Signposts for building a career at Rhodes University: VC's welcome

**New Lecturer's Orientation
Rhodes University**

3 February 2009

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

The theme of *Building a Career at Rhodes University* emphasises, at least to me, the idea of constructing in a careful, considered and active way one's development and trajectory at Rhodes in the years to come. This, it seems to me, is wise counsel, especially the idea of assuming active agency in mapping one's own future.

Of course, in building your individual career's there will necessarily be an interplay between your own aspirations, goals and needs and the institutional context, be it at the level of the Academic Department, the Faculty or University as a whole.

It is to be expected that the structure and dynamics of the Department, Faculty and University will affect your development and trajectory. Hopefully, this will be in ways that are positive and facilitating. At the same time, as you build and develop your career this will hopefully impact in also positive ways on the Department, Faculty and University.

That is to say, individual career aspirations, needs and building are not in competition with the institutional development of the academic Department, Faculty and University.

Indeed, your building of your individual career's should be simultaneously an integral element of ongoing institution-building and development at all levels of the University and in key domains - the domains of:

- Knowledge dissemination through teaching and leaching
- Knowledge production though scholarship and research
- Community engagement

- Transformation of the institutional culture.

For the rest of my welcome I wish to focus on the current institutional context and conditions within which we must build and develop ourselves, play our parts and conduct ourselves.

STRUCTURE - INTERNAL CONDITIONS

- Established, well-known 105 year-old university
- Historically white university
- Motto - Vis Virtus Veritas = Strength Virtue Truth
- Slogan - 'Where Leaders Learn'
- Notion of 'liberal arts' institution
- Institutional vision - 'outstanding internationally respected'; 'affirms its African identity'; 'committed to democratic ideals, academic freedom, rigorous scholarship, and social responsibility'
- Institutional mission – produce outstanding internationally-recognised 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'
- Strong academic culture
- Sound governance and management, that aspires to be also a democratic and participatory governance and management
- Particular institutional structure – 'race', class, gender
- Predominantly white academic and administrative staff
- Strong residential system
- Particular relationship with province and municipality

CONJUNCTURE - INTERNAL CONDITIONS

- 6 faculties; about 6 400 students in 2009
- About 24% postgraduate
- Almost 23% international students from 50 countries
- Almost 50% of students in residences

- Relatively high entrance/admissions requirements
- Highest pass and undergraduate graduation rates
- Outstanding postgraduate success rates
- Best research output per capita academic staff
- Growing community engagement
- Strong commitment to high quality provision
- Generally strong institutional loyalty – staff and alumni/nae
- Numerous institutional challenges
  - ✓ Meaning of 'African identity'
  - ✓ Content of 'Liberal arts' institution
  - ✓ Pursuit of 'Where Leaders Learn'
  - ✓ Institutional research and longer-term planning
  - ✓ Academic shape and size
  - ✓ Equity and quality
  - ✓ Institutional culture
  - ✓ Student and staff equity
  - ✓ New academic infrastructure
  - ✓ Additional student residences
  - ✓ Academic staff accommodation
  - ✓ Staff remuneration
  - ✓ Scholarship and bursary funding for students
  - ✓ Schools and municipality partnerships

AGENCY

If this is the context and these are the conditions, agency on your part in shaping your career at Rhodes requires, to begin with, understanding this context and these conditions.

Yet, at the same time, this context and these conditions should not be taken as given and immutable and accepted uncritically.

Instead, to the extent that they constrain or frustrate the development of a vibrant academic culture, academic freedom, the pursuit of human rights, social equity and justice and an inclusive and embracing institutional culture that affirms and respects difference and diversity, they should become objects of change.

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, discomforting 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-leaning, 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?
✓ Idea of 'liberal arts institution' is to be conceptualised how?
✓ 'Where Leaders Learn' means what?
✓ Community engagement - iRhini/Grahamstown schools partnership and local economic and social development partnership with Makana Municipality

6. Responsiveness

- **Much emphasised goal is making HE institutions more responsive to the needs of the economy. Not disputed**

- ✓ Urgent 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 skills**

- **Must take great care that institutions and academics 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 HE institutions wider social roles**

- ✓ 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

'The 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

- **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.**

10. 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 development.

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

- Fundamentally about changing, how we *think* – about ourselves and others; about what we deem 'natural' and 'self-evident'; about what are and are not necessary conditions and dimensions of academic excellence; about curriculum, pedagogy, and learning-teaching and research; about institutional structures and processes of decision making; about management, administration and planning. about our institution and society; about our obligations and responsibilities; about our challenges, possibilities and constraints

- Need to guard against inertia, complacency and insularity, which can stifle innovation, transformation, and development

- Must subject to critical scrutiny what we consider to be 'tried and tested' ways - are they appropriate to our rapidly changing context and professed goals?

EXTERNAL CONDITIONS - STRUCTURE

GLOBAL

- Globalisation and its uneven impacts
- National economic and social divides
- Dangers of global climate change

NATIONAL

- Apartheid economic and social inheritance
- Pursuit of equity, economic growth and democracy
- Giving effect to Constitution and Bill of Rights

- Apartheid higher education (HE) inheritance
- HE transformation agenda and policy framework

LOCAL

- Underdeveloped province and district
- Economic and social divides and inequalities

EXTERNAL CONDITIONS - CONJUNCTURE

GLOBAL

- Dominance of ideology of neo-liberalism and its implications
- Consequences of unipolar hegemony of United States
- Different kinds of fundamentalism
- 'War on terror' and its implications
- 'Brain drain/gain/circulation'

- HE and GATS
- Growing marketisation and commodification of HE
- Growth of new knowledge institutions
- Growth of private higher education
- 'Managerialsim'

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**
- **Quality assurance system**
- **New funding framework**
- **Declining public subsidies bur promising new signs**

LOCAL

- **Unemployment and poverty**
- **Social and health challenges**
- **Weak provincial and local states**