

VC'S SUMMING UP OF RHODES UNIVERSITY 2006 IMBIZO

**23 JULY 2006
MPEKWENI SUN HOTEL**

THE IMBIZO

Purposes and Participants

- Was an initiative to bring together 60 people who are a cross-section of the Rhodes University community
- The 60 persons were chosen as appropriate to the purposes and aims of the Imbizo
- These purposes were three-fold:
 - ⇒ To provide a forum for a critical intellectual conversation on both the core values, purposes, goals and strategic directions of Rhodes University, and also the efficacy of the policies, instruments and processes for their realisation
 - ⇒ To serve as a forum for agenda-setting – identifying of critical issues and challenges, and the initiatives that could be required to address these and progressively realize the university's vision, mission, goals and strategic directions in the short-, medium- and long-term
 - ⇒ To provide me an opportunity to hear the views of various constituencies on a range of key issues that should be the common concerns of all members of Rhodes and should advance the *general* interest of the *whole* Rhodes community
- The imbizo was *not* a substantive policy- or decision-making event (and therefore also not a bosberaad!)
- The 60 persons did not attend the Imbizo as delegates or in any strict representative capacity, though they certainly were expected to bring to bear on the Imbizo issues as viewed from the different vantage points of individuals and constituencies, and from different locations and positions within Rhodes
- Finally, the 60 persons were chosen with sensitivity to a wide range of institutional, academic and social issues.

Themes

- The Imbizo addressed eight themes:
 - ⇒ The critical issues and challenges facing higher education in the second decade of democracy
 - ⇒ Values, purposes and identity: Rhodes' vision and mission

- ⇒ The 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

Process post Imbizo

- All the presentations as well as a document on the discussions at the Imbizo will be placed on the intranet
- Members of the Rhodes community are invited to read and comment on them as well as raise issues that may not have been addressed
- The critical issues that were raised will be synthesized and will feed into different fora and committees so that there can be deliberations on how to proceed and address these issues

Some comments on the Imbizo discussions

- It is not possible to here do justice to the rich, open and critical conversations at the Imbizo. I will therefore make a few general comments and some comments on the specific themes that were discussed
- To begin with the general comments:
 - ⇒ First, a health critical reflexivity was very much in evidence as is befitting a university.
 - What do we mean by an ‘African identity’?
 - What do we mean when we say that we are committed to ‘sound moral values’?
 - Do our practices, silences and omissions not reflect certain unacceptable values?
 - Are we certain that there not aspects of Rhodes that are really patriarchal and colonial?
 - Is Rhodes indeed a place ‘where leaders learn’ or can much more be done in this regard
 - Do we provide ‘epistemological access’
 - Have our committees, including Senate, not become insipid, with little real discussion on important issues
 - And so on
 - ⇒ Second, what appears to be needed are:
 - *Proactive shaping* of the future of Rhodes University

- An emphasis on self-regulation rather than accommodated compliance with external bodies
- Self-assurance rooted in an understanding that a policy of a differentiated and diverse higher education system makes ample provision for a relatively small institution like Rhodes and that there are not likely that any untenable demands will be made on Rhodes
- Greater institutional planning with respect to where Rhodes wished to be in 2011 or 2015.

⇒ Such planning would

- Clearly explicate our values, vision, and goals
 - Bring together the current enrolment planning, academic planning and physical planning in an overall and integrated institutional planning framework
 - Have intellectual values and the academic project at its heart
 - Be based on a high degree of academic self-rule, and
 - Define the function of the administrative management as ensuring that there was an optimal environment for the institutionalization of intellectual values and the realization of the academic project
 - Encompass continuities and discontinuities, conservation and dissolution
 - Ensure that there are appropriate mechanisms for aggregating, mediating and making choices and decisions with respect to goals, policies and strategies, including trade-offs
 - Ensure maximum participation of staff, and especially academics, in policy and decision-making, distinguishing between different forms of participation (consultation, advice, provision of information)
- Third, the only danger to Rhodes is complacency and a possible attitude that ‘if it ain’t broken don’t fix it’. There are three difficulties with the ‘if it ain’t broken don’t fix it’ position
- ⇒ Are we sure of its applicability to all areas of Rhodes
- ⇒ Is there no room for improvement and innovation
- ⇒ From whose perspective ain’t it broken
- Third, the only danger to Rhodes is complacency and a possible attitude that ‘if it ain’t broken don’t fix it’. There are three difficulties with the ‘if it ain’t broken don’t fix it’ position

- To turn to some specific comments related to the themes under discussion:

- **Context**

- ⇒ Universities experience multiple and competing demands and expectations from a range of actors – the state, business and civil society
- ⇒ Universities are also confronted by paradoxes and intractable tensions – between equity and quality, the local and the global, etc. in so far as these issues must be addressed simultaneously
- ⇒ In the face of this, we need to imaginatively and creatively mediate these demands and paradoxes
- ⇒ We need to find ways of coping with difficult social dilemmas and making difficult choices and decisions
- ⇒ Trade-offs will be entailed and we need to make these deliberatively, consciously and with full understanding of what they may mean for our values, visions and goals

- **Values, purposes and identity**

- ⇒ There was much discussion on ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’ and many of the sessions referred back to these issues as well as to the issues of values and identity
- ⇒ It is clear that we need think more deeply and clearly about ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’ – what we mean by these and to develop a shared understanding of these concepts and what practices they entail
- ⇒ We also need to create and have a sense of our worth by developing an understanding of our identity – what it means to be a ‘university’
- ⇒ If we are an ‘Institution of Intellectual Values’, what are these ‘intellectual values’ and how do we give expression to them through our vision and identity and how do we institutionalise them

- **Shape and size of Rhodes**

- ⇒ In the light of the recent enrolment planning process, and also the meeting with the Department of Education (DoE) on 18 July 2006, shape and size were naturally key issues.
- ⇒ The DoE has posed an interesting challenge: in the light of our excellent pass and graduation rates, do we not want to take on the challenge of producing more graduates? And what will Rhodes require if it were to decide to take on this challenge?
- ⇒ This is not a demand and it is clear that this is also not a challenge that will be extended to all universities, only a few.

⇒ How do we wish to respond? It seems there are 4 options

- Stay with our current plan of 2% per annum growth at undergraduate level, and at *% growth at postgraduate level
- Revise our enrolment plan to zero growth, as some appear to desire, and face in years to come a possible substantial decline in income which could take Rhodes into growing deficits
- Revise our enrolment plan to a growth rate higher than 2%, as others appear to desire, and confront the challenges that this could mean in terms of learning and teaching, maintaining current pass and graduation rates, facilities, etc.
- Revise our enrolment plan to take on the challenge posed by the DoE

We have until mid October to respond to the DoE

⇒ However, is it correct that we should concentrate principally on size? Agreed that in relation to our defined intellectual values and vision and seeking to hold constant our current pass and graduations rates we must decide on the maximum size we want to be. But currently, should our point of departure not be

- How may we innovate in teaching and learning in the current academic programmes and through this produce more graduates and contribute to addressing social and economic development challenges?
- How may we innovate in knowledge dissemination and production through *new academic programmes* and through this also contribute to addressing social and economic development challenges?

▪ Community engagement

⇒ There is increasing talk about a Rhodes initiative centred on historically disadvantaged schools

⇒ In the light of this and to avoid misunderstandings it is important to address this matter.

⇒ There is as yet no Rhodes initiative, in so far there is any commitment to any programme, or contribution of personnel or financial resources

⇒ What there is, is an expression of a desire on my part for Rhodes, for various good reasons, to embrace the challenge of

- Working with historically disadvantaged secondary schools so that they can help realize the right of individuals to an education that nurtures their talents and fulfils their potential, and through this enabling increasing numbers of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve results that enable them to access universities, including Rhodes, and through this enhance their possibilities for economic and social advancement

⇒ Currently, there are only discussions between the VC/VP/Deans and principals of all the Rhini/Grahamstown public and private secondary schools regarding working together with regard to the challenges that face historically disadvantaged secondary schools

- ⇒ The second meeting last Friday made it clear, at least to me, that we have a long way to go before we are likely to reach consensus on goals and strategies
- ⇒ Having signalled my desire for Rhodes to embrace the challenge, I am not in any hurry, especially in the light of last Friday's meeting
- ⇒ As Rhodes, we are going to have to do a lot of thinking, talking and work before we are ready to participate in any schools initiative
- ⇒ I will be looking to the Education Faculty for guidance and to do much of the thinking, talking and work, and to also be the key Rhodes actor that takes charge of any schools initiative