



RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn

‘Where leaders learn’: towards the greater realization of the Rhodes University vision

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Introduction

The Rhodes University slogan is '*Where Leaders Learn*'. This slogan wonderfully and pithily encapsulates a compelling vision that deserves to be pursued to the best ability of a University that has a proud tradition of academic excellence, and is determined to be a great African university at the forefront of the production and dissemination of knowledge and high quality graduates that make a powerful contribution to the economic and social development challenges of South Africa and the African continent.

Yet, there is little clarity of thinking regarding the slogan. This much has become clear enough during the past months of my tenure as Vice Chancellor, when I have engaged with diverse constituencies and individuals on their conceptual understandings of the slogan and also their views on its practical implications.

In its quest to be an outstanding undergraduate university and excellent postgraduate institution, that is also simultaneously distinctive, the slogan '*Where Leaders Learn*' holds great promise as animating *leitmotif* of Rhodes. It would, therefore, be unfortunate if the slogan was to become trite, another stock in trade supposedly self-evident wisdom of the University.

To unlock the great promise of the slogan a conceptual critique of contemporary understandings of the slogan is necessary, as is an explication of the slogan in a way that allows it to guide and shape concrete practices.

Mixed (and dubious) understandings

One interpretation has been that the slogan captures the nature of the students to whom Rhodes University either provides access or to whom it seeks to limit access. At work here is the notion that the requirement of a minimum of 35 Swedish points to enter Rhodes, and possessing these points, is of itself a definition of a 'leader'. Leaders learn at Rhodes because the University only selects the 'cream of the crop', who by virtue of their secondary school results, are already leaders. Such an understanding is tautological, begs many questions and is of dubious value.

Another interpretation has been that the slogan seeks to point to the graduates of Rhodes who have gone on to occupy positions of leadership, achieve fame, accumulate wealth, and exercise influence in the polity, economy and society. Certainly, this is true of some, perhaps even many Rhodes graduates. However, there is nothing unique in this regard about Rhodes. The universities of Cape Town, Stellenbosch and Witwatersrand to name just a few, and increasingly historically black universities like Western Cape and Fort Hare, can all also point to the successes of their graduates in many walks of life. The truth is (as was noted at the recent Imbizo) that not all Rhodes students are outstanding, and some also display values and attitudes (as the work of Louise Vincent and some recent incidents demonstrate) that are disturbing, if not alarming. A reference, therefore, to the example of Rhodes graduates is not wholly persuasive and also does not mark out Rhodes as distinctive.

A further interpretation has been that Rhodes University provides its students with a wide variety of opportunities to acquire leadership skills and practice leadership. In this regard, reference is made to the opportunities to participate in the governance and management

structures of the University, to be sub-wardens in the residences, tutors in academic programmes, run an independent Student Representative Council, head numerous clubs and societies, and so forth. In addition, it is argued, that favourable teacher: student ratios mean that there is considerably more contact between students and academics and this permits leadership traits to be diffused to students. Yet, the reality is that much of this is also true of other universities, and again Rhodes is not unique in this regard. The smallness of the university may make Rhodes distinctive, but is this in itself a sufficient condition of it being an institution ‘where leaders learn’?

Of course, it could be argued that being an institution ‘where leaders learn’ does not require Rhodes to be distinctive from other universities in any or all regards. This is true – yet it is distinctive in ways that are not fully appreciated and harnessed, especially in terms of imaginatively giving effect to realizing Rhodes University as an institution ‘where leaders (indeed) learn’.

Moving forward

How do we move forward?

First, and foremost, we must explicate the meanings we wish to confer on ‘leaders’ and, by association, ‘leadership’.

Second, on the basis of the meanings we give to these concepts, we must define what it would be valuable for our students to ‘learn’ in terms of knowledge, competencies, skills, values, and attitudes while they are at Rhodes, and why.

Third, we must address how we can develop the qualities that we consider to be characteristic of ‘leaders’ and ‘leadership’.

Finally, we must, in the context of the academics, expertise, infrastructure and financial resources that are available to us, or can be mobilised, design and implement a programme that can substantively realize the vision of Rhodes University being an institution ‘*Where Leader Learn*’.

It has been argued that for Rhodes University to be an institution ‘where leaders learn’ it does not have to be distinctive from other universities in any or all regards. Nonetheless it is, distinctive in many respects, and it makes eminent sense to harness this distinctiveness in the cause of being an institution ‘where leaders learn’. This is important in the context of national policy which is committed to a higher education that is comprised of differentiated and diverse institutions.

1. Rhodes is a small university of 6 000 students with an annual intake of only some 1 300 undergraduate students.
2. Rhodes has the best undergraduate pass rates in South Africa, the best graduation rates, excellent postgraduate success, and the best research output per academic.
3. Students enjoy the flexibility to construct their undergraduate degrees in ways and to extents that are not available to students at other universities.
4. The teacher: student ratio overall is about the best in the country and very favourable in all faculties and disciplines relative to other South African universities

5. Some 25% of our students, the highest proportion of any South African university, are from the rest of Africa and other parts of the world. They enrich our educational and cultural life and enable us to contribute to developing the intellectual and professional cadres of the African renaissance.
6. Almost 50% of our students, and most first-year students, live on campus in relatively safe and secure residences, supported by wardens, many of whom are academics, and sub-wardens. The rest of our students live within a few km radius of the university.
7. We have committed academics, many of whom excel in teaching and are dedicated to developing a critical student intellect, understanding of the context and challenges of our South African and African contexts, and values that are congruent with our constitutional democracy.
8. We have increasing numbers of academics from the rest of Africa, which is a source of vitality. They enhance the quality of our academic programmes, challenge us to think more critically about our curricula, connect us to knowledge and expertise networks on the rest of the continent, and help us to overcome our decades of isolation from the rest of Africa.
9. We have a developing culture of student volunteerism that is very ably harnessed by a dedicated community engagement office.
10. The small town of some 70 000 (?) in which Rhodes is located is a fertile environment for developing awareness and understanding of economic and social challenges and leadership. Grahamstown is a veritable microcosm of the social and economic structure of South Africa and Africa, of the historical past and its legacies, of contemporary conditions and their challenges, and of the challenges of underdevelopment and development, locally, nationally, and globally.

Many of the above features make Rhodes University distinctive from other South African universities. Yet, Rhodes has the potential to harness these features to become distinctive from other universities in one further and especially significant respect, a possibility that is closed to other universities because of their much larger sizes overall, their much larger proportion of oppidani students who are also scattered over greater distances from the university, and especially their significantly larger first year undergraduate intakes.

This is a commitment to the pursuit of a ‘liberal education’. The Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca, with whom the concept of a ‘liberal education’ is associated, considered ‘liberal education’ to be one that ‘liberates the students mind, encourages him or her to take charge of his or her own thinking, leading the Socratic examined life and becoming a reflective critic of traditional practices’ (Nussbaum, 2006:4).

A liberal education, Martha Nussbaum argues, is intimately connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, and to the cultivation of humanity. ‘Three capacities, above all, are essential to the cultivation of humanity’ she suggests (ibid, 2006:5).

‘First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions – for living what, following Socrates, we may call the “examined life”....Training this capacity requires 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).

The ‘cultivation of humanity’, according to Nussbaum, also requires students to see themselves ‘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).

Third, it is, however, more than ‘factual knowledge’ that is required. Also necessary is ‘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).

In short, what Nussbaum is pointing to is the ‘cultivation of sympathy’. As Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet and educator put it: ‘We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy’ (cited by Nussbaum, 2006:7).

In the context of the challenges of the South Africa, Africa and world that we live in the immense value of the liberal education described should be obvious. Pursued with imagination and connected to the idea ‘Where Leaders Learn’, it can help us to produce leaders of the kind that our country and continent cry out for, and personify the dictum of the Jewish sage Hillel: ‘If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?’

One way to proceed is to give serious consideration to developing a teaching-learning module that new undergraduate students take in the first year, which provides an introduction to thinking philosophically, historically, sociologically, scientifically and ethically; and introduces students to important philosophical, historical, sociological, legal/constitutional, natural scientific and environmental, development and ethical issues in contemporary South Africa and Africa.

Such a module should be taught by the most outstanding and passionate scholars from across the university’s disciplines and departments/institutes, be accompanied by select especially developed texts, and by complementary innovative multi-media materials that can extend and deepen learning on the part of students. It should include a leadership component geared towards developing leadership attributes and skills, for which purposes the residences can be put to good use and students could also spend time off-campus at a local game/nature reserve.

Such a curriculum initiative would help give substance to Rhodes’ commitment to providing a formative education, and to producing ‘balanced and adaptable’ graduates, and ‘to develop shared values that embrace basic human and civil rights’.

Of course, such a curriculum initiative, while academically exciting and with the potential of generating great rewarding in terms of the kinds of graduates that are produced, will require both intellectual leadership as well as financial investment. Funds will be required to enable an academic and support team to be put to work on rigorously conceptualising and designing a curriculum, producing high quality texts and complementary multi-media materials, devising a leadership component, and planning the effective implementation of the module.

It can be anticipated that there may be immediate objections that such a module would be ‘impossible’ to accommodate given the existing infrastructure of lecture theatres and seminar rooms, the current pressures on the timetable, the demands that would be made on academics, ‘resistance’ on the part of student’s, ‘where will the money come from’, and so forth. None of these are denied or unimportant considerations. All these would need to be duly considered. Nonetheless, to begin with it is the idea or its possible variants and its value that must occupy centre stage rather than objections that are of a technical or resource nature.