Being an academic at Rhodes University: scholarly engagement

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

Rhodes University

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Introduction

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.

The theme of this year's Academic Orientation Programme is *Scholarly engagement with the roles of an academic* and I have been requested to address the topic of *'Being an academic at Rhodes University: scholarly engagement.'*

It seems to me that the topic can be regarded as an invitation to deal with three issues – one is what it means to be an academic; the second is the Rhodes University context, and the third is that of 'scholarly engagement.'

In the time available it is not possible to cover all three issues. In various sessions, the programme will deal with the issues of 'being an academic' and 'scholarly engagement' pertaining to teaching and learning, research and community engagement, as well as with Rhodes' current institutional culture, institutional transformation and other issues.

I will, therefore, confine myself to the issue of the context of Rhodes University.

Context

There are two reasons to take 'context' seriously. One reason is that, as Philip Abrams so cogently puts it, 'doing justice to the reality of history is not a matter of noting the way in which the past provides a background to the present; it is a matter of treating what people do in the present as a struggle to create a future *out* of the past, of seeing that the past is not just the womb of the present but the only raw material out of which the present can be constructed' (Abrams, 1982:8).

Another reason is that 'what we choose to do and what we have to do are shaped by the historically given possibilities among which we find ourselves.' (ibid.,:3). This means that institutions, organisations and people operate "within the framework of possibilities and constraints presented by the institutions of our complex societies" (Keane and Mier, 1989:4).

There are three 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.

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 voluntary participation in community projects undertaken thorough our Community Engagement office.

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

Of course, we exist in a historical context which conditions how we undertake their purposes and roles and how we interact with our society.

We are guided by certain **values:**

▪ The 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 which expresses the core principles that our universities must embody: equity and redress, democratisation, development, quality, effectiveness and efficiency, academic freedom, institutional autonomy (and) public accountability.

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, the needs of our society, our specific 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 national context of higher education

The second aspect of context is dynamics related to South African higher education. I will note just four.

1. Under colonialism and apartheid social, political and economic discrimination and inequalities of a class, race, gender, institutional and spatial nature profoundly shaped South African higher education, establishing patterns of systemic inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation of particular institutions, social classes and groups. The result, as evinced by various conditions and data, was that there was the relative exclusion and subordinate inclusion of black and women South Africans in higher education.

2. Apartheid ideology and planning resulted in higher education institutions that were reserved for different 'race' groups and also allocated different ideological, economic and social functions in relation to the reproduction of the apartheid and capitalist social order.

Despite opposition at various times and in different forms from some historically white institutions and the historically black institutions, both are products of apartheid planning and were functionally differentiated to serve the development and reproduction of the apartheid order.

All institutions faced the challenge of being liberated from such a past to enable them to meet new societal goals. Planning must take cognisance of the institutional inequities and the distortions of the past, but it is vital to look to the future. A key challenge for all the public institutions is to become recognised as *South African* institutions, to be embraced as such, transformed as necessary and put to work for and on behalf of all South Africans.

3. Intellectual discourse, teaching and learning, curriculum and texts, and knowledge production and research were strongly affected by the racist, patriarchal and authoritarian apartheid social order and the socio-economic and political priorities of the apartheid separate development programme. Post-1994, higher education was called upon to address and respond to the development needs of a democratic South Africa, which have been formulated by the new state in various ways.

The 1994 *Reconstruction and Development Programme* spoke of "meeting basic needs of people"; "developing our human resources"[1]; "building the economy" and "democratising the state and society". Despite some economic and social gains, South Africa remains a highly unequal society in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities and living conditions.

In this context we can speak about the four-fold development challenge that confronts South Africa: how do we pursue **economic development**, with **social equity**, and do so in a way that is **environmentally sustainable** and also recognises the need to extend, deepen and consolidate **democracy** in our societies? And crucially, how do we do all of this simultaneously and not consecutively or sequentially?

4. Finally, institutional change in higher education has occurred in an epoch of globalisation and in a conjuncture of the dominance of the ideology of neo-liberalism.

Not surprisingly, "the logic of the market has…defined the purposes of universities largely in terms of their role in economic development" (Berdahl, 2008:48). Public investment in higher education comes to be largely justified in terms of economic growth alone and preparing students for the labour market.

The notions of higher education as just another tradable service and a private good that primarily benefits students has influenced public financing, which in turn has impacted on the structure and nature of higher education. As public universities have sought out 'third stream income' to supplement resources, this has often resulted in, as Nayyar writes, "at one end, the commercialization of universities (which) means

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[1] 'Human resources' and 'human capital' are peculiar ways of speaking about *people,* but not surprising given the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology and modernisation and human capital theories.

business in education. At the other end, the entry of private players in higher education means education as business" (2008:9).

Under neo-liberalism universities are in danger of becoming "just supermarkets for a variety of public and private goods that are currently in demand, and whose value is defined by their perceived aggregate financial value" (Boulton and Lucas, 2008:17). Yet, as a recent monograph notes, "to define the university enterprise by these specific outputs, and to fund it only through metrics that measure them, is to misunderstand the nature of the enterprise and its potential to deliver social benefit" (ibid., 2008:17).

The Rhodes institutional context

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

A third aspect of context is our institutional structure. This is as follows and will provide not just a snapshot but also a sense of dynamics and trajectory.

- We are a well-established, well-known 108 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 our future intentions, these are as follows:
- 6 faculties – Humanities, Science, Commerce, Pharmacy, Law and Education
- 7 645 students in 2013 – about 29% (2 273) postgraduate students
- 20% international students from about 45 countries, meaning that 80% of Rhodes' students are South African

- 57% are Black and 40% are Black South African; 65% of the new intake is black students
- 59% of our students are women –will discuss the desirability of this continuing
- We seek to become more postgraduate and research-oriented in coming years without compromising the quality of undergraduate education. We are well-positioned for such a trajectory: we take research seriously and strive to provide our academics with effective support; have the third best research output per capita staff member; we have the second highest percentage of staff with PhDs (56%), and we have very good postgraduate graduation rates and the best rates at PhD level.
- What we will be next year and in the coming years is the subject of our new enrolment planning (in 2019 could have a new first year student intake of 1 672; 5926 undergraduate students, and 2777 postgraduate students, giving us a postgraduate proportion of 32%
- Despite being the smallest university in South Africa, and comprising only 0.8% of South Africa's university students and 1.9% of all full-time academic staff, we possess 7% of all prestigious research chairs that are available to universities as part of the South African Research Chairs initiative (SARChI).

  A key criterion for the award of a SARChI chair is that the host university must provide a scholarly environment in which the chair and scholarship can flourish – without doubt Rhodes is such an environment. Our SARCHi chairs are in: Medicinal Chemistry and Nanotechnology (Prof Tebello Nyokong); Marine Ecosystems (Prof Christopher McQuaid); Mathematics Education (Prof Marc Schafer); Numeracy (Prof Mellony Graven); Radio Astronomy (Prof Oleg Smirnov); Intellectualisation of African Languages, Multilingualism and Education (Prof Russell Kaschula); 'Insects in Sustainable Agricultural Ecosystems (Prof *; Interdisciplinary Science in Land and Natural Resource Use for Sustainable Livelihoods (Prof Charlie Shackleton); Marine Natural Products Research, and 'Critical Studies in Sexualities and Reproduction: Human and Social Dynamics.' We will announce appointments to the latter two chairs in due course.
- Relatively high entrance/admissions requirements – 40 points
- Extended studies programme to ensure access and success for working class and rural poor students with potential
- Strong commitment to high quality teaching and learning – among the best pass and undergraduate graduation rates among South African universities
- Growing community engagement
- Generally strong institutional loyalty – staff and alumni/nae
- Almost 1 in 2 of our students live in 50 comfortable residences; almost 65% of undergraduate students, and almost all first-years are in residence; associated with 12 dining halls in which over 10 000 meals are served daily
- Over 1 400 staff, including over 350 academic staff
- 140 hectares of land and 220 buildings

  During the past 5 years we have built a spectacular new library; built a new environmental education building; built seven new residences and undertaken numerous renovations and refurbishments to create new academic space and improve facilities and residences.

  We have also added substantial ICT capacity in terms of bandwidth and speed.

Currently, we are constructing a new building for teacher education and building another new undergraduate residence
In the next two years we will:

- Build a new Life Sciences building at a cost of at a minimum cost R101 million; a new School of Language building at a cost of at a minimum cost of R31 million; make improvements in Pharmacy facilities and equipment to the value of R24 million; continue to refurbish our residences, and will spend R3 million to make the campus friendlier to people with special needs.
- 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:

Key Challenges

A. *Transformation*

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. We expressed our commitment to remake and renew Rhodes as a small but outstanding African university

- *Social equity* - becoming demographically representative of the South African population, especially at the levels of academic and senior and middle-level support staff and students, including ensuring access and opportunity for students of working class and rural poor social origins

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

- *Institutional culture* – creating an enabling environment and developing a new institutional culture which is free from prejudice and intolerance in which there is 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 social 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). It includes 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

B. *Modernisation*

- *Modernisation* is long overdue in a number of areas and this is starkly evident in certain areas of institutional life.

C. *Institutional Development Plan*

- An Institutional Development Plan (IDP) is long overdue. Such an IDP will collate, 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.

More specifically, our challenges 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'
- How do we ensure that the development of graduates at Rhodes is simultaneously an exercise in the cultivation of humanity
- 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
- 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.
- 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 partnerships with local schools and municipality - you will observe, eighteen 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.

In a nutshell, this is the context of 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 and become.