

# **RHODES UNIVERSITY 2008 : CONTEXT AND CRITICAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

**Council Workshop  
Rhodes University  
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# INTRODUCTION

‘Stagnant universities are expensive and ineffectual monuments to a *status quo* which is more likely to be a *status quo ante*, yesterday’s world preserved in aspic’

- Useful for this Council workshop to grapple with theme of Rhodes University in the 21st Century.
- Set out a conceptual framework to enable us to explore this theme together interactively.

# CONCEPTS

Context

Structure

Conjuncture

External conditions

External conditions

Internal conditions

Internal conditions

Agency

**CONTEXT**

**STRUCTURE**

**CONJUNCTURE**

**EXTERNAL  
CONDITIONS**

**EXTERNAL  
CONDITIONS**

**GLOBAL  
NATIONAL  
LOCAL**

**GLOBAL  
NATIONAL  
LOCAL**

**INTERNAL  
CONDITIONS**

**INTERNAL  
CONDITIONS**

**AGENCY**

# STRUCTURE: EXTERNAL CONDITIONS

## GLOBAL

- Globalisation
- National economic and social divides
- Pressures on the environment - global climate change

## NATIONAL

- Apartheid economic and social inheritance
- Equity, economic growth and democracy
- Constitution and Bill of Rights
- Apartheid higher education (HE) inheritance
- HE transformation agenda and policy framework

## LOCAL

- Underdeveloped province
- Economic and social inequalities

# CONJUNCTURE: EXTERNAL CONDITIONS

## GLOBAL

- Neo-liberalism
- Marketisation, commercialisation and commodification of HE
- ‘Brain drain/gain/circulation’

## NATIONAL

- Contestation – state, political party, civil society
- Challenge of creating developmental state
- Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa
- Professional and technical staff shortages and JIPSA

- Multiple and competing demands on HE institutions
- New HE landscape
- Student and staff social equity challenge
- Goal-directed funding framework

## LOCAL

- Unemployment, poverty and social and health challenges
- Weak state

# **STRUCTURE:**

## **INTERNAL CONDITIONS**

- Established 104 year-old university
- Historically white university
- Particular institutional structure and culture – ‘race’, class, gender
- ‘Vis Virtus Veritas’ = Strength Virtue Truth
- ‘Where Leaders Learn’



- ‘Institutional vision - ‘outstanding internationally respected’; ‘affirms its African identity’; ‘committed to democratic ideals, academic freedom, rigorous scholarship, sound moral values and social responsibility’.
- Institutional mission – ‘produce outstanding internationally-accredited 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’
- Particular relationship with province and locality
- Predominantly white academic (84%) and administrative staff (87%)

## **CONJUNCTURE: INTERNAL CONDITIONS**

- **Size and shape: 6 faculties; 6 258 students; 58% women; 33% black SAn's; 25% postgraduate; 21% international students from 50 countries; 50% of students in residences**
- **1250 total staff; 350 academics**
- **140 hectares of land, 220 buildings**
- **Contribute 66% of GDP of town**
- **Relatively high admissions requirements**
- **Among highest pass and undergraduate graduation rates**
- **Very good postgraduate success rates**
- **Best research output per capita academic staff**
- **Growing community engagement**
- **Strong commitment to high quality provision**
- **Generally strong institutional loyalty**

# AGENCY

## 1. Multiple and competing demands

- HE institutions are buffeted by the cross-currents of the state, the market and civil society, resulting in 'demand overload'.
- ✓ Must address and mediate this 'demand overload' in principled, strategic and innovative ways
- ✓ Must recognise the legitimacy of certain claims on the University and consider these as part of goals, policies and strategies
- ✓ Must firmly refute other claims that could undermine our core identity and purposes and reduce us to something other than a university

## 2. Innovation in and transformation of core activities

Any serious institutional transformation agenda, if it is to ensure the integrity of the university, advance equity of opportunity, and contribute to economic and social development must have at its heart innovation, renewal and transformation in **teaching and learning**, of the **curriculum**, in research and the **production of knowledge**, and in **community engagement**

- Entails a commitment to
- ✓ Safe and respectful environment that is intellectually nurturing, promotes **higher** learning, and embraces students as partners (not 'clients' and 'customers') in this learning
- ✓ Provide for **varied learning needs** of a **diverse** student body through innovative, carefully designed and implemented academic programmes, and excellent teaching, mentoring and academic development initiatives
- ✓ Look outwards and **build partnerships** with the private/public/NGO sectors so that there can be effective responses to their changing graduate (knowledge, competencies, skills and attitudes) and knowledge requirements

### 3. Social equity

- Significant social equity challenges at the levels of both academic and administrative staff and students
- Embrace a **politics of equal recognition**
- ✓ But which is not blind to the effects of the **legacies of apartheid**
- ✓ Nor believes that the advent of democracy is a **sufficient condition** for the erasure of the structural conditions, policies and practices that ground and sustain economic and social inequalities
- Precisely this recognition that gives salience to the ideas of social equity, social justice and redress, treats them as social imperatives, and makes them **necessary** and **fundamental dimensions** of HE transformation and social transformation in general.
- Creation and institutionalization of a culture that embraces difference and diversity and avoids practices that are alienating, discomfoting and exclusionary

#### 4. Excellence and quality

- Any serious HE agenda must **prioritise quality** as a key policy driver and have excellence as a critical policy goal.
- 'Quality' and 'standards' are not **timeless and invariant**. Unwise to conceive of quality as being attached to a single, a-historical and universal model of a HE institution
- Dubious contention that imperatives of equity and redress must necessarily compromise excellence – certainly are risks but such an outcome is not pre-ordained. **No inevitable conflict between quality and equity.**

Social equity with quality and quality with social equity!

## 5. Institutional missions and orientations

- In a differentiated and diverse HE system institutions must **make choices**
- ✓ Re **teaching-learning**: the options/balance between levels of provision (undergraduate and postgraduate), breadth of qualifications (humanities, natural sciences, law, etc.), the levels of qualifications (certificates at NQF level 5 to PhD's at NQF level 10); nature of programmes (general formative, vocational, professional, etc.), modes of provision (correspondence, distance, e-learning, contact), and scope of provision (local, regional, national, international)
- ✓ Re **knowledge production**: the options/balance between different kinds of scholarship (discovery, integration, synthesis, etc.) and the nature of research ('blue skies', fundamental, applied, strategic, developmental)



- ✓ Re **community engagement**: relations with which communities (business - manufacturing, agriculture, commerce, et al; government, NGO's, social movements); operating in what spaces (national, regional, local, etc.); having what requirements (research, teaching, services); and on what bases (values, principles, goals, etc.)
- Important issues:
  - ✓ Distinctiveness of Rhodes should be defined by what?
  - ✓ 'Where Leaders Learn' means what?
  - ✓ Community engagement - iRhini/Grahamstown schools partnership and partnership with Makana Municipality

## 6. Responsiveness

- Much emphasised goal is making HE institutions more responsive to the **needs of the economy**. Not disputed
- ✓ Need for **restructuring** of qualifications and programmes to make curricula more congruent with the knowledge and skills needs of the changing economy
- ✓ That there is great need to forge HE-industry **partnerships**
- Must be posed, though, whether this means that HE qualifications and programmes should become more **vocational** and focus more on technical **skills**

- Must take great care that we do not allow the demand for ‘responsiveness’ to be narrowed down to purely market/economic responsiveness
- Must insist on a more extensive, complex and multi-faceted notion of HE responsiveness that incorporates wider social roles of HE institutions
- ✓ Intellectual and conceptual knowledge, abilities and skills to meet the wide range and varied local, regional, national and international needs of a developing democracy
- ✓ Development of thinkers and professionals in different fields and disciplines, at different levels, for different social sectors

## 7. Paradoxes, choices and trade-offs

- **Paradoxes and intractable tension** between defined HE principles, goals and strategies in so far as we seek for good political and social reasons to pursue them *simultaneously*
- Establishes difficult political and social **dilemmas** and unenviable **choices** and **decisions**
- Also raises the question of **trade-offs** between principles, goals and strategies.
- **Must boldly confront and imaginatively and creatively mediate these paradoxes and intractable tensions**

## 8. Freedom and Responsibility

(T)he problem of freedom is ...how decisions about the future of human affairs are to be made and who is to make them. Organisationally, it is the problem of a just machinery of decision. Morally, it is the problem of political responsibility. Intellectually, it is the problem of what are now the possible futures of human affairs (C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 1959:174)

- In a nutshell:
  - ✓ How are we to ‘formulate the available choices’?
  - ✓ How are we ‘to argue over them’?
  - ✓ How are we to innovate the ‘just machinery’ that provides ‘opportunity to choose’ and make decisions?

## 9. Better maintaining the current and reproducing the next generation of academics

- Meriting especial attention is the **better maintenance** of the current generation of academics, and ensuring the **reproduction** (and transformation of the social composition) of the next generation of scholars and researchers.
- ✓ From angle of **employment equity** and the **social composition** of academics, have a serious and immediate 'crisis'
- ✓ From angle of the **age profile** of our academics, the remuneration of academics, the pull of the public and private sectors - crisis is growing and could become worse

## 10. Institutional funding

- Challenges of more adequate 1<sup>st</sup> stream income (public subsidy), limits to growing 2<sup>nd</sup> stream income, and of growing 3<sup>rd</sup> stream income (professional development short courses, contract research, conference income, donor and alumni contribution, etc.)
- ✓ Additional institutional infrastructure (library, residences, hall, academic and sport facilities)
- ✓ Adequate academic and other staff remuneration
- ✓ Housing for academics and other staff

## 11. Transformation and development

- Should not **conflate** transformation and development, or assume that the latter is necessarily a concomitant or corollary of the former

Transformation, to be meaningful, must be simultaneously *development* or must lay the basis for ongoing institutional and social development.

- Also much more than about changing **demographics**, numbers and proportions, and achieving 'race', gender and disability equity goals, important as these are



Fundamentally about *thinking in new ways* – regarding academic excellence; curriculum, pedagogy, and learning-teaching; research; community engagement; institutional structures and processes of decision making; management, administration and planning. institution and society; our obligations and responsibilities; our challenges, possibilities and constraints.

- Need to guard against inertia, complacency and insularity, which can stifle innovation, transformation and development
- Must continually critically scrutinise ‘tried and tested’ ways - are they appropriate to our rapidly changing context and professed goals?