

Transformation Summit
Envisioning an institution transformed
Report: 28-30 July
Student Break-away discussion Group

1. Process

The student group began by outlining the rules of engagement for the breakaway group. Participants were asked to:

- a. listening to understand, find meaning and agreement
- b. search for strengths in other positions
- c. understand that all responses have a piece of knowledge
- d. not seek closure in the discussion/s

2. Check in

Participants were divided into groups of three and asked to introduce themselves to the rest of the group. The focus was on the following points:

- Who am I?
- Who do represent?
Students/educators/SRC/ council members/ were represented.
- Why am I attending the transformation summit?

3. Constellation exercise

Members of the entire break-away group were asked to voice out their response to transformation summit. Members who had common view then grouped together.

The student group was then divided into five groups of varying numbers.

Groups

- i. Modifying expectations
 - **Need to modify the expectation for the summit**
- ii. Understanding: listening to students
 - This constellation sought to listen to students to understand their experiences and views
- iii. Premature and fatigue

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This group felt the transformation was premature and only so much could be done in 3 days in comparison to the extensive history of the university. They also felt fatigued by the constant talks of change that yield no **fruit**.

iv. Confusion

This group felt confused by the transformation summit. This is because they sought clarity on the matter or were new to the varsity and were settling in or had assimilated themselves to the university and did not see the need for **transformation**.

v. Transformation- systems

This grouping felt that the focus should be on transforming the systems of the university that operate across the departments. Converging and diverging **positions**

4. The discussion provided the following points of convergence and

divergence: Convergence:

The break-away group agreed on the following issues and ideas:

- The transformation summit as premature and as a result if not carefully articulated and critiqued may recreate a similar unequal structure where a few individuals, largely intellectuals make decisions for the whole.
- The transformation summit lacked a consensus as to what it hopes to achieve.
- **No one person having a monopoly of knowledge and transformation as a national process certain groups.**
- Departments need to re-envision and examine their structures.
- There is a strong unwillingness to change in Rhodes.
- **Several students, largely black South Africans, are intimidated in classroom spaces and only ask questions after or before class.**
- A need to move beyond defensiveness and begin to acknowledge privilege.

Commented [LM1]: The conversation around this was much more complex than this. The sentiments were indeed the very idea was actually premature but it was based on a reflection that the university was not a homogenous group, that the consciousness levels of the university had not grown enough for most people to even be aware of the "need" to transform and then to climb to the next stage which was a critical conversation of kind of transformation this would be.

The lady who presented originally on gender issues, highlighted the several structures that exist within the transformation process that are strategically placed to hinder the process and instead continue with "talkshows".

Most of the comments around came from struggle experiences within the university spaces. The number of protests, the reasons behind the protests and how the university responded. The fact that one moment you can be a student, the next a student with critical thought asking important questions to only wake up in a prison cell. And how you then navigate around such a place to transform it from within.

Commented [LM2]: This was just the perspective of one person – who is a new lecturer of economics coming from the business world.

Commented [LM3]: Four members within the group here developed what sounded like a quasi-functionalist argument, they tried to ground the aspirations of transformation and link them to some type of praxis. So they viewed the various departments in the university as different organisms and they all had to take the sole responsibility of transforming their own department in the hopes that transformation would spread like cancer across the university. Positive peer pressure basically to see the whiteness in the economics department fall to only inspire change in another department etc (just as an example).

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- A need to prioritize, Rhodes has several challenges that all need attention but cannot all be resolved at once.
- A need to tap into the emancipatory potential of education for the university and the broader community.

Divergence

Members mainly disagreed on two items: Firstly, the validity of the transformation summit based on the absence of key stake holders, in particular the student body. Secondly, whilst some members felt discouraged and fatigued by these processes the large majority had a sense of hope so something better than the current lived reality.

5. Prioritising issues raised

Members were grouped into three groups and asked to select the 3 most pressing issues. Once this was done groups then combined and reached consensus that the most pressing issue are the budget and student funding.

Student funding and budgeting

Challenges

- A. Student funding limiting the access to the university for students and disabling epistemic access.
- B. External funders dictate the terms that often restrict the change needed
- C. The commercialisation of knowledge: through publications
- D. There is little or no accountability in the budgeting processes.
- E. The university not spending the little that it gets wisely.
- F. A lack of clarity on councils' priorities that inform their decision making.
- G. The absence of a strategy was worrying and presented a challenge to the university
- H. The absence of a reserve fund

Commented [LM4]: Because this was the student working group, I think its important to emphasis any of the solutions that were offered always placed the importance of student consultation. The group was clear that the SRC being used as rods of student consultation was not working at all. That real student voices had to be mined differently by the university , there was a consensus on bottom up student involvement at a departmental level and those demands, suggestions issues etc being synchronized at the faculty level and elevated further up.

Essentially this meant planning the departmental budget sided by side with departmental admin and lecturers, the curriculum.

Student involvement was the crown jewel of this particular workshop.

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- I. **NSFAS as a shameful process that places students in debt that is likened to slavery** because it gives students just enough and expect them to feel grateful.
- J. Rhodes part of a larger capitalistic system.
- K. Students leaving the university quietly without their stories being told.

Commented [LM5]: This point was around trying to concretely understand that you cannot transform Rhodes University ignoring what Capital demands from it and that transformation if its real would need to also impact structures outside the university. Meaning a sharper analysis was needed to understand the crisis within the university.

Possible solutions

- A. Involvement of students in the budgeting processes.
- B. Offering short courses, that benefit the immediate community and open up research opportunities.
- C. Incentivising academics to encourage them to publish and still maintain academic freedom.
- D. Having an internal audit prior to requesting more funds.
- E. SRC needs to redefine their role in the universities so that they are not just aligned with political parties, they instead need to focus on the students need in context.
- F. Engaging in open access publishing to combat the commercialization of knowledge.
- G. Transparency and accountability
- H. Questioning the third-stream funding and reliance on Government and finding ways to be a University that sustains itself.
- I. Calling on all stake holders to play their roles in addressing the shortage of finances.
- J. Questioning how a public university can be privately funded and still be called a public institution.

6. Check-out

Members were asked what they will take out from the TS and comment on the overall discussion.

- Members stressed how the working group was well facilitated and as a result, they were able to hear one another and build relationships that will go beyond the Transformation summit.

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- The above left the group feeling hopeful and encouraged by the wealth of knowledge the University has.
- The group hoped that the findings from the Transformation summit would be critically engaged with and then implementation would take place.

Commented [LM6]: Overall the student group identified student funding as the priority issue that needed to be dealt with, funding seemed to solve a few problems at once, the Universities financial crisis, the class financial barrier that hinders students from entering the University or completing their degrees.

Student Funding would then also challenge the status quo and assist in transforming the university through changing the basic material conditions of students lives.

This conversation engaged the various avenues to consider, starting off with what the university currently prioritizes spending its money on- hence the need for student involvement in budget planning – not budget report day. Where questions like “if the current form of the university has more students flocking to stay of campus **because it is expensive to stay on campus** then is it really good investments to keep building residences all the way up the hill

The discussion looked at third funding streams.

Potential mentorship programs to push the quality of Masters and even Honours thesis to be converted into published papers.

Living Spaces: case of the Oppidan Students

It was noted that statistically, the majority of the student body lives off campus, this is a big shift from Rhodes University being a residentially based campus. Historically Rhodes University largely housed most of its students and so institutional and infrastructure planning has always been based on this, but with times changing a large group of students ranging from first years all the way to senior Postgraduate level live off campus and by definition are Oppidan Students.

The first thing that came up was based around institutional culture, there was a culture or a loyalty identified, that Rhodes University wants to remain the smallest institution in the country and also to be a residential university. This institutional culture was identified as the fundamental basis of easily ignoring the needs of the fast pace growing Oppidan population who required institutional support.

1.) **Lack of Oppidan Student Leadership Equipment from the DSA and the University.**

The starting point would be there is no foot print of the Oppidan's in University leadership training manuals, in fact, none of the training manuals that were used for the 2017 student leadership workshops did not even mention the name Oppidan, which essentially means there is no leadership equipment for the Oppidans. All training that takes place is based on Residential scenarios, which means the Oppidan issues are never considered.

Examples:

- Fire fighters training is a reminder of the residential evacuation system, a system that realize on a stay in Warden and stay in sub-wardens and CPU that can easily be accessed. While no one could recall a single fire causing death in the residences, a Rhodes University student/s have died from fires at their places of accommodation outside campus now every year from 2011 – 2016.

This applies to the living spaces training that only relates to residential students.

2.) **The registration period at the beginning of the year, for all Oppidan Students but first years in particular.**

There is a desperate need for institutional support from the University during the registration period at the beginning of the year. While the university may not have full control over the NASFAS bursary, the number of first-year students who depend on those funds suffer the

most. Unlike with the residence based students, there seems to be a long-term plan put in place to assist the students in residences. The delay in NSAFAS payments leaves oppidans literally homeless. Without any money, it is very difficult if not impossible to get accommodation as they have deal directly with Landlords and the local estate agents

3.) **Accommodation accreditation process**

In line with the point above comes the issue of the accreditation process. It was suggested that rather a formal relationship was established with the estate agents of Grahamstown. This relationship would be based on agreed standards between owners of the property. Agreed on standards because some of the accommodation students end up getting out of desperation do not allow for productive conditions.

- Example the Grand Res has well over 120 Rhodes University students yet it does not have res net, while according to policy res net needs a minimum of 20 students to be located in the complex and it has been a massive challenge to get res net done.

The accreditation process also provides property owners some type of security in the event NSAFAS pays students late, the university can act as surety for respective students so that they are not kicked out of accommodations due to delays in funding as we saw in 2017.

4.) **The Oppidan Bus.**

The Oppidan bus is self-funded by the Oppidans with each Oppidan paying a total of R 155.00 for the whole year. This amount has not gone up for the last 3 years, yet the price of labour, fuel and maintaining the running of the bus has gone up every year. The Oppidan Bus is used by any student who leaves of campus and needs to be transported safely home, every day between 17:00 – 24:00. While completely aware of the University's financial crisis, Oppidan students in increasing numbers seem to be fighting for their lives on their way home, violent stabbings, rape cases, robberies e.t.c are generally all linked to students trying to access campus for various reasons (extra ADP classes, library, the computer labs for the assignments e.t.c). Unlike students who live on campus where a blue (safe) route is provided for them with panic buttons on every corner, a corner generally covered with Hi tech guards with the right to also call on campus unit protection to walk students from point A to B within campus. Oppidans do not have that as such there is a desperate plea for the support of a second bus to assist in transporting more students and financial support to keep the current bus going. The bus does more than transport students but is considered a safe place.

5. The Oppidan Myth

It was emphasized a few times during the meeting that the growing number of Oppidans is not based on the enjoyment of staying off campus, but most students cannot afford to make the minimum initial payment (MIP) for both tuition and resident. While staying off campus is expensive given the property mafia's in Grahamstown It is still cheaper than staying in the residences.

6. The Oppidan Meal fund

The Oppidan Meal fund requires actual institutional fund raising intellectual machinery. This fund should both be the worry of the University and that of the Oppidan committee.

Executive summary from the student working group

1. The realization of the right to protest and that the how to protest to be only defined by the constitution and not the institution.
2. The bottom up approach and student inclusivity at every level of planning and decision making, specifically going far beyond the role of the SRC
3. Gender issues to be taken seriously
4. That the student body is not homogenous at all as such the transformation process needs to be sensitive and flexible.
5. The absence of a lackadaisical approach from the DSA
6. For the SRC to remember what their purpose it and who they are representing and why.
7. The student group was equally split around the name change debate.
8. The importance of the Oppidan Hall