

Welcome address at the Southern Africa-Nordic Centre Conference

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INTRODUCTION

The Chairperson of the South African–Nordic Centre Council, Prof. Sigmund Gronmo, SANORD Board members, the SANORD Director and other SANORD officials, fellow Vice-Chancellor's of Nordic and Southern African universities, the SANORD Conference committee under the leadership of Prof. Anne Bang, keynote speakers, , presenters and participants, distinguished guests, molweni, good evening

It is a great privilege to host the second SANORD Conference and a great pleasure to also welcome you all to Rhodes University, to the town of iRhini/Grahamstown, to the Eastern Cape and, in the case of colleagues from Northern Europe, to South Africa.

I thank the SANORD Council and Board for choosing Rhodes as the venue and for the privilege of hosting this second SANORD conference. I also thank you all for travelling long distances to grace us with your participation.

For transport, logistics and costs reasons, compared to universities in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, Rhodes academics and students have to work hard to attract and host national and especially international conferences. That we do so with considerable success, I believe, is testimony to the quality of our scholars and students, the recognition that the University enjoys nationally and internationally and the special ambience of our University and town.

Indeed, as a University we take pride in having among the best pass and graduation rates and research output per academic staff member. We take especial pride that although we are the smallest university in South Africa, proportionally our students consistently win more prestigious national and international scholarships than any other university.

Some like to say that our successes have to do with the fact that there is very little to do in our small town. Hardly! We like to think that it primarily has to do with the fact that as Rhodes

University we take knowledge and scholarship very seriously and work hard to create a vibrant and critical institutional culture that values knowledge, scholarship and open debate.

Over the next few days we will participate in an intellectual feast of an exciting and impressive range of presentations and sessions on the important theme of *Inclusion and Exclusion in Higher Education*.

In bidding to host the second SANORD conference, we motivated theme of *Inclusion and Exclusion in Higher Education*. There are three principal reasons for our choice of theme and for this to be discussed at Rhodes University in iRhini/Grahamstown, in Africa.

Firstly, despite the proclaimed virtues of globalization and greater contact across regions, nations, cultures, religions and languages, during recent decades there has been an all too evident closing of minds and hearts and discarding of important human values.

The negation of core human values – respect for human dignity, difference and diversity, human rights and the oneness of humanity – have promoted destructive fundamentalisms of various kinds, social exclusion, intolerance and prejudice, and have made the world a much less just, safe and secure place.

The closing of the mind has been evident in the economic and social thought that has prevailed during the past thirty years. Wisdom derived from vigorous intellectual debate, knowledge, and understanding has been disdained. Instead of the idea of the public good and ethical leadership, self-serving ideas based on arrogant power and narrow economic interests have triumphed.

The result has been dubious and pernicious economic and social orthodoxies and policies that have slowly matured into the grave financial and economic crisis which envelopes the world today.

Instead of, as Amartya Sen has put it, viewing 'development as human freedom', as 'a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy', human development has come to be largely reduced to 'growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance' (Sen, 1999:3).

Under the sway of the new economic and social orthodoxies a culture of greed, crass materialism and unbridled individualism has taken root, its mantra 'grab what you can and damn the rest'.

Instead of a concern with people, inclusion, equity and social justice, in the new gilded age the unadulterated pursuit of power, self-interest, material wealth, profits, and performance bonuses have come to be the new gods.

What powerful economic and social groups have sown during the past two decades, without any effective restraint and regulation, the whole world now reaps.

Nonetheless, the current crisis and its harsh, indeed brutal, effects on millions of people, provides the opportunity for a bold new imagination that is freed from the stifling and dangerous orthodoxies and policies of the past decades.

It creates the space for new ideas, and for the recovery and promotion of important values related to human development, social justice, solidarity, freedom and internationalism.

It provides the opportunity to think about and to act to construct a different kind of world and different kind of citizenship, 'a world where markets are servants, not masters'. It creates the space for leadership of a different kind from that which has tended to prevail during recent decades.

The extent to which this happens depends on whether, as intellectuals and scholars, as universities and graduates, and as citizens and government's we take on the responsibility of boldly re-thinking and re-making our world and our societies on the basis of other principles, coordinates and logics than the ones that have been oppressively dominant in recent decades.

This new logic has to first and foremost put human development, people's needs, inclusion, justice and human rights at the centre of all our actions.

It must appreciate, respect, and affirm difference and diversity related to race, gender, sexual orientation, language and culture and grasp these as well-springs of intellectual and social vitality and strength.

It must embrace the idea that we have inherited the earth in safe-keeping for future generations and must abandon the reckless degradation of our environment and natural resources in the name of 'progress' and 'development'.

The orthodoxies of the last two decades have been especially harmful to how we think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about education and knowledge.

The new logic must revalue knowledge and education as cornerstones of human development and restore to universities their important and diverse social purposes, instead of seeking to reduce them to instruments of business and the economy.

If a rampant neo-liberalism, now in crisis, has cared little about social inclusion and justice and exacerbated social exclusion, this is an opportune moment to return to issues of social inclusion and justice and the policies that must underpin them.

Secondly, higher education holds the promise of contributing to social justice, development and democratic citizenship. Yet, this promise often remains unrealised and instead universities

frequently continue to be a powerful mechanism of social exclusion and injustice, through both their own internal thinking, structures, cultures and practices and their external conditioning by the wider society.

This regime of social exclusion extends well beyond issues of access and admissions to universities. It includes the questions of the opportunities for intellectual, social and citizenship development and for success. It extends to the issues of institutional and academic cultures, and largely ignored epistemological and ontological issues associated with learning and teaching, curriculum development and pedagogical practice. It further extends to the very ideas and conceptions of the purposes and roles of universities.

This university is an ideal location for discussion of questions of inclusion and exclusion. It has been observed that “the tradition of dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living”. 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.

Its public acknowledgement last year of shameful past actions under colonialism and apartheid and its apology has set it on a path to a different future. Yet, as welcome are the facts that today some 56% of the study body is black, 59% is women and 21% is international students from 50 countries, the changed and welcome new demographics do not exhaust the challenges of inclusion.

There remain the challenges of ensuring access and opportunity for students of working class and rural poor social origins; of a new institutional culture of genuine respect for and appreciation of difference and diversity – whether class, racial, gender, national, linguistic, religious or sexual orientation in nature.

As fundamentally, there are also challenges that arise from our historical “legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation”. These are threats to the flowering of ideas, discourse, discovery and scholarship, and also to academic freedom (du Toit ,2000).

Any serious agenda of 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.

Finally, this town, iRhini/Grahamstown, around whose very name there is ongoing and bitter contestation, is a good location for considering the theme of inclusion and exclusion. The man after whom this town is named, Colonel Graham, was an officer but no gentle man. He introduced particularly barbaric methods to dispossess the original inhabitants of this area of their land and to secure it for the British Empire.

The economic and social structure of this town, like hundreds across Africa, has been profoundly shaped by the historical processes of development and under-development, and the associated patterns of inclusion and privilege and exclusion and disadvantage.

As you will observe, fifteen years into democracy, the legacies of colonialism and apartheid remain stark, and there is a considerable distance to be travelled, as in many parts of Africa, before the historically disadvantaged and socially marginalized inhabitants of this town to be assured of the human, economic and social rights that our Constitution proclaims.

It seems to me that if we are serious about inclusion and social justice in higher education, we have to interrogate the relationship between wider social structures and conditions and

exclusion and inclusion. We have to also refuse 'to accept the logic of inequality and the repression that it involves', and have to continue through our scholarship to 'search for human agency, for the means through which inequality can be undone' (Hammani, 2006:32).

Drawing on social theory and appropriate methodologies, I believe that it is our intellectual task, as universities and scholars, to investigate, through a sensitive, critical, dispassionate and rigorous, yet unquestionably moral scholarship, the mutual interpenetration of past and present, social structure and conjuncture, events and processes, and human action and agency.

Our concern must be to lay bare the processes and mechanisms of social reproduction and transformation - the hidden structures and the conditions that both institutionalise exclusion and frustrate inclusion and social justice, but also make possible the triumph of justice.

I trust that you will enjoy a stimulating and productive conference in the lovely and friendly environment of our campus and town, and that through vigorous and critical discussion we will emerge with greater knowledge, insights and understanding on issues of exclusion and inclusion in higher education, as well as possible strategies that can advance inclusion and social justice.

I also wish you a most enjoyable stay at Rhodes and in iRhini/Grahamstown, confident that you will find your Rhodes colleagues friendly and hospitable hosts.

It gives me great pleasure to now call on Prof. Sigmund Gronmo, Rector of the University of Bergen and Chairperson of the SANORD Council to welcome you.