

**WELCOME ADDRESS TO THE ASESMENT EVENT:
CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ASSESSMENT**

11 September 2006

The chairperson, conference participants, speakers, distinguished guests, colleagues: good morning, molweni

A very warm welcome to Rhodes University, to Rhini/Grahamstown, to the Makana District, and to the Eastern Cape.

And to our special guests from Scotland, welcome also to South Africa. We are grateful to you for making the time and effort to be with us and to share with us your knowledge and experience.

As Rhodes University, and specifically the Academic Development Centre, we are honoured to host this event. We trust that you will find us convivial and hospitable hosts.

I am delighted at the number participants and papers that this conversation has attracted and I am especially pleased with the number of papers that are to be presented by Rhodes academics.

I welcome this event for a number of reasons.

First, it serves as a catalyst for developing among our universities a critical reflexivity with respect to learning and teaching which continues, even in the so-called research universities, to be the major function of universities.

Second, it is an important signal of the growing openness of an increasing number of academics to critically interrogate teaching and learning, including the curriculum, learning and teaching methodologies and techniques, and assessment.

Third, it contributes to scholarship on teaching and learning, which has the potential to enhance the quality of the educational experience of both students and academics.

The university should, to use Gordon Graham's words, be an 'institution of intellectual values', which includes a search for truth, the practice of critique, a willingness to embrace new ideas, knowledge and practices, and an openness to engage with new intellectual, educational and social challenges.

Regrettably, there is often a gap between what a university and what it should be. Too often, instead of being pioneers in the production and dissemination of knowledge, we stagnate, giving credence to Ralf Dahrendorf's charge that we are in danger of becoming 'expensive and ineffectual monuments to a *status quo* which is more likely to be a *status quo ante*, yesterday's world preserved in aspic' (2000:106-7).

Instead of being imaginative and innovative, we trade in dangerous platitudes – that such and such way is 'tried and tested'; and 'if it ain't broken, don't fix it' - never pausing to think or ask:

- Whether it has indeed been 'tested' with adequate rigour

- Whether the ‘tried and tested’ is still appropriate in the light of the changing social composition of students at our universities
- Are we absolutely certain that ‘it ain’t broken’
- What could a prevailing attitude that ‘it ain’t broken’ imply for innovation and improvement, and most critically
- From whose perspective ain’t it broken.

Turning to assessment there are, of course, important ontological, epistemological, methodological and contextual issues involved in assessment. It would not be unfair to say that many academics are blithely unaware that this is so.

And yet, to the extent that we indeed wish to have as our bedrock intellectual values, are committed to becoming more self-conscious, more critically reflexive, and developing a more innovative praxis, it is vital that we grapple with how these issues condition assessment, and that we address the important questions of *why* we assess; *what* we assess; *how* we assess; *when* we assess, and *who* assesses.

In participating in the Accreditation Committee of the Council on Higher Education Higher Education Quality Committee, I was sometimes struck by the claims that were made by academics regarding programmes submitted for accreditation. Let me exemplify the claims through a hypothetical Masters in Higher Education Policy.

We would be assured that the graduates of such a Masters in Higher Education Policy would have a comprehensive knowledge of philosophical, sociological and historical aspects of higher education, including South African higher education; would have exposure to key

debates and developments in the provision, governance and financing of higher education; would be able to analyse, integrate and synthesize; write lucidly and generate policy reports, perhaps even journal articles and chapters in books; communicate with a range of actors, including Minister's of Education, senior government officials, officials of national agencies, and senior university officials; and be of valuable service to a range of higher education institutions and organisations.

The curriculum and learning and teaching methods, and the qualifications and expertise and experience of the academics would perhaps display some congruence with the goal of producing such graduates. The assessment methods and techniques, however, would make it patently clear that there was as much chance of the programme producing the graduate attributes it claimed as, forgive me, the prospect of any radical or black intellectual or scholar becoming a vice chancellor of Rhodes University prior to 1994.

I am confident that much learning and insights will emanate from this conversation. The challenge is to find ways of imaginatively, boldly and strategically infusing these into teaching and learning.

I wish you well in your conversation, trust this will be a stimulating and productive knowledge sharing occasion, and hope that you will have an enjoyable stay in the lovely environment offered by Rhodes and in Rhini/Grahamstown.

Thank you.

Before I hand over to the chairperson, I should mention that I have a strong affinity for Scotland, having had the privilege of being there some 4/5 times, though each visit was, alas, much too short.

In honour of our special Scottish guests, and in case they are at all feeling a little homesick, we have a special welcome for them, which we hope they and you will enjoy.