

Scholarship in a Context of Transformation

**Centre for Higher Education Research, Learning and Teaching
Academic Orientation Programme**

Rhodes University

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

Scholarship in a Context of Transformation is a most appropriate theme to frame this induction programme for new scholars. It invites us to actively and carefully think about *scholarship*, *context* and *transformation* as we navigate our way as new scholars at Rhodes University, and as we also construct our developmental path at Rhodes.

Inevitably, the issues of *scholarship*, *context* and *transformation* will shape your development and trajectory as there will necessarily be a relationship between these issues and your individual aspirations, goals and needs. But we must think dialectically – your contributions will also, hopefully, impact on *scholarship*, *context* and *transformation*.

In the time available to me it is impossible for me to cover all three of the issues of *scholarship*, *context* and *transformation*.

It is clear from the programme that considerable attention will be given to the issue of *scholarship*. So I will confine myself principally to the issues of *context* and *transformation*, though you will see that what I have to say has clear implications for *scholarship*.

CONTEXT

To begin with *context*, there are two aspects of context that are important.

The idea of a university

The first and foremost aspect of **context** is our rationale for existence as a university and our core purposes.

What are the core purposes of higher education and universities?

The first is to *produce knowledge*, so that we can advance understanding of our natural and social worlds and enrich our accumulated scientific and cultural heritage.

This means that we “test the inherited knowledge of earlier generations”, we dismantle the mumbo jumbo that masquerades for knowledge, we “reinvigorate” knowledge and we share our findings with others.

We undertake research into the most 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).

Above all, we ask *questions*. We don’t immediately worry about the right answer or solution. Instead, we worry *first* about the right *question* or the better question.

It is as Einstein has said: "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

Well maybe not always in 5 minutes. But what is true is that it is the right questions, the proper questions that lead to the great leaps in knowledge and science, to the great discoveries and innovations.

As a university our second purpose is to *disseminate knowledge* and to cultivate minds. Our goal is to 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, that they can communicate cogently, orally and in writing, and that they have a “critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves”.

At the same time, we also seek that our students should have “a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times”; should be “able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it”, and that they should have “some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems” (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000:84).

Our final purpose as a university is to undertake *community engagement*. On the one hand this involves your voluntary participation in community projects undertaken thorough our Community Engagement office.

On the other hand, it involves service-learning, in which through your academic courses you take part “in activities where both the community” and *you* benefit, “and where the goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance (your) *learning* through rendering this service” (CHE, 2006:15).

Of course, we exist in a historical context which will condition how we undertake their purposes and roles and how we interact with our society. Our purposes as a university 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.

This requires Rhodes to be a powerhouse of knowledge production and knowledge dissemination, and of the formation of new generations of thinkers and actors. The particular contribution of Rhodes will be the product of the complex intersection of our institutional history, our choices and decisions regarding our purposes and goals, our strategies and various other factors.

In joining Rhodes University you commit yourself to the pursuit, making and sharing of knowledge. This is why we refer to Rhodes as indawo yolwazi - a place of knowledge.

The Rhodes institutional context

Having addressed why we exist, we must recognise that we, of course, undertake our activities in a particular historical and institutional context.

A second aspect of context is our **institutional structure**, which is as follows:

- We are a well-established, well-known 106 year-old university, one of the oldest in Africa
- We are the smallest university, by far, in South Africa
- We are a historically white university
- Our institutional vision is to be an 'outstanding internationally respected' university that 'affirms its African identity' and is 'committed to democratic ideals, academic freedom, rigorous scholarship, and social responsibility'
- We have the institutional mission of seeking to produce outstanding internationally-recognised graduates', who embody our motto - Vis Virtus Veritas = Strength Virtue Truth and our slogan, 'Where Leaders Learn'

- We also wish, through teaching, research and community service, to contribute to the advancement of international scholarship and the development of the Eastern Cape and Southern Africa'
- We have a strong commitment to an undergraduate formative and liberal education
- We have a strong and robust academic culture
- We have sound governance and management, that aspires to be also a democratic and participatory governance and management
- We are characterised by a particular historical institutional structure of 'race', class, and gender which continues into the present
- Our academic and senior and middle administrative and support staff are predominantly white
- We are a highly residential university with a very strong residential system.

Turning to our **current situation**, and intentions, this is as follows:

- 6 faculties – Humanities, Science, Commerce, Pharmacy, Law and Education
- 7 300 students in 2011 – increase to 7 600 in 2013
- About 26% of postgraduate students - seek to become more postgraduate in coming years
- 20% international students from about 50 countries
- 80% of Rhodes' students are South African
- 57% are Black
- 40% are Black South African
- 65% of the new intake is black students
- 59% of our students are women – having been discussing the desirability of this
- Relatively high entrance/admissions requirements
- Extended studies programme to ensure access for working class and rural poor students with potential
- Highest pass and undergraduate graduation rates among South African universities
- Outstanding postgraduate success rates
- Possess third best research output per capita academic staff – 1.97 (benchmark = 1.25); seek to further enhance research

- Strong commitment to high quality teaching and learning
- Growing community engagement
- Generally strong institutional loyalty – staff and alumni/nae
- Almost 1 in 2 of our students live in 49 comfortable residences; almost 65% of undergraduate students, and almost all first-years are in residence
- Over 1 4000 staff, including over 350 academic staff
- 140 hectares of land and 220 buildings
- Annual operational budget of almost R 600 million
- Largest institution in Grahamstown - contribute 65% of the GDP of the town
- Consume 45% of the town's electricity and water - have a special responsibility to the town and our well-being and future is inextricably tied to the well-being future of the town.

Finally, like any other institution, we have numerous **institutional challenges** that we must deal with. These include:

- Issues related to our identity: what do we mean by a commitment to 'African identity', what is to be the meaning and content of the liberal education we wish to be characterised by, and what do we mean substantively by the slogan 'Where Leaders Learn'
- Academic shape and size – pressure on funding
- Effective institutional research to inform decisions and planning on a longer-term horizon
- Equity - enhancing the representation of black South African students
- Equity - enhancing the representation of black South African and women, especially at senior levels of academics and senior support staff
- Institutional culture
- New academic infrastructure for increased enrolments and new and specific academic programmes
- Additional (postgraduate) student residences and sport facilities
- Academic and support staff accommodation (and schooling for children)
- Continued improvement of staff remuneration

- Scholarship and bursary funding for students in financial need
- Principled and effective partnership with locals schools and municipality

In a nutshell, this is the structural context and the current conditions at Rhodes, and these are our institutional challenges.

This context and these conditions should not be accepted uncritically nor should they be taken as given and immutable.

The question is how do we protect, cultivate and further reinforce those aspects that we are proud of and wish to maintain as key features of the Rhodes institutional structure and culture and how do we intervene to eliminate, erode, modify or transform those aspects that we find unacceptable and unnecessary to the kind of institution that we wish to be.

Transformation

This brings me to the issue of **transformation**.

It is not self-evident that what is regarded as ‘transformation’ in education or society is also ‘development’ or necessarily creates the conditions for development.

We should, therefore, be cautious to not conflate transformation and development, or to assume that the latter is a necessarily concomitant or corollary of the former.

Transformation, to be meaningful, must be simultaneously *development* or must lay the basis for development.

Notwithstanding a deserved international academic reputation, 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. Yet, as welcome are the changes that have been occurring, these changes do not exhaust the challenges of transformation.

Transformation and development are much more than about changing demographics, numbers and proportions, and pursuing and achieving 'race', gender and disability equity goals, as important as these are.

Key transformation issues at Rhodes also fundamentally include

- The challenge of social inclusion: of ensuring access and opportunity for students of working class and rural poor social origins
- Developing a new institutional culture which is characterised by genuine respect for and appreciation of difference and diversity – whether class, racial, gender, national, linguistic, religious or sexual orientation in nature
- Challenges that arise from our historical “legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation”, which are threats to the flowering of ideas, discourse, discovery and scholarship, and also to academic freedom (du Toit ,2000).

Any serious agenda of inclusion in higher education entails the duty of using “the powers conferred by academic freedom” to substantively decolonize, deracialise, demasculanise and degender our inherited “intellectual spaces” (Bentley et al, 2006).

It means creating the space for the flowering of other epistemologies, ontologies, methodologies, issues and questions other than those that have dominated, perhaps even suffocated, intellectual and scholarly thought and writing.

- Changing how we think – about ourselves, about others, about our institutions and about our challenges and possibilities. It includes what Martha Nussbaum argues is the capacity ‘for critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions’, which entails developing ‘the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgement’ (ibid, 2006:5)
- ‘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).
- Acting in new and different ways. Here, as Nussbaum argues, is the task of understanding 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).
- Having the courage to be open to and, where necessary, finding new ways of doing things – whether in connection with access and admissions, opportunity, the curriculum, learning and teaching, research, structures and processes of decision making, or managing and administering.
- Embracing certain changes because they are moral, ethical and constitutional imperatives and create the possibilities for the development of social groups and individuals whose talents and potential are all too often wasted and unrealised
- Grasping that such changes create possibilities and opportunities for our own development as professionals, citizens and people, as well as for institutional and social development

Finally, we must also be aware of the economic and social structure of town in which we are located and in which we loom large. Like hundreds of towns across South Africa and Africa, this town – Grahams town or iRhini - has been profoundly shaped by the historical

processes of development and under-development, and the associated patterns of inclusion and privilege and exclusion and disadvantage.

You will observe, sixteen years into democracy, the legacies of colonialism and apartheid remain stark, and there is a considerable distance to be travelled before the historically disadvantaged and socially marginalized inhabitants of this town are assured the human, economic and social rights that our Constitution proclaims.

It seems to me that if we are serious about transformation, social inclusion and social justice, we have to interrogate the relationship between wider social structures and conditions and exclusion and inclusion. We have to also refuse 'to accept the logic of inequality and the repression that it involves', and have to continue through our scholarship to 'search for human agency, for the means through which inequality can be undone' (Hammani, 2006:32).