

# Transformation Summit

## Teaching & Learning Group

### Recommendations

---

#### Introduction

The Teaching & Learning (T&L) sub-committee is made up of people from various faculties who are interested in Teaching and Learning. Our committee was set up in response to Noluxolo Nhlapo's call for "an inclusively planned, and ... a coherent implementation of an institutional plan for transformation" in *A Brief Case for a Consultative Transformation Summit*. Our aim was to facilitate transformation conversations with as broad a group as possible, addressing 9 themes, and with a variety of entry points. This document describes the process and events, and synthesizes the recommendations that are emerging from the numerous conversations that were inspired by them. As part of the preparation for the Summit, the document was submitted to the Teaching and Learning committee for their engagement, and a number of concerns were incorporated into the document..

#### Process

The T&L committee was co-ordinated by Corinne Knowles, with participation from other committee members (Shabnam Shaik, Jen Snowball, Sisonke Mawonga, Sanele Ntshingana, Thina Maqubela, Anathi Mbalula, Yusuf Motara, Kate Matookane). The committee organized several discussion-based events on the themes outlined in the Transformation Summit document (Table 1 lists the discussion topics and the dates on which they were held). Each lunch-time/evening discussion group was attended by about 30 people, who were mostly a mix of academic staff and a smaller group of students. Support staff, especially at the lower grades, did not attend. The final discussion was held in the evening and was attended by about 60 people, more than half of whom were students.

The committee saw its role initially as organizing, assisted by the Institutional Cultural office at RU, and inviting as wide a variety of speakers as possible to share their ideas and experiences, deliberately focusing on those who may not have had previous opportunities to speak publicly (see Table 1). A variety of media were used in the discussions, such as videos, photographs and pictures, and PowerPoint slides, and drew on opinions, experiences and research done specifically for this theme. In this initial stage, the committee saw their role mostly as facilitators, who drew out the diverse recommendations from the discussions. In the second phase, the committee themselves discussed the recommendations, added their own, and tried to shape the discussions into actual recommendations for action.

**Table 1**

Date	Theme	Chair	Panel members
16 March 1-2pm	Income & Financial Management; Sustainability	Anathi Mbalula	Geoff Erasmus Karen Ellery Sally Matthews Jen Snowball Tracey Chambers
20 March 1-2pm	Visual Culture & Rituals; Institutional Identity	Sisonke Mawonga	Sikhumbuzo Makandula Chris Morris Adv Shuaib Rahim
23 March 1-2pm	Staff	Shabnam Shaik	Dee Mahoto Minesh Dass
27 March 1-2pm	Governance	Corinne Knowles	[Facebook conversation]
2 May 6:30- 8pm	Students; Curriculum	Sanele Ntshingana	Jo-Anne Vorster Jen Snowball Nwahara Nnamdi

Each seminar was widely advertised via posters, a dedicated Facebook page, and through faculty mailing lists. Each discussion was recorded and made available on the Facebook page.

This short report contains a summary of some of the recommendations as a result of this process.

## **Transformation context**

A discussion point in many of the meetings was the importance of defining what "transformation" in the T&L context is, and how to frame some understandings so that we can judge if a curriculum is transformed (or not), and how one could go about it. It is important to include all university constituencies in the discussion. "Curriculum" is understood broadly, including WHAT is taught (content) and well as HOW it is taught/ facilitated and rewarded. Some ideas of what a transformed curriculum would include are that:

- It is adaptive to the changing socio-demographics of the student body, in that it takes into account the multiple ways students learn (transformed pedagogy);
- It can be radical (whole curriculum overhaul), or incremental (smaller changes over time);

- It uses majority of sources from the global south, where possible, rather than the global north;
- It takes into account our African context as a developing country in designing the course (which includes content, assessment and applications and examples);
- It recognises the importance of multilingualism in T&L, and that the language used in lectures is aimed at including those who might struggle with English as a medium;
- It is connected to the lived experience of students, and offers opportunities for application to bridge the gap between students' lived experience and what they encounter in the classroom.

As part of the process of T&L transformation, this understanding of what transformation in the T&L context is (added to and adapted as needed) could be incorporated in, for example, Departmental course reviews, course evaluations, and Teaching Portfolio assessment criteria.

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

**Problem.** Students come from a range of backgrounds and lecturers are often left to guess as to what the issue might be with a student - is it language, or unfamiliarity with the fundamental concepts, or unfamiliarity with the problem domain, or unfamiliarity with the subject, or an age-related issue, or something else? By the time that an issue is firmly pinpointed, it may be too late to help a particular student; the rest of the class could be weeks ahead.

**Theme(s).** Students.

**Recommendation(s).** Provide all lecturers with socio-demographics of their classes (this is already available on the PROTEA system). For each class, provide at least the following items for class members: home language groups, age, matric subject profiles, matric mark, residential situation (residence name or off-campus).

### Recommendation 2

**Problem.** In practice, lecturers face no consequences if they fail to take student feedback seriously. In small or close-knit departments, maintaining collegiality may be prized above remediating poor teaching (where poor teaching is potentially the reason for high failure rate).

**Theme(s).** Students; Curriculum; Governance; Staff.

**Recommendation(s).**

1. Ensure that aggregated course feedback is seen at the level of the Dean, outside of the department, and implement monitoring to verify that changes are being made. Courses with high failure rates must be examined in terms of curriculum re-design and additional support required. Departments are required to report on course changes, their impact, and the relevant student data for two years after the

last problematic throughput rate. Departments, and failing that, Faculties, should be empowered to send in observers to better understand the reasons behind a high failure rate, and reports and recommendations of observers should be carefully considered and, unless there is good reason to not do so, implemented.

2. Where an intervention (as in (1)) has been made, a further recommendation is that written discussion documents and evaluations are to be submitted to the relevant Dean every three years after the monitoring period ends, where lecturers/departments comment on failure rates, as well as the support that is needed and provided.
3. Staff are to account, departmentally, on results of feedback, and a process must be instituted by CHERTL that alerts academics to the need to demonstrate responsiveness to student feedback. Within a limited time frame (for example 3 years), responsiveness to student feedback will become a more important part of the assessment criteria for Teaching Portfolios submitted for promotion.

**Comment.** The issue here is not one of *lecturers*, but of *course modules*. The intent of this recommendation is not to victimize or single out particular lecturers, but rather to improve teaching in response to student feedback.

### **Recommendation 3**

**Problem.** Students are increasingly unfamiliar with the use of books and reading material as their primary way of obtaining information. While it is agreed that students must *become* familiar with this mode of learning, it is unrealistic to expect the transition to occur immediately upon entering university. Furthermore, many students enter the university with a poorer grasp on English than students in decades past and, while they will improve, they may not improve quickly enough to pass their first year.

**Theme(s).** Students; Curriculum.

#### **Recommendation(s).**

1. The IT department is to take an annual survey of technology (including devices and software) being used for teaching purposes. This information is to be uploaded to the Rhodes website and made available to lecturers, especially at the first-year level, who can then use the suggested technologies to broaden participation. Broadening participation may include, for example, multiple languages in their courses using new technologies like videos and podcasts. IT is to report to the Academic Technologies Roundtable on whether this has been done, and to report to the university community via official channels when the information is updated.
2. Look into the possibility of translation services in relevant departments for the first year; see, for example, the translation services available at North-West University.
3. All lecturers to be reminded by HoDs of the kinds of language they use, and that are found in readings that are set in first year. Efforts must be made to use as inclusive/accessible language as possible, especially in first year, but not excluding other years.

4. Provide tri-lingual dictionaries (English, isiXhosa, Afrikaans – Eastern Province languages) in exam venues.

## **Recommendation 4**

**Problem.** The financial sustainability of the University and its teaching programme depends, in part, on the research subsidy that the University receives. To sustain that teaching programme, it is important for it to contribute to the research of the University.

**Theme(s).** Sustainability.

### **Recommendation(s).**

1. Make lecturers aware of the opportunities of publishing in the field of T&L as a way of sharing best practice and contributing to financial sustainability through research. Each department to table all papers written annually, including written reasons from members of the department who have not written a paper.
2. ALL staff (not just new staff) encouraged to complete PGDHE, and/or establishment of faculty T&L committees (Science and Commerce already have them), which would encourage a more critical analysis of T&L
3. Recognizing that some of the recommendations have financial implications, we call for an open, detailed budget workshop by February 2018, where budget decisions can be defended, and where new contributions can be considered. We call for ongoing engagement and negotiations based on this for a more sustainable budget.
4. Re-evaluate the policy of slow undergraduate growth rates at RU: we are good at undergrad and have spare capacity in some courses. Smaller undergrad classes are, in some subjects, resulting in smaller postgraduate numbers. Annually, each department to table the financial implications of undergrad/postgrad numbers, to serve before Faculty. Currently, despite the focus on research, including M and PhD research, 75% of the University's income comes from teaching.

## **Recommendation 5**

**Problem.** Incoming and outgoing students and staff don't necessarily appreciate the historical context of the University, which is necessary for understanding the University as it is presently constructed. They may, consequently, jump to extreme conclusions.

**Theme(s).** Visual culture & rituals; Institutional identity.

### **Recommendation(s).**

1. Problematise visual culture with colonial roots not by removing it, but by providing information on background and meaning. This can be done by using well-placed signs to explain the historical context of buildings, artworks, etc. Students should be

encouraged to form their own opinions, based on the facts, about the culture, traditions, and visual representations of Rhodes University.

2. Reform O-week activities to include the history of RU as a way of sensitizing students to the colonial past of the institution and the meaning and significance of the campus, and their place in it.
3. Rethink graduation. Allow different graduation regalia, consistent with the decorum of the occasion and the Eastern Province context. For example, a student may choose to add African cultural symbols to the graduation regalia. Students have been encouraged to graduate wearing traditional cultural dress, and this should be continued.

## **Recommendation 6**

**Problem.** Staff, especially new staff, sometimes face many obstacles to change in their departments. Many staff (and students) have reported that their experiences are dismissed as “anecdotal”. This creates an unnecessary barrier to radical change and reinforces an unsustainable status quo. The barrier is not necessary because existing staff and structures should be able to argue against a proposed change based on solid reasoning around the benefits and disadvantages of the proposed change itself, and not have to rely on the argument that the current system is “good enough”.

**Theme(s).** Staff.

### **Recommendation(s).**

1. N-gap or accelerated development staff progress reports should be acknowledged and, if needed, problems (such as the reporting of racist or sexist incidents) should be investigated and discussed. This must be the responsibility of the Research Office or VC's Office.
2. A wider representation on Senate, including N-gap lecturers, should be considered. Pleasing progress has been shown in this regard.

## **Recommendation 7**

**Problem.** Despite changes that Rhodes has made, the underlying system at the University is perceived as preferring a “white” or “colonial” cultural heritage over more local Eastern Cape and African cultures. This has led to the charge of Rhodes being unresponsive in the context of a changing South Africa. The culture of the University greatly influences the culture and values of the students that it produces, and it is therefore important for Rhodes to accent, re-think, and/or replace existing cultural norms as necessary.

**Theme(s).** Institutional identity.

### **Recommendation(s).**

1. In university ceremonies, like graduation, translate traditional songs and other text into isiXhosa and other EC languages. This has already been done to some extent.
2. The "home for all" slogan, among others, is inappropriate and unrealistic. It is clear that everyone at Rhodes does not feel at home, and it is not clear that any students *should* feel at home: an academic environment that prizes constructive engagement with difficult ideas is quite different from most homes. The current slogan enforces a group identity and causes students to feel that they are not "real" Rhodes students if they do not feel at home. This has also been independently picked up by the Sexual Violence Task Team (see Recommendation 68 of *"We Will Not Be Silenced": A three-pronged justice approach to sexual offences and rape culture at Rhodes University/UCKAR*), albeit in a different context.
3. Those who feel at home in the dominant institutional culture could be made to feel uncomfortable with some of their assumptions and attitudes. One way to achieve this would be to make cultural sensitivity training mandatory for RU staff, based on consultations between the Equity and Institutional Culture office, and all faculties.
4. Give alumni more of an opportunity to comment on what was useful for them in T&L experiences – especially those who belong to industry related groups such as the Black Lawyers Association/ Black Business Forum etc. The Alumni department is to assist with this, and reports can be tabled at faculty or departmental level as appropriate.
5. As a condition for graduation, every final-year undergraduate must submit 1 page of feedback on their learning experiences in each of their majors. The feedback should highlight what worked and what did not work in their learning experience at Rhodes. The data should be seen at the departmental and faculty level, and departments should be required to utilize such feedback for curriculum design going forward; there is an opportunity for integrating such feedback with the process described in Recommendation 2, points 1 through 3.

**Comment.** These recommendations attempt to be concrete, and therefore necessarily address symptoms instead of causes. It would therefore be easy to make the necessary "window-dressing" changes that are not accompanied by any sustainable or worthwhile underlying change. An example is such window-dressing is the change of "bosberaad" into "strategy session" into "imbizo", with little practical difference to be seen. We caution against this approach. Instead, it is important to reevaluate existing practices and norms — both cultural and academic — in the light of South African and, more specifically, Eastern Cape cultural practices and norms. As an example, traditional South African cultures tend to value group work and group dynamics above competition and conflict; yet much of the assessment at Rhodes creates competitive divisions in a class and encourages students to keep their knowledge to themselves. Is a reevaluation in order?

## **Recommendation 8**

**Problem.** Students report a divide between what is taught in the classroom versus lived experiences. As a consequence, they feel that what is taught is sometimes irrelevant to them,

and they have greater difficulty learning it. Part of curriculum transformation needs to attempt to close this gap by using more content from the global south, but also through encouraging application of theory to real-world examples that speak to the context of student's lived experiences.

**Theme(s).** Curriculum.

**Recommendation(s).**

1. In designing/redesigning curricula, encourage and provide support for a more democratic model, where the ideas and life experiences of students can be included. Ways to do this include:
  - a. Including students in discussion groups around course redesign where possible, or how to include student created content (for example, 3rd year students to provide input to 1st year courses). This approach is particularly applicable in the humanities.
  - b. Revise or impose a theme on practical work to reflect the context of the Eastern Cape and/or South Africa and/or Africa. This approach is particularly applicable in the sciences.
2. Service learning provides an opportunity for both curriculum transformation and the use of a transformative pedagogy, which is important for both personal and university transformation. It was recommended that service learning should be highlighted as an important way into transformation. A challenge is how to make it available at undergrad level in a cost-effective way. Each department should nominate a service learning representative who would be tasked with researching and implementing service learning in at least one course per department.
3. Modules which are relevant in a specifically South African context, in addition to stating learning outcomes, should state how the course is useful in a South African or decolonised context (Why take this course? or Why is this course important?).
4. Encourage departments to consider a wider variety of assessment types, while still making sure that they are valid and reliable. This has already begun in some departments where, for example, student assessment includes podcasts, blogs, journals etc., with less emphasis on one final exam. CHERTL should support this process through workshops, individual advice (which is already offered) and further encouragement for those already making assessment innovations to share best practice.

## **Recommendation 9**

**Problem.** Students at Rhodes have reported going hungry due to a lack of resources. This, in turn, has a negative effect on their studies.

**Theme(s).** Students; Sustainability.

**Recommendation(s).** The University must provide a lunch time meal at a dining hall for these students. Students may be required to undergo a means test to qualify for this. "Budgetary constraints" are not a sufficient reason to not implement this

recommendation, unless *every other non-essential activity* at the University has already been removed from the budget.

## **Recommendation 10**

**Problem.** Rhodes often laments that it cannot find the necessary staff to fill certain academic posts. Staff comments indicate that part of the issue is that, without the social and financial infrastructure that supports historically advantaged applicants, new black staff members struggle to make ends meet and cannot justify applying to Rhodes.

**Theme(s).** Sustainability; Staff.

### **Recommendation(s).**

1. Rental accommodation should be provided for staff, suitable for a single staff member or a staff member with a partner. This should not be "transit" housing, where staff are encouraged to "move on" and find their own accommodation after a few months; in addition, it should be located on or close to the University campus. The accommodation should be furnished with similar basic items that a self-catering chalet room (or off-campus student accommodation) of a similar size might have - small refrigerator, kettle, bed, stove, chair, desk, etc. As an example, an apartment in an apartment building would be acceptable as accommodation.
2. Staff should be assigned to a dining hall and be able to book meals at that dining hall, including breakfast, lunch, and supper. Rhodes should consider carefully the possibility of covering at least the mid-day meal.

**Comment.** The goal of these recommendations is to remove *most* of the day-to-day worries that a new staff member might have: specifically, *where do I sleep?* and *where do I eat?*. It should be recognized that a historically advantaged person would typically have the necessary social and financial capital to remove these worries, whereas a historically disadvantaged person would not.

## **Recommendation 11**

**Problem.** It is clear from the research report that the University, though it produces a great deal of research *per capita*, is reliant on the presence of "superstar" researchers to achieve this: most staff do not produce any subsidy-earning research in a given year. Staff have reported wanting to spend more time teaching instead of doing research, claiming that it is a more satisfying path for them. This focus may be what has resulted in some of the best throughput rates in the South African higher education system.

**Theme(s).** Staff.

**Recommendation(s).** Provide a viable career path for three kinds of academics: teacher, teacher/researcher, and researcher. At present, only the teacher/researcher has a viable career path towards the professoriate at Rhodes, and the researcher tends to be valued more

than the teacher. A viable career path would make it possible for a teacher to carry a much greater teaching load and achieve a professorship in comparable time to a teacher/researcher. Researchers, by contrast, would be responsible for generating much more subsidy-earning research. A teacher/researcher would follow the “traditional” career path.

**Comment.** It is traditional to view the academic as being teacher, researcher, and administrator. However, many academics simply do not wish to pursue all three goals, and it is unrealistic — and likely unsustainable — for Rhodes to insist on a particular conception of “academic”, simply because that is the traditional construction of an academic. Indeed, the research reports over a number of years have tacitly acknowledged that some staff simply do not do research, and the Research Division at the University has spent considerable time attempting to “fix” such staff members by means of incentives, education, and so forth. However, do otherwise-productive staff members really need to be “fixed”? By acknowledging, respecting, and encouraging the strengths and desires of each staff member, Rhodes stands to gain a great deal from the specialization of its staff.