Critical Reflections on Rhodes, 2006-2011

27 June 2011

Introduction

The Critical Reflections on Rhodes document attempts to do two things.

- The first is to provide a review of developments between the University imbizo of July 2006 and this imbizo.

- The second is to critically reflect on key aspects of the past five years at Rhodes.

The purpose of doing this is to facilitate an open and critical conversation on current realities and how we may wish to proceed in coming years; to ground, to use other words, 'a dialogical and analytic engagement with where we are now' that is undertaken in a spirit of openness, honesty, critique and self-criticism.

To what extent I am successful in my critical reflection and I provide a useful basis for the kind of conversation that we need to have I leave it to you to be the judges.

As I indicate, this is a document written from a particular vantage point – that of the Vice-Chancellor - and there could be, indeed likely to be, other narratives on the past five years or/and particular inflections on aspects of developments and realities during the past five years.

Ultimately, we need to together begin to chart the way forward, by boldly identifying our weaknesses and shortcomings, setting out an agenda and priorities, imaginatively making choices and decisions, and creatively devising interventions and effectively implementing them.

1. Framing issues

Our conversation and our agreed upon agenda and priorities, choices, decisions and interventions cannot occur in a vacuum or be divorced from certain what I call 'framing issues.'

They have to be framed by and take into account a number of important issues.

I have suggested that these key issues include:

Values and purposes

- The 1996 South African *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights*:

- ✓ Set out the character of the society that is envisaged

- ✓ Proclaim the values of 'human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms,' and 'non-racialism and non-sexism.'
- ✓ State that no institution or individual 'may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.'
- ✓ Enjoin us to 'respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights in the Bill of Rights.'

- The 1997 *White Paper* on higher education expresses the core principles that universities must embody: 'equity and redress, democratisation, development, quality, effectiveness and efficiency, academic freedom, institutional autonomy (and) public accountability.'

- The core purposes of universities: *production of knowledge*, *dissemination of knowledge* and cultivation of minds, and *community engagement* (service-learning).

Institutional change

- The idea that a university is a differentiated and loosely coupled structure rather than one that possesses a 'unitary character' opens the way for a more rigorous, multi-dimensional and nuanced analysis of change and for being potentially better equipped to undertake change
- Having clarity about the nature of change that is needed and must be pursued
- Needing to consider change from the perspective of the relatively permanent and strongly embedded features of a university and its more fluid, dynamic and shorter-term features; a distinction which usefully alerts us to be sensitive to continuities and discontinuities in conditions.
- Understanding change as occurring 'within the framework of possibilities and constraints' of a complex institution, and having to take 'into account the contradictions, possibilities and constraints' of existing conditions
- Understanding that change or the lack of change cannot be explained only in terms of given conditions and circumstances. Change is also 'the product of purposeful orientations developed within a field of opportunities and constraints' and of 'cognitive and political praxis.' Human agency including contestation among actors will necessarily affect the pace, nature and outcomes of institutional change.
- Steering clear of some dangers – determinism, voluntarism, 'don't rock the boat', an attempt to immediately and rapidly realize sweeping and far-reaching institutional changes
- Being vigilant that bold declarations about equity and transformation are not accompanied by only the most modest changes
- Need to navigate a deliberate, bold, and resolute, and yet sober path with continuities and discontinuities as appropriate to given and changing institutional conditions
- Need to inspire, conceptualise, manage, communicate and effectively implement change - a demanding undertaking

Paradoxes

- Necessary to recognise that a change agenda will be suffused with paradoxes, in so far as we may seek to pursue *simultaneously* a number of values and goals that may be in tension with one another.
- Need to avoid 'simplifying manoeuvres'
- Recognise that the pursuit of particular goals and strategies *simultaneously* gives rise to difficult dilemmas and unenviable choices and decisions, and could necessitate trade-offs, especially in a context of scarce financial resources.
- Paradoxes have to be creatively addressed and policies and strategies devised that can satisfy multiple imperatives, *balance* competing goals and enable the pursuit of equally desirable goals. To the extent that trade-offs are inevitable, they must be made consciously and transparently and their implications for values and goals (short-, medium- and long-term) must be confronted.

2. The 2006 imbizo and post-imbizo developments

Chart the developments since 2006 in each of the seven areas discussed at the 206 imbizo:
- Values, purposes and identity: Rhodes' vision and mission
- Shape and size of Rhodes
- Sustaining and enhancing excellence! Where leaders learn?
- Recruitment and access and support and success
- Community engagement
- Institutional environment and culture: A people-centred institution/A home for all
- Institutional planning, policy and decision-making structures and processes

3. Key Challenges

A. Transformation

- *Social equity* - becoming demographically representative of the South African population, especially at the levels of academic and senior and middle-level support staff

- *Institutional culture* – creating an enabling environment which is free from prejudice and intolerance in which difference and diversity - whether class, racial, gender, national, linguistic, religious or sexual orientation - are appreciated and all feel respected and affirmed

- Historical 'legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation,' which are threats to the flowering of ideas, discourse, discovery and scholarship, and also to academic freedom - any serious agenda of inclusion at Rhodes entails the need to substantively decolonize, deracialise, demasculanise and degender our inherited 'intellectual spaces;' means creating the space for the flowering of other epistemologies, ontologies, methodologies, issues and questions

- Applicability of slogan 'Where leaders Learn' and the motto, 'Truth, Virtue and Strength' – Do we wish to ensure that the development of graduates at Rhodes is simultaneously an exercise in the cultivation of humanity?

- Strong *laissez faire* culture at Rhodes, which equates a laissez faire approach with safeguarding academic freedom and organisational autonomy - an aversion also to *any* real democratic and peer accountability?

- An Institutional Development Plan (IDP) which collates, consolidates and expresses our choices, decisions and goals and strategies with respect to academic programmes, enrolments, staffing, infrastructure and finances over the next decade (two five-year terms) - a compass that guides developments, prioritisation, decision-making and implementation at Rhodes while leaving room for pursuing new imperatives and exploiting possible new opportunities.

- An effective institutional research capability, for rigorously monitoring, reviewing and analysing a whole range of issues, especially of a critical academic nature. Also a limited institutional capability to effectively analyse our changing social context and to monitor, evaluate and interpret dynamics, trajectories and trends that have implications for institutional development.

B. *Modernisation*

- Challenge of *modernisation* starkly evident in certain areas of institutional life, which are characterised by the lack of systems, documented protocols and effective and efficient procedures, the lack of innovation, the lack of proactive engagement and responsiveness, and inflexibility - means inadequate information to effectively inform policies and decisions, to effectively monitor critical areas and issues, inefficiencies and waste of time and resources, an amateurish approach to issues and the absence of nimble support services; give rise to unnecessary bottlenecks and frustration for academics and staff more generally.

- *Modernisation* is long overdue in a number of areas

4. Other challenges

- ### *Enrolment Planning*

✓ Whatever our agreed enrolment targets, either we adhere to targets – and these could give rise to difficult dilemmas and choices - or we set higher (and more realistic?) targets in order to not unnecessarily lose teaching inputs subsidy.

- ### *Academic Planning*

Our key challenges include:
✓ Maintaining our status of possessing the best undergraduate pass rates and graduations rates among South African universities

- ✓ Ensuring that we provide effective support to all our students, and especially black South African students who are from historically disadvantaged public schools
- ✓ The need to give attention to the appropriate balance between face-to-face teaching-learning and other forms of teaching-learning that harness the potential of new information and communication technologies
- ✓ Finalisation, informed by the recent review, of an appropriate model for providing extended studies programmes for students that do not meet our usual entrance requirements but display talent and potential
- ✓ Identifying potential new postgraduate and research niche areas and programmes, and ensuring that there is effective planning, fund-raising and implementation
- ✓ Providing further support to the Humanities, Law and Commerce faculties to enable them to increase their contributions to postgraduate and research outputs
- ✓ Developing appropriate institutional arrangements to enhance the quantity, the quality, the academic and social experience and the equity profile of our postgraduates, and especially South African postgraduates
- ✓ Continuing to pursue further chairs in proven or potential new areas of academic excellence.

- ▪ ***Staff planning***

Key challenges here include:
- ✓ Improving the equity profile of academic and senior and middle-level support staff
- ✓ Retaining black staff through attending to certain aspects of institutional culture
- ✓ Continuing to build the next generation of academics, especially black and women academics
- ✓ Improving teacher: student ratios overall and in specific areas
- ✓ Reconsidering academic staff norms in the context of a trajectory of becoming more postgraduate and research-oriented
- ✓ Effectively supporting new academics
- ✓ Effectively supporting new staff recruits in settling into Rhodes and in Grahamstown
- ✓ Systematically moving to remunerate all staff on the 50th percentile
- ✓ Finalising a remuneration policy.

- ▪ ***Infrastructure planning***

- ✓ Timeous decision-making on infrastructure priorities is vital for informing Rhodes' applications for DoHET Infrastructure and Efficiency funding, and to direct the fundraising efforts of the Development Office. An infrastructure priority list will necessarily be matter of debate and even contestation.

- ▪ ***Finance planning***

- ✓ It should be possible to calculate public subsidies with a measure of certainty and to also project tuition fee income and other income, as well as expenditure, with some certainty, and on this basis to develop three-year budgets.

- ***Overall institutional development planning***

✓ For various reasons, developing and finalising an IDP has proved arduous. The IDP has to be informed by and also underpinned by Faculty- and Division-level plans. There has to be a specification of the institutional arrangements, concrete strategies, funding and time frames for the realisation of goals. Informed by the IDP, the Campus Development Plan needs to be also finalised as a guide to the considered overall physical development and maintenance of the Rhodes University campus.

✓ A Green Fund which supports the University to institute environmentally-friendly short-, medium- and long-term measures, and initiatives and activities, through which all the constituencies and stakeholders of Rhodes can contribute to the Green Fund, will hopefully receive enthusiastic and widespread support.

- ***Institutional planning and implementation***

Various shortcomings which have adverse implications for the achievement of goals related to knowledge production and the production of high quality graduates, for inclusive participation, and for effectiveness and efficiency:

✓ Non- or non-timeous or inadequate engagement or/and responses on the part of structures and Offices with critical issues which compromises inclusive processes of policy- and decision-making, delays decision-making and implementation with various negative consequences
✓ The inordinately lengthy time period for ideas to become concept documents and full proposals, with the result that there are possible missed opportunities
✓ Tardy and/or *ineffectual implementation* of programmes, projects and initiatives despite available funding. Where funding has been made available by donors, the consequences are possible reputational damage among donors, delays in potential further funding from donors, and compromising of particular goals and strategies
✓ Insufficient attention to the *planning of implementation*, evidenced in inadequate clear specification of roles and responsibilities, lack of adherence to time frames and the like
✓ The absence of or ineffectual *monitoring of implementation*

Conclusion

In 2008 we made what I consider to be a very important public declaration. I like to think that our acknowledgement of shameful actions and public apology in 2008 both freed us to and expressed our commitment to remake and renew Rhodes as a small but outstanding African university. The declaration also signalled a commitment to an institutional culture in which honest and bold critique is an accepted concomitant of institutional loyalty.

We committed ourselves to resolutely pursue knowledge, understanding, critique and reason; to steadfastly continue to promote human dignity, equality, non-sexism and non-racialism, critical citizenship and all the human rights and freedoms that our Constitution

proclaimed, and to courageously and boldly to protect and assert the core values and purposes of a university, including advancing the public good, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability.

It seems to me these public pledges usefully frame and illuminate our tasks and should guide all our actions.