**Graduation talk: Rhodes 2019**

Ian Scott

The Chancellor, Justice Lex Mpati

The Vice-Chancellor, Dr Sizwe Mabizela

The Chairperson and members of the Rhodes University Council

Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Dr Chrissie Boughey and Dr Peter Clayton

The Public Orator, Distinguished Prof Paul Maylam

Deans, academic and support staff, and students

Distinguished guests, ladies, and gentlemen

And, especially, the graduands and their families and guardians

I am truly honoured to be here. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my gratitude for this wonderful award to the Rhodes Council, to the University as a whole, and in particular to my nominator, Professor Boughey, the Orator, Professor Maylam, the Communications Division, the organisers who have so considerately made all the arrangements for my wife, Pam Lloyd, and me, and the individual academics who I know will have put a great deal of care and time into the honorary degree process.

My only complaint is that I’ve found absolutely no space to park the rather large water-tanker that I was told to drive up here from Cape Town.

If I may, I would like first to make some brief remarks about what this award means to me and my colleagues in my field.

The award is a major highlight of my working life and the greatest honour I could have imagined. It has special significance for me because of the nature of my field of work – that is, Academic Development (AD) or Higher Education Development as it’s now often known. The fundamental goal of AD is to find ways in which the higher education sector as a whole, and all individual universities, can enable talented students to succeed irrespective of their educational background. So AD is concerned with two matters that are important in South Africa: social justice through equity of opportunity, and enabling higher education to meet our society’s real needs for advanced knowledge and skills, which are crucial for economic and all other forms of development.

However, AD as a field of research and development is relatively new and is not well understood in many parts of the academic community. Moreover, educational development work is usually best undertaken in partnerships with academic departments or higher-level university bodies, so AD work often has a backroom role. A consequence of this is that the knowledge and expertise of AD specialists are often not readily visible or given due recognition.

Chancellor, this is a counter-productive situation in higher education wherever it occurs but particularly in South Africa because of our debilitating education-related inequalities. Firstly, it is a manifestation of the subordination of the educational mission of universities to their research mission. Especially in today’s world, can the production of knowledge be more important than the sharing of knowledge? The significance of all the graduands here today, and their future contributions to society, say that that is not the case. Why do we still have to argue about the relative value of teaching and research when both are equally essential for our progress and wellbeing?

Secondly, at the heart of AD work are two key intellectual questions: “How does our species learn?” and “How, in practice, can learning be successfully facilitated across the divides of natal conditions such as ‘race’ and gender and social conditions such as socio-economic circumstances?” I would argue that these questions rank among the most challenging and critical faced by the contemporary world. AD work is integrally linked to this area of knowledge, and is central to its application in higher education.

The special significance I attach to this award comes from the situation I’ve outlined here, and is twofold. Firstly, it is a wonderful and uplifting boost to my personal confidence and sense of fulfilment. Secondly, it recognises AD as a valid area of research and development in its own right. If I am not mistaken about this, the award is a powerful encouragement for all who are already in AD or are attracted to our field. As befits a university with such a strong higher education unit as CHERTL, in deciding to make this award Rhodes will have helped to extend the recognition of AD across the country.

I would like now to give full attention to all the graduands here, who are at the heart of this celebration.

I must confess that my first visits to Rhodes had nothing to do with normal studying. My visits began when I was an undergraduate at UCT – a bit younger than you are now – when the world, especially South Africa, was a very different place. My reason for coming here was that what Rhodes was then most famous for (at least for us students) was partying. I came here in 1966 to investigate if the fame was justified, and I was not disappointed. So I came again and again to continue my research. I think the social scientists would call it participant observation.

Although I have visited Rhodes many times since my student days, I haven’t continued that original research project – until now. I wanted to wrap up the project at this end of my career, so I made inquiries about student life here and now, in this new millennial world. I was hugely impressed to be told that you don’t do partying anymore! I hear that Rhodes students at all levels take their studying and social obligations much too seriously to allow for such frivolous things. I’m sad about my project but extremely glad to know that the world is passing into such responsible hands. Congratulations to you all.

I also know now, from my more recent research, how important you and your future roles in society are. It is sad but true that only about one in seven of our youth ever get into a university, and a much smaller proportion into a university as successful as this one. Even more sadly, only about half of all entrants ever graduate. So you here today fall easily within the top-achieving 5% of your age-group.

This creates a need and above all an opportunity for you to make special contributions to our world with your knowledge, expertise and integrity. So a question that I hope you will ask yourselves, especially at key stages of your lives like this one, is “Given my own particular talents and circumstances, what can I do to make a difference?” It’s an old question but it is one that should never go out of fashion.

Especially as the world is changing so fast, what can I say that may be of use to you in what you choose to do? Since the central purpose of my field is to make a difference, I think the best I can do is to pick out some lessons that I’ve learnt in the course of my work and that I think apply to all kinds of efforts to improve a bit of the world. I’d like to offer three of these to you for what they are worth.

*Things are often not as they seem*

Making a real difference almost always involves resolving a persistent problem – whether it’s something in our daily work or something on a huge scale, such as the way poverty blocks people from fulfilling their potential. The trouble is that persistent problems, of whatever size, are usually very difficult to pin down. That’s why they persist. And if a problem is not clearly identified and defined, efforts to resolve it will be misdirected and will not succeed.

I hope the following account of a true story will illustrate this point. A while ago, a powerful philanthropist, visiting a small Latin American country, was shocked to discover that a very high proportion of the primary-school children could not read. It became evident that the children were unhealthy, listless and unengaged in their learning. A major investigation revealed that almost all of them had worms. This condition sapped their energy, concentration and ability to learn. Convinced that the cause of the baffling reading problem had been identified, the philanthropist organised a comprehensive de-worming programme across all the schools. The children’s health improved dramatically, and this success inspired rollouts of the programme in other countries.

But it turned out that the children were still not learning to read. This terrible disappointment forced a return to the drawing-board. Almost by chance, the focus shifted to the reading materials that the children had to use. While these little books had years before been considered to be a good benchmark and by then were never questioned, they turned out to be seriously inappropriate for the age-groups concerned and actually to be a barrier to reading development – quite the opposite of the purpose they had been assumed to be serving. The key cause of the problem had been hiding in plain sight.

This does not mean that the de-worming efforts were not valuable in themselves, but rather that the fundamental solution to the reading problem lay in providing a teaching-and-learning approach and materials that were fit for their purpose. If this had been uncovered earlier, the children could have been healthier *and* able to read.

What this case and many others show is that an aspect of a situation may be so embedded in standard practice, so taken-for-granted, that it is virtually invisible. So it is not recognised as what it is: a critical variable that may well be a major part of the real underlying problem. The lesson I have learnt, then, is always to challenge what is taken for granted, to be highly sceptical of “obvious” or “common-sense” responses, to dig underneath apparent solutions, and to keep digging until the true roots are exposed.

If you ever feel the need to write a message to yourself on your bathroom mirror, I suggest: “Beware of false certainties” – they have bedevilled human thinking from the beginning.

*Distinguishing between means and ends*

A similar lesson for those trying to make a difference is to beware of confusion between means and ends. In other words, it is essential to be crystal-clear about the ultimate goal you are aiming to achieve, and about understanding the difference between this and the sub-goals that must be met in order to achieve the ultimate one, the end goal.

May I take an example from my own field. At times in the evolution of AD, there were fierce debates about what form AD work should take, for example: learning support like extra tutorials; curricular innovation; psychological support; material support like bursaries or residence accommodation; or professional development of academic staff in their role as teachers. The arguments were ideological and bitter, and drove people into silos, undermined inter-institutional co-operation, and turned out to be both futile and counter-productive. This is because they missed a simple key point: that the end goal of all education is high-quality student learning, and all the activities we’d clashed about were subsidiary – they were means for achieving the end. None of them in itself would achieve the end goal; doing that is dependent on an effective educational process as a whole.

This is not to say that the individual means don’t matter – they are necessary conditions for success. But their value and priority must be determined in accordance with their contribution to meeting the end goal. They must not be reified as ends in themselves, as this leads to the real end goal being obscured and never met.

In my view, this same issue is prevailing in South African higher education today, in the debate on decolonisation of curricula. It’s folly to comment on so complex a matter in a sentence or two, but I see the same mistake being made. Decoloniality has become an important concept in curriculum development, and decolonisation of curricula that leads to greater inclusiveness and expansion of consciousness has a key role in education. However, any assumption that decolonisation of the content of curricula will in itself make higher learning less complex and thus more accessible would in my view be a major mistake. The obstacles to student success that are perpetuating under-achievement and inequalities in South African higher education extend well beyond content. *How* the educational process is structured and carried out will remain as critical to successful learning as *what* is learned. Improving one without the other will not meet the end goal.

So if you’d like to vary or add to the messages on your bathroom mirror, this would be a good one: “Know your end goal”.

*Change and improvement*

My first two lessons have concerned the importance of precision in identifying your goals and the problems that have to be tackled to achieve them. This last one concerns the spirit in which I believe you need to work in order to make a difference.

In my time, I’ve come across many people who are intent on bringing about change, and I’ve reached the conclusion that they fall into two groups: those who are seeking improvement and those who want change for the sake of change.

Why would anyone be interested in change for its own sake? It’s because change in itself can be impressive, and sometimes being impressive is seen as important for personal advancement. How many times do we hear of a new leader – whether a CEO or a junior manager, or even a university leader – “stamping their authority” on their new domain, and then, not long after, moving on to a higher position? (The implications of power and coercion are well captured in the metaphor.) Improvement of some kind may result, but that was not the point of the exercise. Making a positive difference usually needs to be strongly intentional.

So my last suggestion for your bathroom mirror is: “Change is not an end in itself. It must improve the world.”

*Blood, sweat and exhilaration*

I leave you with this caveat and hope. Working for positive change almost always involves long periods of hard effort, determination, “legwork”, and engagement in very unglamorous tasks. But conditions in South Africa, where so much is still fluid and embryonic, make it possible for people in all walks of life to make a worthwhile difference. I can bear witness that being involved in such efforts is truly exhilarating.

I wish you well in your lives.

*IRS: April 2019*