



Transformation Summit Report

Community Discussion Group

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Context

Since 2015, Rhodes University has deliberately set out to re-position itself in its geographical context. Specifically, whereas it earlier viewed itself as merely being situated in Grahamstown, it now regards itself as also being of Grahamstown and for Grahamstown. This inclination and commitment has taken practical effect over the past couple of years. Specifically, reference should be made to the constitution of the Assumption Development Centre (in partnership with the Assumption Sisters) and the launch of the Vice-Chancellor’s Initiative to Revitalise Public Schooling in Grahamstown.

In the light of this re-positioning, it is appropriate for the Rhodes Transformation Summit to be informed by input from key stakeholder groupings in the Grahamstown community.

Introduction

The Community Discussion group is made up of two staff members from the Community Engagement Division (Diana Hornby & Thobani Mesani), a staff member from the Human Resources Division (Sue Robertson), an academic from the Law Faculty (Jonathan Campbell), an academic from the Pharmacy Faculty (Nosi Ngqwala) and a project leader from a Community Partner Organisation, GADRA (Ashley Westaway). The mandate of the group was

to facilitate discussions around transformation at Rhodes with community stakeholders. The identified stakeholders were Student Volunteer Leaders, School Leadership, Civil Society Community Partners, Parents and Grahamstown Businesses.

The Community Discussion group scheduled one consultation session with each of these groups during May/ June 2017. It should be noted that whereas the Community Engagement (RUCE) Office has ongoing contact with most of the aforementioned groupings, the consultation sessions were of a 'once-off' nature. So whereas the other summit discussion groups went through a sustained process of discussion and deliberation, the Community Discussion group had a different mandate and function. Its primary role is to ensure that a range of community voices are recorded and heard.

The following are summaries of each dialogue held with the identified stakeholders. At the end of each summary, the main issue that emerged is highlighted.

Stakeholder Dialogue Summaries

Student Volunteer Leaders

Student volunteers interact with the broader community regularly through different volunteer initiatives facilitated by the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) Office. Student leaders within the volunteerism structure were invited to a dialogue where they share their views on the Rhodes University's transformation agenda.

On the issue of language, the discussion was centred around how institutions of learning should be inclusive of African languages in terms of how courses/ subjects are offered. The example given was as Afrikaans is taught in institutions like Stellenbosch, so should Xhosa classes be available in an Eastern Cape institution.

Students also noted a big divide between Rhodes University and the rest of the Grahamstown community. They mentioned that the only prevalent mode of community involvement is through the Community Engagement office. They believe that faculties and departments need to start incorporating community engagement in their curriculum through service learning and other initiatives. It was felt that the focus of engagement should not only be targeted to Grahamstown East but also Grahamstown West as this will foster better integration.

Students stressed that the university's culture also needs to change. Black students, especially those from township schools, often find themselves 'having to wear a mask' and assimilate a culture that is unfamiliar to them. If they do not assimilate they become invisible or feel alienated. A culture that celebrates and recognises diversity, not only on paper but also in practice, needs to be adapted.

Key dialogue Issue:

The student leaders contrasted assimilation and integration. They would like to see Rhodes develop into an institution where diversity is valued and one characterised by genuine integration. At present, students are expected to assimilate into the dominant institutional culture and practices.

Grahamstown Schools Leadership

Principals from various schools in Grahamstown were invited to have a conversation on how they think Rhodes can transform. A mix of school Principals, private, ex-Model C and those categorised to be previously disadvantaged, were present.

Themes that came up were Rhodes' interaction with schools; teaching and learning language; marketing the university; and, how the university can assist schools by influencing government policy change.

The Principals noted that Rhodes interacts with schools but the interaction is most prevalent with High Schools. They noted the different programmes that Rhodes offers to schools and learners. Programmes such as the short course on Leadership for Public School Principals, the 9/10ths Programme, Khanya Maths and Science Club. However, the Principals believe that the university could also play a meaningful role in Primary Schools. The example given was career guidance to motivate the learners so that by the time they reach High School they have an idea of which career path they are interested in.

The promotion of isiXhosa in teaching and learning was also mentioned by the Principals. They believe that the university might be missing out on future academics as English can be restricting to those who are second language speakers.

There are 700 students from Grahamstown registered at Rhodes. 250 from ex-Model C Schools, 225 private schools, 160 from GADRA and 120 from the rest of Grahamstown schools. The principals believe that these numbers could increase if the university could add a few factors in its marketing strategy. Such factors are the small size of Grahamstown, missing-middle families can benefit from this as their children can still live at home and therefore accommodation rates would be reduced compared to if their children attend universities outside Grahamstown and had to stay in Residences. Another suggestion that came up was that Rhodes could offer more sports bursaries as universities such as Stellenbosch offer these and local learners tend to be attracted by such and end up enrolling at universities outside of Grahamstown.

A number of students from Grahamstown enrol at Rhodes through the Extended Studies Unit. The school Principals suggested that Rhodes needs to look further into this. Preference to all Extended Studies programmes should be first given to academically-deserving students from Grahamstown.

Key dialogue Issue:

The Principals applauded the University for its contribution to local schooling and the local community and urged it to expand its programmes in primary schools in particular. They urged Rhodes to intensify its efforts in making the institution accessible to local youth.

Civil Society Community Partnerships

The community discussion group invited Community Partners with whom the Rhodes Community Engagement office works closely to a dialogue on transformation.

Community partners expressed that they don't feel that the university takes community development seriously, rather seeing Community Engagement as an 'add-on' to the University. It should be embedded into the curriculum. They also noted that there is very low involvement of Rhodes academic and support staff in addressing local social and economic challenges in the city.

Community partners raised their concern that Grahamstown is not seen as worthy of academic focus by the university. They pointed out that Grahamstown does have a lot of potential as an intellectual project. There are a lot of things to look at in Grahamstown without having to leave the space to go research somewhere else. They quoted the example of the VC's 'Reviving Grahamstown Schooling' initiative, arguing that for it to be sustainable, the Education Faculty needs to start doing research on the programme. An adequate body of research needs to be built up. All pillars of the university need to be represented in these initiatives to make them sustainable in the long term.

They argued that the way universities are set up is that a lot of value is placed on individual scholarship and research. The whole reward system does not facilitate the deep engagement with communities that the university needs to look for. The majority of academics at Rhodes don't do research. There is a reward for research but a lot of people get away with not having published. They asked the question of whether academic staff are contractually obliged to do research and are they contractually obliged to do community engagement. If academic staff are not contractually required to participate in community engagement then there's a problem of the third pillar/key area not being understood or taken seriously.

Production of knowledge should be linked with the importance of social justice. A greater drive to produce knowledge for the public good was seen to be important. They also asked if Rhodes' knowledge-production directly serves the people. They believe that transformation will only happen if knowledge-production genuinely serves the people.

They stressed that the debate around decolonisation and transformation of institutions of higher learning will lead to solutions that will assist in community development. Institutions are more focused on the "know what and know how". They believe that institutions of higher learning run away from these conversations.

Key dialogue Issue:

The university refers to community engagement as one of its three pillars (alongside teaching and research). Yet, this inadequately reflected in the way in which Rhodes manages its processes (e.g. staff promotions) and goes about its business (e.g. research).

Parents of Rhodes Students

Parents stressed that more needs to be done to break down communication barriers between them and the university. Those with no email access feel left out as they do not receive any communiqués from the university. Rhodes needs to also regularly send information about their children’s progress and not only send information about fees.

Parents are concerned on how Rhodes appears to be moving further away from the community. If integration is something that Rhodes wants, why is the university building residences very far away from the community? Students at UCT have residences within their communities, this helps with integration.

The view was expressed that Rhodes needs to improve their career guidance. It was felt that it needs to also start focusing on career guidance in lower grades and not focus only on the FET phase.

Parents believe that Rhodes academics do not engage with what is happening around Grahamstown. They believe there was little or no involvement by Rhodes when there were debates around the Grahamstown name-change.

Parents noted that Rhodes also benefits more from the National Arts Festival, Rhodes needs to be a catalyst in making the Arts Festival come to the township, so that township businesses can also benefit.

It was felt that learners from Grahamstown who are eligible to enrol at Rhodes need to receive bursaries from Rhodes.

Parents indicated an interest in forming a Forum where they will be able to discuss issues related to Rhodes University.

Key dialogue Issue:

Local parents called Rhodes’s commitment to Grahamstown to be sustained and enhanced. This should be reflected through measures such as effective communication, enhanced bursary support, academic engagement with local issues and adult education programmes.

Grahamstown Business Forum

Grahamstown Business forum members asserted that it is difficult to do business with Rhodes and it is difficult for local businesses to access university staff and students (for marketing purposes). There is a lot of red tape and businesses wanting to do business with Rhodes University get pushed from

pillar to post. One of the members said that he has businesses in Stellenbosch and found the university there to be more accessible and amenable to local businesses.

Members envisage a more dynamic and mutually beneficial relationship with Rhodes. There was a specific suggestion that Rhodes could establish an innovation hub, specialising in the development and actualisation of innovative technologies. In reflecting on the current state of affairs, one member said he sends water samples to Cape Town for testing because the turn-around time from Rhodes is too slow. The business concerned would prefer this work to be done locally. In this regard, it was proposed that Rhodes should consider defining a 'Business Manager' portfolio, to facilitate and strengthen communication with local business. The concept underpinning Trading Live could be expanded to facilitate broader and more sustained exchange.

The business community is very concerned about the state of Makana Municipality. It holds that there should be a closer working relationship between Rhodes and itself pertaining to municipal matters and challenges. There is currently a perception that Rhodes and the municipality are taking decisions bilaterally rather than in an inclusive, transparent manner.

Concerns were raised that Rhodes is no longer a University of choice for private school learners and students from more affluent households in general. Businesses said that this impacts the towns' economy because business relies on students contributing to the local economy. For example, if students have poor purchasing power, this puts strain on the property rental and retail sectors. With regard to the former, members took note of a more generalised decline in the property market in Grahamstown. This was attributed to poor municipal services and long standing academics leaving Grahamstown and being replaced by more junior people who have less equity to purchase homes/property.

Finally, the business community thinks that it may have a more substantial role to play in the sustainable development of the university. It pointed to apparent decline in university infrastructure and suggested that a stronger set of business skills is required in the long term. It asserted that the core business of Rhodes is the academic project and that peripheral or secondary business would be better performed by business than by academics. Rhodes may benefit from a transformed business model in this regard.

Key dialogue Issue:

Grahamstown business called for more meaningful and regular exchange and communication with Rhodes. There are opportunities for mutually-beneficial initiatives such as the establishment of an innovation hub at the university. All key sectors in the town face a common set of challenges and it is important to address these in a transparent and inclusive manner.

Conclusion – Summary of Overarching Issues

The stakeholder groups universally welcome the re-positioning of the university (in relation to Grahamstown) that is currently underway. Indeed, they urge that Rhodes's interactions with local people and institutions be deepened and extended. Specifically, the groupings recommended that:

- Community engagement should be given greater prominence at the university,

- Rhodes academics should take up local issues in a regular, sustained and substantive manner,
- The university should find ways to make its academic programmes more accessible and relevant to the local population,
- It should extend its support to local public schools, and
- It should renew and deepen its relations with all key local sectors, including business.