and dynamics of the Department, Faculty and University will affect your development and trajectory. Hopefully, this will be in ways that are positive and facilitating. At the same time, as you build and develop your career this will hopefully impact in also positive ways on the Department, Faculty and University.

That is to say, individual career aspirations, needs and building are not in competition with the institutional

development of the academic Department, Faculty and University.

Indeed, your building of your individual career's should be simultaneously an integral element of ongoing institution-building and development at all levels of the University and in key domains - the domains of:

- Knowledge dissemination through teaching and leaching
- Knowledge production though scholarship and research
- Community engagement
- Transformation of the institutional culture.

For the rest of my welcome I wish to focus on the idea of a University and the current institutional context and conditions within which we must build and develop ourselves, play our parts and conduct ourselves.

THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY

Arthur E. Levine of Columbia University writes that 'in the early years of the Industrial Revolution, the Yale Report of 1828 asked whether the needs of a changing society required either major or minor changes in higher education. The report concluded that it had asked the wrong question. The right question was, what is the purpose of higher education?'

Levine adds that questions related to higher education 'have their deepest roots in that fundamental question' and that 'faced with a society

in motion, we must not only ask that question again, but must actively pursue answers, if our universities are to retain their vitality in a dramatically different world'.

The meaning of higher education and universities cannot be found in the content of their teaching and research, how they undertake these, or their admission policies. Instead, the core purposes of higher education and universities reside elsewhere.

The first purpose of universities is the *production of knowledge* which advances understanding of the natural and social worlds, and enriches humanity's accumulated scientific and cultural inheritances. This means that 'universities operate on a complex set of mutually sustaining fronts – they research into the most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge and yet also seek the practical application of discovery; they test, reinvigorate and carry forward the inherited knowledge of earlier generations'.

Universities also 'operate on both the short and the long horizon. On the one hand, they work with contemporary problems and they render appropriate the discoveries and understanding that they generate. On the other hand, they forage in realms of abstraction and domains of enquiry that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit'.

The second purpose of universities is the *dissemination of knowledge* and the formation and cultivation of the cognitive character of students. The

goal is to produce graduates that ideally: 'can think effectively and critically'; have 'achieved depth in some field of knowledge', and have a 'critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves'.

Our graduates should also have 'a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times'; be 'able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it'; have 'some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems'; and be able to 'communicate with cogency'.

The final, if somewhat newer but increasingly accepted, purpose of universities is to undertake *community engagement*. We must distinguish between a university being responsive to its political, economic and social contexts and community engagement. Being alive to context does not mean that a university is necessarily engaged with communities, however we may define these. While sensitivity to economic and social conditions and challenges is necessary for community engagement, it is not sufficient.

At different moments, in differing ways and to differing extent, community engagement has encompassed community outreach, student and staff volunteer activities and, more recently, what has come to be termed 'service-learning'.

Service-learning has tried to build on the core knowledge production and dissemination purposes of

the university. Instead of being an add-on, disconnected from the University's core activities, as community outreach and volunteerism have been, service-learning seeks to become a 'curricular innovation' infused in the teaching and learning and research activities of the University.

As has been noted, 'service-learning...engage(s) students in activities where *both the community and student* are primary beneficiaries and where the primary goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance student *learning* through rendering this service. Reciprocity is therefore a central characteristic of service-learning'.

The goal of service-learning is 'integrating community service with scholarly activity such as student learning, teaching, and research. This form of community engagement is underpinned by the assumption that service is enriched through scholarly activity and that scholarly activity, particularly student learning, is enriched through service to the community'.

To effectively undertake its diverse educational and social purposes, a university must have a commitment 'to the spirit of truth' and must possess academic freedom and institutional autonomy. However, while academic freedom and institutional autonomy are necessary conditions, they are also rights with which duties are associated.

In the African context, we must recognize, as Andre du Toit urges, 'the legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation as threats to academic freedom';

and that 'the powers conferred by academic freedom go hand in hand with substantive duties to deracialise and decolonize intellectual spaces'.

Other duties on the part of universities include advancing the public good and being democratically accountable. They also encompass bold engagement with economic and social orthodoxies and resultant public policies that may seriously misunderstand and distort the purposes of universities, stripping them of their substance and leaving them 'universities only in name'.

STRUCTURE

- Established, well-known 105 year-old university
- Historically white university
- Motto - Vis Virtus Veritas = Strength Virtue Truth
- Slogan - 'Where Leaders Learn'
- Notion of 'liberal arts' institution
- Institutional vision - 'outstanding internationally respected'; 'affirms its African identity'; 'committed to democratic ideals, academic freedom, rigorous scholarship, and social responsibility'
- Institutional mission – produce outstanding internationally-recognised graduates'; 'to strive, through teaching, research and community service, to contribute to the advancement of international scholarship and the development of the Eastern Cape and Southern Africa'
- Strong academic culture
- Sound governance and management, that aspires to be also a democratic and participatory governance and management

- Particular institutional structure – ‘race’, class, gender
- Predominantly white academic and administrative staff
- Strong residential system
- Particular relationship with province and municipality

CONJUNCTURE

- 6 faculties; about 7 000 students in 2010
- About 24% postgraduate
- Almost 23% international students from 50 countries
- Almost 50% of students in residences
- Relatively high entrance/admissions requirements
- Highest pass and undergraduate graduation rates
- Outstanding postgraduate success rates
- Best research output per capita academic staff
- Growing community engagement
- Strong commitment to high quality provision
- Generally strong institutional loyalty – staff and alumni/nae
- Numerous institutional challenges
 - ✓ Meaning of ‘African identity’
 - ✓ Content of ‘Liberal arts’ institution
 - ✓ Pursuit of ‘Where Leaders Learn’
 - ✓ Institutional research and longer-term planning
 - ✓ Academic shape and size
 - ✓ Equity and quality
 - ✓ Institutional culture
 - ✓ Student and staff equity
 - ✓ New academic infrastructure
 - ✓ Additional student residences
 - ✓ Academic staff accommodation
 - ✓ Staff remuneration

- ✓ Scholarship and bursary funding for students
- ✓ Schools and municipality partnerships

AGENCY

If this is the context and these are the conditions, agency on your part in shaping your career at Rhodes requires, to begin with, understanding this context and these conditions.

Yet, at the same time, this context and these conditions should not be taken as given and immutable and accepted uncritically.

Instead, to the extent that they constrain or frustrate the development of a vibrant academic culture, academic freedom, the pursuit of human rights, social equity and justice and an inclusive and embracing institutional culture that affirms and respects difference and diversity, they should become objects of change.