

What is 'transformation and what enables or constrains efforts at transforming an institution like Rhodes University?



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# 1 SUMMARY

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What first became apparent on reading the data was that academics interviewed are working with widely differing interpretations of what is meant by 'transformation. These include that transformation has to do with:

- a 'tick box exercise' in reaching numerical targets imposed by management and/or government;
- helping underprepared/underachieving black students;
- attracting black students;
- attracting and keeping black staff;
- changing the ('white') culture of the institution;
- changing symbols, names and social practices;
- a greater emphasis on community engagement/service learning;
- racism/discrimination/essentialism/reverse discrimination;
- curriculum/pedagogic change;
- changing the profile of researchers or the nature of research;
- social justice.

At first the participants' diagnoses of what enables/inhibits 'transformation' in the institution and their ability as individuals to contribute to transformation were thought of as separate sections of this report. However it soon became apparent that most enabling/inhibiting features identified by participants tended to be opposite sides of the same coin. For instance have resources or not having resources, having leadership that is or is not enabling, and so on.

Some of the enabling/inhibiting factors highlighted included:

- having or not having access to resources such as time, money, status, access to power;
- age/knowledge/experience can enable one to act but can also constrain change if it means narrow mindedness or being set in one's ways;
- leadership whether in a department or of the institution enables or constrains change;
- a person's 'race'/gender could be enabling or constraining depending on the context;
- personal/individual characteristics such as determination, one's values, outspokenness and so on either facilitate or prevent one from being an agent of change;
- having or not having a team or network of support including peers or collaborators, or a critical mass of like-minded people was identified as enabling/constraining efforts towards transformation;
- institutional structures/processes/institutional culture could be constraining or enabling for instance a culture of autonomy both constrains and enables action for change.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

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This report is based on research requested by the Director, Transformation, Equity and Institutional Culture who was in turn acting on a request from Heads of Department for a greater understanding of what can be done, at a Departmental level, to aid ‘transformation’. The request was for three Departments to be studied with a view to understanding how transformation has progressed in those Departments. The reason for these Departments having been singled out was relayed to the researchers as anecdotal evidence suggesting some positive progress with transformation in these Departments.

One of the first issues that arose was to question this idea of what it means for a particular Department to be making – or not making – positive progress towards ‘transformation’. Why were these three singled out? How would one measure ‘progress towards transformation’? What would be the criteria? As researchers these were the first questions we asked when we were requested to undertake a study of three academic departments, two in the Faculty of Humanities and one in the Faculty of Commerce. We made the suggestion that at least one department from the Faculty of Science ought to be added. We also suggested that concrete comprehensive data by department and by faculty would provide some basis other than anecdotal on which the focus on one department rather than another could be justified. Unfortunately, following an initial speedy release of a small tranche of data, further data was very slow to be released. There seemed to be some unknown process at work that made it difficult to obtain the overview by faculty and department that would have provided a sound basis at the outset for focusing the study in particular directions. In the absence of this data being made available we were requested to go ahead with the four Departments stipulated.

This set of circumstances can in some ways be seen as integral to the present report. The cooperative processes in the institution, the availability of sound data as a basis for reaching conclusions and making that data available to researchers, the openness to being available for study in order that the institution can understand itself better – are all features of our institutional culture and all say something about the extent to which we are – or are not – reading off the same page.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

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The initial brief was for all academic staff in the included Departments to be interviewed and for the views of students in these departments to be canvassed also. Given the delays in access to the field (gaining HOD permission) and data to aid decision making about which departments

to include in the study, the timelines ended up being very much contracted and while a good number of academic staff in all four departments were interviewed, the present report includes no data from students or administrative staff.

In total, for the purpose of this report, interviews were conducted with 30 academic staff members and two academic deans:

- Seven in department one
- Eleven in department two
- Six in department three
- Six in department four.

Data was collected employing in-depth, open-ended interviews. Given that the departments in the study had been chosen on the basis of anecdotal evidence suggesting positive strides towards transformation in those departments, participants were asked, 'given the legacy of apartheid and the imperative for universities to transform their structures and practices, for example, in relation to teaching, research and the way we relate with each other in the university' what in their view and personal experience, either aided or constrained such efforts. Participants were asked whether they personally felt able to/not able to contribute positively towards transformation and to relate concrete examples of when they were enabled or constrained in some way, in this regard.

Interviews usually lasted at least one hour or more. These interviews were transcribed verbatim and then coded using NVIVO – qualitative data analysis software.

Initial open coding indicated that there would be four main categories into which the data could be grouped:

1. Understandings of transformation.
2. What participants see as 'enabling' from the perspective of efforts towards transformation.
3. What participants see as 'constraining' from the perspective of efforts towards transformation.
4. Participants' views of their own individual agency with respect to being able to make a difference in relation to transformation.

## Analysis

The report tries to provide as many original quotes as possible, in the words of the participants. It would be disingenuous nevertheless to claim that there is no interpretive work that went on in the coding of the data or the writing of the report. In organizing and making sense of over three hundred hours of recorded interviews clearly an interpretive frame has been imposed on the data. The inclusion of multiple original quotes, it is hoped, provides the opportunity for

readers to gain a genuine insight into the data as it appeared to the researchers – to be given the privilege of listening to the words of the participants in the same way as the interviewer was able to. Again, though, this is somewhat deceptive. Rather than listening to a whole interview, quotes have been selected and placed within the context of other similar quotes – and this ordering, selecting and categorizing are of course interpretive acts. But to the extent that it is feasible, the report tries to describe in a way that is faithful to the texts of the interviews themselves, what emerged from the research. This is not an academic paper in which the writer offers a systematic interpretation or theorisation of the data. It is a report that describes the views of the participants in the hopes that these insights provide a basis on which to continue the conversation about transformation at Rhodes University.

### A note on ethics

Informed consent, anonymity and right to withdrawal are core features of ethical research that were observed in obtaining the data for this report.

Many participants were particularly concerned that their anonymity should be preserved. In a small institution, guaranteeing the anonymity of a participant is a mammoth undertaking. We all know one another well. Simply to mention someone's alma mater may be to compromise their anonymity. Great pains have been taken with anonymising the data including not simply removing names but changing small identifying features wherever possible. It may be that failings remain. However to further aid this process, individual quotes are not attached to particular interview pseudonyms thus making it impossible to piece together the whole of any single account and therefore making it more difficult to identify the voice of any one person and thus to honour our undertaking to the participants to take seriously their right not to be identified.

Tasked with assisting the university to better understand itself, we as researchers are often met with suspicion, mistrust and from time to time find ourselves being lectured about transformation and why it is a bad idea or on how properly to understand what it means. We are also sometimes lectured on research methodology, administrative failings of the university and many other matters. We have thus become very much aware of how sensitive members of the institution are to research of this nature – for one reason or another. We do everything in our power to build trust through ethical and respectful practice but there are sometimes ways in which we can be faulted. The difficulty is that the target community is one to which we must return again and again in our efforts to provide meaningful insights on the basis of which our institution might be better positioned to be a place in which all its members have the opportunity to flourish and be the best that they can be. We experienced a certain degree of research fatigue especially in one department and among black academics who are becoming weary of reporting their experiences. For this reason further research needs to be carefully

considered and targeted towards answering meaningful questions. Ethically, it could be argued that each piece of further research commissioned by the institution needs to be preceded by a thorough audit of the data we already have, what it is telling us and what more we really need to know. Ethical research does not only proceed on the basis of 'do no harm'. It proceeds also on the basis of a reasonable expectation of the research meaningfully benefitting humanity in some way. This requirement of benefit places a significant burden on researchers when considering embarking on any piece of primary research involving human subjects none more so than in the hothouse environment of a small institution.

## 4 UNDERSTANDING 'TRANSFORMATION'

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*I just wish that those who are looking at transformation could put down in one page what they mean, what are their goals because this word transformation has too many interpretations and nobody really knows what it means and you end up being confused and it becomes like a swear word. Just say for transformation this is what we want, it will be easier for everybody.*

How one defines or interprets something obviously has a decisive impact on one's attitude to that thing. If one defines abortion as 'murder' one is unlikely to be pro-choice; if one defines life as beginning at conception one is unlikely to be pro-choice – and so on. Understanding what the term 'transformation' means to people then, can be very telling.

As many have commented over the years, what exactly is meant by 'transformation' is widely debated with almost as many meanings and interpretations of the term as there are commentators. The present report will not review that literature. Nor does it see itself as presenting a 'proper' view of what transformation is supposed to be understood as. Rather the point here is to describe the wide range of responses that emerged from participants in relation to what is meant when the word 'transformation' is uttered. When someone is asked, for instance, 'what do you think enables or inhibits transformation at this university' and they then begin to talk about particular things it is possible to gain an insight into what kinds of things come to that person's mind when he or she hears the term 'transformation'. Knowing what these (often otherwise not explicitly stated) assumptions are might assist the institution with understanding what kind of conversation it needs to have with its members. If there is resistance to transformation it may come from misunderstanding what is meant when the university says it wishes to 'transform'. Lack of progress may arise as a result of efforts being dispersed because in understanding transformation there is a lack of a clear set of priorities – and this failure to set priorities results from the dispersed, incoherent and rather fuzzy sense that we seem to have as an institution of what 'transformation' is.

#### 4.1 QUOTAS/ STATISTICS / A 'TICK BOX' EXERCISE

One common understanding of 'transformation' is that it has to do with meeting numerical targets and quotas.

*We had an instance now in one department, turning down a white female because they have got quotas. This is bizarre because the University is looking for postgraduate students and here we are telling a postgraduate student we can't take you, the consequences of these practices are horrific ... it is so stupid.*

The interpretation of numerical targets by the institution and the imposition of these under the banner of 'transformation' was expressed as a point of frustration who felt that framing the issue in this way underestimated its true complexity.

*I am sitting on a selection committee where the likelihood of getting a black South African at professor level in this particular field is very tiny....We need a person to be supervising PhDs and potentially be the next Head of Department. So the HR department comes with a whole bunch of statistics about how first a black man should be sought. So [they see] a black man as preferable to a black woman because they are "too many women" in the Department. I don't get that. If the next HOD of your department is going to be a black woman that has to be fantastic. I can't get that logic. Then the second thing they do is that they go something like 75% of the economically active population is black so therefore of the candidates 75% of them must be black, so in the pool of people who get shortlisted for this particular job, three quarters of them must be black. Now it is all very well to go that's the economically active population of the entire country which includes every single human being, but when you're talking about this field, how many people are we talking about in that field, what does that field look like, what is the likelihood? So I think I just felt completely overwhelmed and depressed. I thought we are working with statistics that don't help us. We went down this track for like three months and by the time we got to the end of the three months and [offered the job to] a young black PhD [knowing] we will prop her up, that sounds terrible but we will work with her, we will help her develop her curriculum, no teaching experience, doesn't know how to put the course outline together, we will do it. When we went back to her, she said I already have a job, she has been snapped up by some other University, so now we're sitting with this department under selection committees that are banging our heads about statistics and things, that just don't work, so the frustration level of what is the way through this ....*

*It is very hard to have those conversations, I think it is hard to have the conversation with University structures, last year when we had a conversation about that particular job, we went to the Dean and we were kind of like this is the complexity and what*



*made me very uncomfortable and frustrated was the Dean's position was that it is morally wrong to employ a white person in the department that is full of white people, so his position was very simple, I am taking a moral position, as soon as somebody says to you it is morally wrong to employ a white person, [it makes one] feel like a kind of white supremacist who is asking for only white people and that is not what is in my head at all, so that is a very frustrating place to be that somebody in authority, when HR sort of goes these are the statistics, that is the negation of complexity, so it is very difficult to work with that, how do you have the conversation?*

Participants spoke of their resistance to the idea of transformation which they understood to be a 'tick box exercise' having to do with people in positions of administrative power 'building their empires'. In some cases they took the process of being interviewed to be yet another in a perceived long line of 'tick box exercises' and reacted defensively to being asked what their views concerning, and contribution to, transformation might be.

*I know that you be looking for something here that you can report on, I am afraid that I am not going to once again engage in a box ticking exercise and put out there things that I did merely to tick the transformation box.*

In some cases the idea that transformation discourse comes from 'you people in the Humanities' was a way of explaining or defending a particular business as usual approach against an imagined enemy constructed as having simplistic views, ridiculous practices and an inability to understand the academic project.

*I know that I will be open to challenge with the likes of people in your field, the proposition that a sympathetic educator who is alive to the realities and the challenges faced by the student counts to my way of thinking a great deal more than somebody who is ticking a box for having an ADP session with students after hours or whatever the case maybe, I feel my natural instinct of reaching out to a student who is battling and struggling.*

Some participants insisted that if transformation is understood to entail change of some kind, especially if it is to be change dictated from above, it was not particularly relevant to them because they are already good people who try their best and do a good job.

*In terms of substantive tangible things, I would say look I don't know, all I know is that my feelings are in the right place, ... I am open to suggestions but I am the kind of person who tends to resist the centralized imposition by diktat of these boxes in order for us as an institution to achieve change and I am cynical and sceptical about that sort of thing.*

In the academy individuals often have self-narratives which express an identity of criticality and individualism which enjoy significant legitimacy in this context. Those narratives are then drawn upon in order to resist a construction of transformation as something superficial, externally imposed, and characterised by group think which is then contrasted with the critical, thinking, independent-minded true academic.

*I have a critical and inquiring mind and if I am presented with let's say a checklist of tasks to perform in the name of transformation I would be the one to say I resist this but I know that many colleagues happily tick away .... And nothing will change. I am someone who is far more interested in the outcome than the process.*

#### 4.2 HELPING UNDERPREPARED/UNDERACHIEVING (BLACK) STUDENTS

Asked for their views on what enables/inhibits transformation in their department some participants responded by talking about black student underachievement. When transformation is constructed in this way then extra lessons and remedial interventions are assumed to be what is meant by action to aid transformation.

*I see black males at the bottom of the class and that's a tragedy.*

*I am more than happy for anybody who wants extra lessons to sit down and I'll help them.*

*African students like notes, because they like to be contained but that is a natural way I teach, so I did not have to adapt to that, I just do it automatically, so I haven't done anything other than to be very sensitive to their questions and to be very much open door, you can walk in here anytime and sit down and say I have a problem.*

Asked about what enabled or constrained transformation in their Department, many participants began immediately to talk about ways in which (Black) students could be helped, supported and mentored, suggesting that in the minds of these participants, 'transformation' has something to do with the entry of underprepared students into the university and what to do about it.

*What I see is we can try and attract African, Coloured and Indian students in the subject area and as a lecturer you know that you have got the responsibility to assist the students. What I do, what I find is effective is to have one-on-one consultations with the students immediately after test results are available to ask students where anything went wrong to provide additional assistance in terms of extra classes and extra consultation hours and I found that the students who took that opportunity, they were more successful, their pass rate was more in line with their white counterparts in the class.*

Constructed as a problem of underprepared, disadvantaged students, transformation for several participants then became about either being willing to have, or not being willing to have, extra classes for these students.

*This has involved bringing in fixed AD classes, so an additional lecture a week which is for those who are struggling. I mean anyone can attend it but it is aimed primarily at those who are struggling just to give them space out of the normal lecture schedule to catch up and to ask questions in a smaller environment. We have introduced workshops at the beginning of the year just to give people the terminology, a basic overview just so that they can try in some small way to get up to speed.*

If transformation is understood as evening up the pass rates between the black and white members of a class then when asked whether or not transformation has been effected in a particular department, participants working with this definition would then refer to the de-racialised pass rate as a key indicator of transformation. A de-racialised pass rate in turn leads to a 'if its not broken don't fix it' narrative in terms of which transformation, by this indicator, is achieved, and therefore any further suggestions for what might need to change is met with resistance because according to the original (de-racialised pass rate) criterion, the goal has been realized.

*There is no difference between pass rates from the different race groups, so ... I am very confident that what I am doing is working and I will not implement a change or any sort of innovation until I am convinced that it is going to be to the benefit of the student.*

When transformation is constructed as having to do with helping struggling disadvantaged students, then qualities such as patience on the part of the academic are surmised to be of paramount importance in the transformation project.

*Often the females -- and it is often the black women who are in this category, who are struggling but who have this drive to succeed and to learn and to overcome the challenges -- these are people who genuinely want to learn and my response to that kind of person is one of a great deal of patience, a giving sense of you are curious, you want to learn, let me try and help you understand this proposition, patience for the struggling student from a difficult background who really wants to learn is what I have brought to the table I think in a transformational sense: sympathy and understanding and a great deal of patience.*

Language

*We have to make particular efforts to help them catch up and in that regard it especially means more frequent contacts, to particularly help in English and to a lesser extent how to be a researcher.*

For several participants language was one of the most prominent markers of/effects of underpreparedness. The logic was as follows: transformation means that more underprepared people will be found at university and these people will struggle with English. Therefore being an academic who acts in such a way as to enable transformation means adapting to this situation in some way.

*I know that the language I use is at a level where everybody's understanding it and that students are not misunderstanding what I say because I am trying to use language which is accessible to everybody.*

*I have adjusted [my] language. I don't believe that I dumb down on the language, however if I use a term that I am more than familiar with, something you would not expect a second-language speaker to understand, I would give an explanation of what was said. This achieves two things, firstly obviously promoting understanding but secondly because our students are going to be expected, whether rightly or wrongly, to converse in English at a reasonably high level when you go out and work, so part of one's day-to-day interactions in a lecture scenario is to introduce them to English terms and concepts that they themselves would be able to use later and I certainly don't take it for granted people will necessarily understand them, but I always make a point of explaining them as I go along, so that'd be an instance where I have actively changed the way I teach to promote transformation.*

*I have always been interested in language and how language can actually isolate individuals and I think that -you lose a lot of students that speak African languages and I often find that such students really do struggle, not with the material but with the fact that they just can't put into words what they mean in exams or tests or when they are asking you questions for example. So I have tried my best to get around that in some way by lecturing as simply as I can. So I have noticed that there are certain words that people don't really understand and I assumed when I got here that you know you are a BSc student, and there are terms that you really should have heard about, but people don't. So I have made a point of actually trying to explain those words before I use them in class and also in tests, ... because I think that is also a huge factor in why some of the students were doing so badly, so to sometimes put the questions in simpler words and even puts translations of words that they might not understand and I think that has helped quite a bit and also just to make myself available to explain lectures, if people have problems with language, so for me that has always been a big thin.*

### 4.3 ATTRACTING BLACK STUDENTS

*Transformation is really outside my normal area of thinking, it is not a big issue because we have sufficient students in the department to keep the department running and there isn't a big pool, there is no big obvious pool to recruit from unless we start getting students from other universities and a lot of those are not adequately prepared and because of our emphasis on research, we like well-prepared students, so there's quite a strong tension there between what we are doing well already and other things we could be doing, unless we start recruiting extra staff to solve those additional agendas, I don't see things changing.*

*Students [in our department] remain predominantly white and we regret that but I am not quite sure why that is.*

Reflecting, perhaps, different disciplinary characteristics, while in some participants' minds the influx of underprepared students is very much tied up with transformation, for others the absence of black students in their discipline/department represents the major transformation challenge that they face.

*We very rarely have [black] graduates in [my subject], it's not an attractive area at Rhodes, so we have had to go elsewhere, we are looking for potential students.*

What it means to attract black students – the diagnosis of the problem – rests on many prior assumptions about what challenges may arise when one is successful in attracting black students. One participant spoke about the usefulness of internship programmes 'because that sees which students are hard-working, which students fit in well and then we can then find positions for some of them'. So on the one hand while the participant feels an urgent need to attract black students, he worries that they may not 'fit in' or be hard working. If one puts those assumptions together with the comment of a different participant: 'With attracting black students, it goes back to have we created a welcoming and attractive environment' – it becomes possible to wonder whether dominant constructions of 'the black student' as underprepared, potentially not hard working and not fitting in with 'us' may themselves be responsible for creating an unwelcoming environment. A discourse of wondering who will and will not 'fit in' suggests an understanding of transformation dependent upon getting the 'right sorts of student' who can adapt successfully to the institution rather than placing the burden of adaptation on the institution itself.

*The dreadful schooling that too many are subjected to in this country, those are problems for specialists other than me to deal with, I am not saying I wash my hands of that but by the time they get to third year or fourth year, unfortunately – and I am not saying I support this process -- those youngsters haven't made the grade ...*

#### 4.4 ATTRACTING AND KEEPING BLACK STAFF

*I am very worried about the lack of the changing face of the staff, I think that is a huge problem at this institution.*

The imperative of attracting and keeping black staff was uppermost in the minds of several participants when asked about ‘transformation’.

*Students don’t have enough examples [of black lecturers] .... these are people that are a minority at an African University. What the hell? We should be the norm, we should be what people see when they come to an African University but this is a particular kind of African University, the outcome of colonial money that came from the Rhodes Trust, its job was first to take care of white children from Rhodesia and perpetuate the English secular identity, that’s what its role was, its a product of that history .... People like me aren’t the norm here, that’s the problem and when black people come here they often tend to have to see themselves in isolation.*

#### 4.5 CHANGING THE CULTURE OF WHITENESS

Asked about transformation black staff often homed on the culture of the institution. Several black participants interpreted transformation as being about seeking to shift the dominance of a culture of whiteness in the institution. What makes a culture ‘white’ is a notoriously difficult question to answer. Participants identified many different markers of whiteness from language to attitudes towards staff/student relations.

*As I said you cannot speak your language; that is the first limitation so you always have to be thinking in your language and speaking in another language.*

*So I was saying the culture is English so I don’t speak my language, I have to speak a foreign language and I have to behave a certain way to fit into the way of doing things. In [my previous university] the majority all speak [indigenous language], so we are able to do the normal day-to-day in our vernacular and we even use our clans to call each other, it is very relaxed and it is very, it is like you are at home, just doing something productive but the culture here is very white in that everything is done the white way in the sense of being called with your first name and your students also calling you by your first name and students don’t have that bold line between lecturer and student, it is very grey whereas where I am from, the system where I am from, it’s quite bold but I find here students are very much almost peers and I think that is how their educational background has made them to be ..... Generally schools which are private and very modernized and very white cultured.*

For one participant being in a 'white cultured' institution meant that her own culture gets 'killed in the process'.

*I was talking to my daughter the other day, she was told at school that whenever they lose a tooth the tooth fairy would come and take it away and I said that is nonsense we don't have that, that is for that culture, it does not belong to us. You go there for schooling, not to adopt their culture, in our culture you keep the tooth and you will go to the rural areas and you will throw it on the roof. We have to make them realize that this is how we do things. The education system is very spoiling.*

As one participant acknowledged, identifying what makes an institutional culture feel 'white' is 'a difficult one, something I cannot really explain'. He went on to make an attempt:

*People don't have clans, they don't even know my clan, you know [where I come from], if you want a favour from somebody, you don't call them by their names, you call them by their clan and things get done quicker and we get favours -- that is what the practice is, that is what we know, this is the way we grew up....*

Some black staff experience the assertive, entitled way in which students in the institution conduct themselves as an instance of 'whiteness'.

*People need attention, now they are wanting that attention and there are 200 of them and it is just two of us and they want the attention and you will find that they are quite demanding, they send you an email and they say you did not respond to my email. For instance somebody is writing a message on the weekend for a test on Monday, they need attention there and then but it is a weekend for me so you can't send me emails. That takes away the privacy that one needs or is entitled to. But that is the environment. I have had to adapt to certain things and I've had to compromise somewhere, when you don't want to compromise then you stand on your own.... There are certain things that are not negotiable but there are certain things that you can look at and say what has been the practice and where am I on this matter and take it from there.*

Another participant felt that the Rhodes environment mirrors the 'white dominated and male dominated' corporate world.

*If this is a man's world, it is still a white man's world. So when I said Rhodes culture is still that of the corporate world, I mean it is exactly the same in terms of everything, a white system and it is doing business using the English culture and that is how it is, that is how it is done.*

#### 4.6 SYMBOLIC DECOLONISATION/ SOCIAL PRACTICES

*So those institutional attempts to enforce transformation of some kind or another, I think are false really because they don't address the heart of transformation as I see it. For me transformation comes at the level of human relationships: are we open to new experiences, ideas? Are we open and willing to act on things that convince us outside our day to day taken for granted ideas of the world? For me that's what transformation is. It's about developing those respectful collegial relations with a wide range of people and ideas and practices, not just because we want to crunch numbers. It's about that personal human connection for me.*

In a few cases participants associated transformation with what one called 'symbolic decolonisation'.

*... what I would call a gesture of symbolic decolonization whereby existing colonial names of residences might be changed, lots of colonial names like Jameson, Milner, Oriel, Beit, those are all names associated with Cecil Rhodes and his activities in Kimberley, but no residence [has] agreed to change its name.*

This participant pointed to ways in which attempts at symbolic decolonisation have proved controversial in the institution. Name changes as one dimension of such a project are particularly controversial and most controversial of all is the name 'Rhodes' itself.

*I did see a few weeks ago the idea of changing Rhodes's name and the idea of the symbol of energy of the man on the horse which is Rhodes' symbol. I have no problem with Rhodes changing its name, I have been expecting it for a long time. Will I be sad? Yes I will be sad simply because I grew up with its name. I do think that it is a waste of resources. The Rhodes Scholarships' name hasn't been changed. And the Rhodes symbol, apparently it was symbol Cecil John Rhodes had commissioned and it is inherently colonialist and all that, although my sort of arguments would be if you asked anybody, very few if anybody in the University is aware of its previous meaning. It's sort of has gone beyond its original meaning and has a whole meaning of its own.*

Added to the argument that colonial symbols no longer mean what they originally did but have 'sort of gone beyond their original meaning' is the familiar argument that the name Rhodes and its associated symbols constitute a valuable brand and that this value outweighs any potential transformatory impact of symbolic delonisation.

*If you mean you want to change the symbols of the University, you want to change the bachelor whatever, the flag, you are playing with fire because the franchise of*



*Rhodes is built up over a century, if you take it with that franchise, it is a Coca-Cola quite in itself something other than Coca-Cola, you're going to destroy the franchise. The United States has not bashed down the status of confederates in the South, it is history and it's not the building that gives character to the University, it is people, the leaders in particular and the people who work here and the students who study here. Who cares about symbolism? You have got to recognize history. My goodness, it is logical.*

Sometimes people who do feel at home in the institutional culture (which includes its symbolism, built environment, name, language preference and so on) feel mystified as to what it is, precisely, that discomforts those who do not feel as at home. The complex weaving of the materiality of institutional culture with the symbolic and the relation of both to social relations and practices is seldom engaged. Instead a narrative prevails of 'newcomers' not quite fitting in for reasons that remain mysterious. Participants find themselves feeling for possible explanations in ways that are sometimes bizarre, but at the same time being reluctant to confront the more obvious explanations for why those who see themselves as 'westerners' might be more at home in the institution than those who these 'westerners' construct as 'other'.

*You know social interaction is quite an important component and westerners drink a lot of coffee, a lot of tea. We sit around and talk. Most of the black students are reluctant to do that stuff, however encouraging we can be and you can only encourage, you cannot force people. We still tend to get that separation which is unfortunate and it's just, these changes don't happen quickly but it will be to those students' benefit if they were willing to, if they had the confidence to interact, because I think in the long term chatting feeds back into academic performance.*

The participant cited above is astute in recognising that exclusion at a social and everyday level feeds into more significant forms of (academic) exclusion – or to put it the other way, those who are at home and comfortable at the level of social interaction have their advantage in the system compounded. However rather than the institution needing to adapt to undo these dominant practices that are differential in their effects on people, the solution that is proposed is waiting for the new entrants to adapt, to grow more 'confident' to interact and 'less nervous'.

*One level of the separation is, obviously people come from different backgrounds and people who are new to Rhodes, when they have these old white-haired Profs they can be a little nervous and so I occasionally but not very often, would take them to lunch, and just try to foster a more relaxed attitude .... I think it depends, we have one guy, a very confident individual, it's easy for him, I don't know his background, I will guess he is a big city guy and the rest of it but we have students who come from country areas, and there is a level of inhibition. My approach is simply to try and be as friendly*

*as I can, as welcoming as I can, and over time I think it's will be over the years, you know people can become more relaxed and more confident.*

Participants who on the one hand fervently defended colour blind stances on pedagogy and curriculum and argued that anything less would be racist, deployed a narrative of 'in my culture' when reflecting on ways in which practices familiar to themselves had changed. Theorists of 'race' frequently comment on how replacements for illegitimate racialised terms operate in speech that is essentially about race. 'Culture' is one such example. In South Africa a discourse of individual human rights coupled with the illegitimacy of racialised references mean that race is often rephrased as class, individual preference or culture when making statements about those perceived as 'other' to the speaker. So on the one hand a person might deny that they have any racialised assumptions at all and therefore that their dealings with students, for instance, are entirely colour blind or race neutral but then express assumptions about black people being happy or colourful or noisy in contrast to white people who are polite, restrained and understated.

*On a structural level, I think a lot things have changed. When I was graduating there was a polite clap, but now if you attend some of our graduations, it's a far more festive happy affair. In my culture it is considered inappropriate to cheer at things like that, but that's not to say I think there is anything fundamentally wrong with it. You have seen as the demographics of the graduates change, things like graduations have also taken on more colourful flavour.*

#### 4.7 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT/ SERVICE LEARNING

*My understanding of community engagement is the University has to be oriented towards South Africa as a whole, not to white South Africa because that's its history, that is what I mean by community engagement .... For too long the community has been white South Afric., .... My orientation is from the point of view of being black but towards all South Africa, whereas what I see in the definition of community engagement in Rhodes is an invisible orientation towards white South Africa and ancharity orientation to black South Africa. That is just appalling. But it is going to take a while for this University to see itself differently ... and because black Grahamstown political leaders are not taking responsibility for their part of the relationship, it means that Rhodes would always be stuck in a kind of charity response, or a kind of we are saving something response. Whereas for me ... the role of the university is to be an intellectual leader in its community. That's why I am about intellectually oriented engagements. If anything the University should be part of a lobbying so that the politicians do their job where they should.*

Community engagement is often seen as part of what is meant by ‘transformation’ and in the same way as interpretations of transformation are extremely diverse, so are interpretations of community engagement *as* transformation/transformational.

Some participants seemed to think that transformation had to do with insisting that academics become active in charity – and it was *this* that they objected to.

*I am not saying that I reject all propositions but give me something that I can work with and don't bring to me community engagement projects which are acts of charity for example. I think it is hugely inappropriate for a University ... thinking that they are engaging in community service by collecting to replace somebody's stolen clothes is nonsensical.*

Instead some argued for the academic project prioritized and for academics to contribute in ways that they are specifically trained to contribute.

*We have people who should be researching, who should be teaching or developing the teaching or whatever – [not] engaging [in] charity ... that is wrong and a bizarre and almost criminal misallocation of valuable scarce resources.*

Others shared having had powerful experiences with the transformational potential of service learning experiments from the point of view of student learning.

*I was taking the students specifically to communities [that they usually] have very little contact with in their everyday lives and it has worked very well. They always get very anxious because they are scared that they are not going to understand the language of everybody else. I don't really understand what the problem is because it's fourth year University students -- they are going to know far more than those grade tens, but I think they are a little bit scared of maintaining discipline and things like that and keeping the children engaged because they are not parents. So potentially it is quite a scary thing and it always turns out well and in fact I have had at least three students who decided to become teachers. They dropped science and have moved out into teaching and I think that is quite important because teaching is no longer the sort of reason why you go into the University.*

#### 4.8 RACISM/DISCRIMINATION/ESSENTIALISM/REVERSE DISCRIMINATION

In the minds of some white participants transformation has to do with a kind of personal attack on them – a suggestion that they are in some way racist and that their attitudes and practices are in need of change. Responding to a question about what enables or constrains transformation in their departments these participants moved immediately to defend

themselves as if under personal attack. Invited to be interviewed on the subject of 'transformation' some engaged in small research projects prior to the interview to find out if they are liked or disliked by black people.

*I dare you to go to any of my African students right now. I said to an African in the toilet before I came here, I said 'how is it going?' and he said 'Prof I really enjoy you'. So what more do you want me to do, fill in the box?*

Others wanted to assure us that they personally had no difficulty in getting along with black people – suggesting that this is what the challenge of transformation entails.

*It is just a natural instinct I have and I am particularly sensitive to African students, because I know I may do a little bit of acting so that they feel comfortable.*

If transformation is a) constructed as having to do with the elimination of overt discrimination against black people and b) white people are unaware of this kind of discrimination existing in the institution then it becomes possible to wonder what all the transformation brouhaha is all about.

*When someone says you must make it more hospitable for people, is there anything that is wrong, could someone say, write it down, this is wrong you must change it? You can't just have a blanket thing -- make it more friendly for the African or whatever. What is it that is not friendly at Rhodes? Is there any way the students have been discriminated against at Rhodes? Someone should tell me where. Not in my Department. I have never seen it. Certainly not in this corner of the office, and I would doubt any other part of the department. I have not encountered any discrimination against blacks.*

Some participants argued that the way in which 'transformation' is interpreted by management or HR sometimes seems to rest on what social scientists call 'essentialist' assumptions about 'race'. That is to say, that black people and white people have differing 'essential' characteristics such that the appointment of a black person will always be better for transformation than the appointment of a white person. Some participants argued that this is not always the case. This participant argued that a good, critical white lecturer can teach in a transformational way, for example.

*Well I have these moments when I don't understand what they are doing at all. Are we saying that innately, a black skin makes one a better teacher and a better researcher – innately? I completely agree with, say we are 92% black and all the professors are white, that makes no sense whatsoever, that is crazy and I can absolutely see how a student ... looks at the white professor and says oh my gosh I*

*can never be like that. But at the same time things are happening in classrooms, it doesn't really matter what race you are as the teacher or the students, sometimes the things that happen in classrooms are powerfully productive and race has got nothing to do with it because you are encountering interesting and challenging material ....*

#### 4.9 TRANSFORMATION AS CURRICULUM / PEDAGOGIC CHANGE

*I am a bit uncomfortable with the idea of changing one's style of teaching and assessment because that sort of presupposed that races inherently think differently which is not something I subscribe to.*

Education White Paper 3: a Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education places considerable emphasis on the curriculum in terms of 'content, relevance, design and delivery' as part of what it means by higher education transformation. Experts in the transformation of teaching speak of 'transformed' teaching as involving a process of inducting students into academic discourse in ways that are more equitable and less exclusionary. In other words at the heart of the transformation challenge with respect to pedagogy is the attempt to find ways of teaching that deliberately seek to provide access to those previously excluded rather than unwittingly reproducing exclusion. The Dean of Teaching and Learning at Rhodes, Professor Chrissie Boughey has argued on many occasions that 'some students have been inducted into Discourses which are close to academic Discourses by virtue of their upbringing' and that 'these students have a head start on students from other backgrounds'. For Boughey, 'teaching for transformation involves making the rules and conventions of the Discourse overt so all students can catch on and not only those who know what to look for or recognise what they see'. Boughey argues that transformation requires attention to both the 'what' of teaching and the 'how' of teaching.

For this reason the opening question to participants specifically referenced, in passing, teaching and learning (along with research) as an aspect of transformation. Several participants reacted very negatively to this.

*I think it's a very dangerous path that you say, we change the way we teach because it presupposes that students of other races think differently which is in itself inherently a racist proposition.*

For this participant the logic is that transformation has to do with more black people entering the university. Therefore to call for curriculum change is to imply that one has a theory of 'other races' thinking differently to white people rather than curriculum renewal being in the interests of all students.

For some participants the idea of curriculum or pedagogic change and their relationship to transformation was simply baffling suggesting that there is room for a wider university conversation around what the possibilities are for thinking differently about what is taught and how it is taught. Many academics in disciplines that are content heavy believe that there is little room to manoeuvre in the curriculum. Professional bodies must be answered to, accreditation is at risk, standards must be maintained.

*Remember we need to set standard that they can pass nationally. I don't know what more people want us to do other than to teach to the best of our abilities, to teach cutting edge stuff.*

Curriculum transformation is often described as something that the woolly-headed humanities people have the leisure and luxury to pursue but that other disciplines have a standard content that is either timeless (the law of gravity) or externally dictated by the requirements of professional bodies, industry or business.

*I don't know what else one can do, we can't ... you can't drill the knowledge into people's heads, what do you want us to do, we offer special classes if they want them, we give them notes, we lecture to the best of our ability, we mark as fairly as we can but don't forget we mark to a strict mark plan which we then put on RU Connected, it is not like marking the history essay, where it is judgment, ours is objective largely.*

*I am not saying teach the English Civil War in South Africa, it doesn't make sense, but certainly in my discipline, scope to change subject matter, I think is very limited and as I said earlier to say change the way we teach, that premise is built in my opinion on a fundamentally racist view that we think differently, if it's in reference to teaching, I frankly can't think of a way one would teach differently.*

Because transformation in relation to curriculum or pedagogy is constructed as the straw person of catering differently for black people who are seen as essentially different, it is easily ridiculed as self-evidently ridiculous.

*I would like to see a document issued by the University saying we expect you to teach like this for these reasons. A colleague of mine keeps on going on about we need to adjust teaching, I said well how do I adjust my teaching? Because I have a class of 150 and each of them has their strengths, has their need, and our classes as I said to you are 45% white, 55% black, I cannot say okay black South Africans you need to do ABC, white South Africans you need to do DEF, non South African Africans you need to do this and that, women need to do this ....*

Others saw pedagogy as key to transformation in that it is only through a critical, engaged pedagogy, that the university can expect to produce critical, engaged students. For this

participant then, 'transformation' brought to mind wider concerns of social justice and pedagogy was seen to be central to engaging with those wider concerns.

*These are sometimes very painful questions and they go to the heart of identity and self-recognition, they are often very discomforting questions and I think it is incumbent on us as lecturers to be aware of the potential of disrupting students' normal ways of thinking about that. But I mean that is what the University is for, isn't it? I mean what else are we here to do? We are not here to validate everyone's worldview. We are here to challenge and to pose questions and to provoke.*

The idea of 'bringing alternative ideas into the curriculum' was central to some participants' interpretation of 'transformation'.

*The whole idea of the course was to change the procedures, processes, routines, understanding and purposes of [my subject] at the outset so, we interrogate the mainstream and begin to try and open up new epistemological territory if you like in trying to understand how [my subject] could be done differently. For example, with one of the things that we have done, we were to send our students into more disadvantaged or marginalised communities in order that they may understand important public issues from the vantage point of local people. So you know you are just talking to people -- what are their priorities and how do they frame those priorities? What do they think their issues are and the language they use to describe those issues? It's challenging because there is linguistic diversity, class diversity, all sorts of challenges, in trying to communicate with people in these different spaces and there is a lot push backs from a lot of students. They find it quite hard work. One person said was she was having an ontological crisis. People feel like it is out of their comfort zone. I think students appreciate that something different is happening once they make that final commitment to breaking that kind of bubble of social places on campus. I am quite proud of that. We might have changed their minds on what they think are the priorities on the planet. I don't know if I am deluding myself on that point. I do think there is an education going on at a deeper level, so I think that is a good thing.*

#### 4.10 RESEARCH

Tellingly, perhaps, very few participants chose to speak about research when asked about 'transformation' despite the centrality of research to the academic endeavour and the widely acknowledged challenges that research in South Africa faces. There were exceptions. One scientist spoke about the complex challenge that she faces in her discipline when trying to meet the challenge of doing 'relevant' research which she constructed as a contrast between 'academic things' and things that are 'community related'.

*... otherwise we are working on academic things that are not really community related.*

This person went on to explain that when she and her team had attempted to undertake research rooted in local communities and development challenges the kinds of problems that were encountered were social problems which the scientific team could not address because ‘they are social problems not [problems related to my specific scientific discipline]’. These problems included for instance HIV infection ravaging communities, conflict, communication, and so on. This participant and her team ‘gave up trying to work on [this community-related problem] ... because it is a social problem, not a [science] problem’.

*We are very focused on science and not social problems, so what you’re going to find is in the science departments, we don’t worry about the people side of things, which may be a mistake .... Our Department is very much focused on its topic, and its topic is not people.*

This participant went on to associate ‘transformation’ research with research that is ‘something which would help the poor’. She also described working, in the course of her research, with people from many different countries in Africa but went on to say, ‘but I wouldn’t call that transformation, that is just doing science’.

In some cases participants touched on issues of isolation, lack of funding and not being able to see their way through the bureaucratic processes at Rhodes as holding back their ability to flourish in research. This is perhaps significant given the need to increase the number of research active academics.

*I don’t think I have actually been able to do much, anything except that finding my own support systems or just doing as much as I can for myself, things like lack of research supports, am lucky that I can at least have some colleagues that can mentor and provide advice, for example sources of funding at things that the research office is supposed to do so I have just been trying to sort it out myself because, wandering through this maze of trying to change things at the University, just doesn’t seem like it is going to happen anytime soon.*

These remarks suggest that as an institution we have not been thinking together about how research may be relevant to the transformation conversation to ask what is our ‘research culture’?

#### 4.11 SOCIAL JUSTICE



A different interpretation of what ‘transformation’ is compared to many of those outlined above was the more global idea that transformation is fundamentally about social justice rather than being limited to processes internal to the university.

*When I talk about transformation, I think about transformation of the world .... Everybody in the University supposed to be pro-transformation [but] lots of people in thought it was outrageous when we put forward our motion that any academic who wants to come to Rhodes, has to declare that they are against the illegal occupation of Palestine. I feel outraged, I felt disgusted ... this University is supposed to be pro-transformation and the Senate says no we can't support this. They are worried about the reputation of the University. Now how do I balance working for my organization that sees they are pro-transformation and they won't support people in similar situations in another country and yet changing this country did not come about without the support of people in other countries saying this is unacceptable, so what does that mean about how we think about transformation?*

*Transformation for me is bigger than just changing the demographics of this University, it is changing the ideas of the students because I would hate for it to become a University in which the demographics are black and the politics is as conservative as apartheid politics I am not interested in that.*

*We [have] a vision of the kind of students we want to produce: students that are committed to social change. So it's about transformation at that level that we see ourselves as contributing to the Constitution. The Constitution makes certain statements about engaging with the wrongs of the past and inequity and so on, and our teaching is directly informed by that.*

This participant thus raises the possibility of the Constitution in a more explicit way informing a shared set of values and practices as a starting point for transformation.

## 5 WHAT ENABLES / INHIBITS TRANSFORMATION?

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Part of what motivated the commissioning of this piece of research was the desire to know what enables or inhibits efforts at transformation at the level of individual academic departments. However, it is not possible to say what enables or inhibits ‘transformation’ unless we know what is meant by ‘transformation’. As has been shown above, participants’ interpretations of what exactly is meant when someone speaks of ‘transformation’ vary widely and clearly this will in turn influence one’s perception of enabling and inhibiting factors. But taking at face value whatever it is that a person means by ‘transformation’ we therefore went

on to ask what, in the participants' experience, they felt enabled or constrained efforts towards transformation. While initially separated out, enabling and inhibiting factors are discussed together here because as we found, they are often opposite sides of the same coin. In many ways the enabling conditions were often mirror images of the factors identified as inhibiting. So for example, leadership was identified as either enabling or inhibiting transformation. Similarly, depending on one's experience, resources can be enabling or inhibiting and so on.

## 5.1 ACCESS TO RESOURCES

For some individuals what is perceived to be a small, friendly working environment that is well resourced, with a flat management structure and easy access to whatever it is that they need in order to make their ideas happen is a huge factor in their being able to realise their goals. Which resources participants focus on as enabling/hindering their ability to contribute to transformation is highly dependent upon their interpretation of what is meant by 'transformation'.

### Technology

As is discussed above, many lecturers speak of transformation as having to do with meeting student needs, and the challenge of growing student numbers and growing numbers of underprepared students. In this regard the quality of the technology and facilities that they have available to them is perceived as helpful.

*It is what the institution provides, so I believe that the University tries to meet us in our needs. I have a large class and lecture theatres are very well equipped technologically, so I am very privileged that I have access to the best equipped lecture theatre on campus and I am very grateful for that.*

### Time

Time is possibly the most valuable resource academics have and many stressed time limitations as one of the factors limiting their ability to have agency in relation to transformation.

*At a certain point in the year I literally just run around the whole day, for weeks on end. So I think time limits my power to act, I might have an idea but I just don't have the time to implement it.*

### Money

*Well, if you want transformation, put aside money to achieve transformation.*

One participant, identified by others as a powerful agent of change, having introduced ground breaking projects aimed at benefitting the most marginalised in society modestly perhaps, focused on funding as having been key to what she had been able to accomplish. As she put it, 'it sounds probably a little bit crass but I have had resources, we get good funding'. Several other participants shared this focus on resources or the lack thereof as central to what they are or are not able to accomplish.

In addition to technology, if 'transformation' is a matter of underprepared students then tutor budgets and teaching resources are going to be emphasised as either constraining or enabling transformation efforts.

*I think finances is always a problem, especially if you think about tutor budget, there's always limited resources for that so you have got to try and do the best with what you've got. I think if more funds are provided, students will be able to be assisted on a daily basis. In terms of maybe changing the way you teach and implementing new strategies I think in our department once again, we are actually encouraged to do that and all resources are made available.*

Where 'transformation' was taken to mean attracting and retaining black staff, analyses of why it is difficult to attract and keep black staff differed widely. But for some, attracting and keeping black staff is simply about money. For some reason, black staff are thought to want to be paid more than white staff and to be 'serious about transformation' is to be willing to pay 'previously marginalized groups' more.

*I think the University should make a concerted effort to attract black males and black females and the previously marginalized groups but then you have got to negotiate a good package to attract those previously marginalized groups to come to the University. That is why the appropriate individuals are not attracted, but I think if you make efforts and offer the people more to get the previously marginalized groups and if you're really serious about transformation you would do that and I don't think it's the right thing to say that you can't attract the right people, we can't do this we can't do that, then maybe we should start thinking outside the box, how to attract the previously marginalized people.*

*Some black staff members would have been very happy to work for us but we just couldn't pay them the salary that they needed. Because of salary constraints sometimes we lost staff members because they would work and then realize actually this is no fun to be working for this level of salary with all my friends earning that and we just couldn't match those salaries, so that was constraining.*

Money is also cited where transformation is taken to mean changing the demographics of the student body.

*So the percentage of South African black students is probably lower than what they should be, but then again the large part of that comes down to funding requirements, in terms of how the students find money to actually come to this University which is very expensive. Maybe that is the one thing that is kind of in the way, but this is not a problem of the institution again, this institution has to balance the books, it becomes kind of a government issue as to having money available to transform the student body.*

*From a postgrad point of view, it will be the funding. Although it is a very small amount, if you are able to access the right channels through the university, through the research office, you are often able to get funds that assist development students. There is a development fund that you can get students onto bursaries to do PhDs and ultimately end up working within the departments. I have tried that with one of my students but unfortunately she was attracted by a larger company and went off and took the better salary rather than staying on. But there are some funding avenues within the university that enable you to promote these sorts of things.*

#### Accelerated development programmes

Accelerated development programmes which in themselves are resource intensive, were sometimes cited as enabling transformation in that some departments had been successful in attracting and retaining black staff through the mechanism of these programmes. Whether or not such programmes result in practice in changing the demographics of staff in any particular department was described by one participant as ‘a mixture of hard work and good fortune’, making the important point that merely having such programmes is a necessary but not sufficient condition for change – human effort is also required particularly on the part of leadership such as HODs.

*I think it also used to include young women of any colour could be fast tracked into a post on a three-year contract and the idea was that these people will be the future generation of academics and will also be part of the transformation process.*

*We had a number of successful Mellon foundation candidates working in [the university], and I think that has been really good because I think that it has provided candidates with the opportunity to develop as academics and some are now permanent staff members.*

Some seemed to indicate that the idea of 'accelerating' academic progress may be unviable thus accounting for an inevitably slow rate of transformation.

*You cannot fast track your young black academics into professorships, you have actually got to get the PhD, you have got to do the research, you have got to spend at least 10 years and then you can have a professorship ... you can't shortcut that and maybe I haven't thought it through very carefully but there's some things you cannot really shortcut, the years are going to give you something that is going to be valuable ...*

### Status/position

*I think just in terms of if one is in a position at work where one can drive some sort of instruments, I think you can have more influence, if you are completely at the bottom off the hierarchy, there is probably not a lot that you can actually do around transformation. The more senior one gets I think the more ability to influence people and processes, and procedures etc. and then you can have more sway. So I think it has got a lot to do with where you are in the institution and your ability to influence.*

*Well because I am not part of that, those are higher echelons of the University, I am not the professor, I don't belong to Senate, I am not important enough to make an impact in that way.*

Having status or a position in the university is itself a resource than can be drawn upon in order to influence change or institute new ways of doing things. For example, HODs and Deans are very influential when it comes to appointments, influencing not only the selection process itself but who is appointed to selection committees in the first instance.

*[As an HOD] if I happen to for example have a negative view towards transformation, I might become very stereotyped in terms of who I think we are going to appoint, whereas if I have a view that yes I really, really want to achieve transformation, then I might influence the people in that selection committees and just face it, there is the ability to influence people, one can influence a selection committee to look more at the transformation candidate ....*

HODs also reported being able to influence their own existing staff depending upon what their own vision of transformation is.

*If I saw that there was a need to bring more transformation to the student body and one thing that I do here is that I put pressure on the staff to look at the differential*

*pass rate, just to access and understand what it is, inasmuch as they said to me we don't have to compare pass rates, I say well I'm sorry but you have to.*

## 5.2 AGE, KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

### Knowledge

For those individuals who find themselves in circumstances where their attempts to change existing practice are resisted, access to developmental programmes, training and support from outside their particular department is perceived as what enables them to act within the department to bring about change. The assessors course is one example:

*Empowering me to make changes to my teaching and learning, knowing what was out there in terms of what CHERTL offered, that was hugely empowering and knowing the way things had been conducted in the course that I teach over the past 20 years hadn't changed, the same slides had been used for 20 years and where changes have been made, they have been made on the slides and they were used with those changes. So I knew that any changes I made could only be beneficial to my students and I then had the educational understanding of what I was doing so I could argue for changes given what I'd seen and heard and given what was coming from my students. So the students were asking for change, I was learning about change and I married the two. So in terms of teaching and learning within the department, getting involved with CHERTL and doing their course has been hugely empowering.*

For some, not being in a senior management position means that they face budgetary and information constraints which hinder their ability to take action.

*I have got a very extremely limited budget and obviously I cannot dictate policy and changes and I don't have all the information I need at my disposal to actually understand what changes should be made, so no I don't think I have got everything I need. Because of issues to do with funding and proper inclination in terms of this is what we need to do and this is how we can do it, not just, you know we need to achieve transformation in the next five years, but exactly how and how will the institution get behind that to make those changes. I think it is too easy to say to the head of Department, you have got to make a change, and I mean if we don't have the financing and we don't have the proper guidance, then it is like you are out on an island somewhere, where you wouldn't really be able to affect the change. So you have got to have the institutional support, the knowledge and the funding.*

### Experience

In other cases, knowledge and experience can make change hard particularly if one has a sense of oneself as already doing a high-end valuable job and holding valued expert disciplinary

knowledge. This can mean that any suggestion that one should change something is seen as questioning ones' expertise which is precisely what one should be valued for. Participants with this kind of self-perception tended to be quite defended against the suggestion that there might be something new to learn about teaching their discipline, for example.

*Well I am very experienced in the subject that I teach; I am a very experienced academic, so I am extremely valuable to this University.*

## Age

For some older academics transformation is something for the new generation rather than something which they can be very effective in bringing about. Their age, they feel, limits the extent to which they can make a difference.

*I am now older ... and I think there is a lessening of the kind of closeness of contact that there used to be, a sense that the students would be comfortable chatting in my office, they tend to put you on a pedestal as you age and I think that's understandable.*

*Let's be blunt: I am white and I am middle age, what do I know about the needs of the teenage black students? That's a copout I know but it's the reality. Let's face it, if you're a scary older guy, it is a scary proposition coming to talk to somebody like me, so that has to be regarded as an obstacle. I insist on first name terms, but that just leaves them feeling uncomfortable. This guy's old enough to be my grandfather, I don't want to use his first name. It is a problem.*

Some who saw themselves as wanting to be more active in promoting change identified older staff members as barriers.

*I think that there can be a very negative kind of cohort at the university, sort of generally much older individuals who have got very entrenched value systems and so on, and that kind of negativity can pervade your overall approach. I try personally to switch off or not tune into that kind of thing because we are in a very different space, we are in a very different environment in SA now than we ever were and I think it is about embracing where you are and embracing going forward and not trying to believe that you can go backwards and by going backwards it is going to be better. I think there are negative sort of sectors but it is about sort of tuning that out when thinking about these sorts of issues, particularly transformation which is a reality and it is an important reality and we cannot be going on and sticking our heads in the sand and thinking that this is not something that is important.*

*I guess linked to teaching within a system there are older individuals who have done things this way for so many years, you can sometimes come up against opposition or hurdles and that oh we don't need to change things, you must carry on doing it the*

*same way. So that has sometimes been a little bit of an obstacle. I mean we have come a long way and there is less of that inertia or resistance to change and being much more open to the ideas of change, to really try and overhaul what we teach and how we teach, which is very important as a transformation vehicle. So it is not always from the top but also from the bottom [that things can change]. Initially there was this huge resistance to being even open to talking about the idea, but that seems to be changing and certainly changes significantly when particular individuals move on from the University and retire.*

*I think that some people are just very rigid in their thinking as they near retirement. I suppose you get tired at the end of your career and you don't want to have to engage in discussions about significantly changing how you do things.*

It was not always only older academics who were identified as rigid in their thinking however. Some people were seen as simply 'narrow minded' and therefore an obstruction in the way of innovation, particularly by high impact individuals who run large projects and have made large changes in the way things are done in their particular domain .

*I think the infuriating part is dealing with narrow minded individuals, you know people who can't see the bigger picture, who are tied up in the minute. That drives me mad.*

The other side of the coin was to see the injection of new ideas that comes with new, younger staff being appointed, as enabling from the perspective of being able to implement change.

*It does also help that we have in recent times had a number of young academics and I think those younger academics have been through that process of observing what happens with the breakdown of apartheid and implementation of democracy, so in essence they are the new generation if you want to call them that, the free generation, so I think in that sense it has been a lot easier, having younger staff who perhaps recognize and are more aware of the need for transformation and are more aware of the need for diversity because in essence many of them have gone to school where there was no segregation, they just see people as people.*

In other cases, older staff members saw their age as a resource – having been in the institution for a long time they felt they had 'paid their dues' and gained confidence from understanding how things work which in turn gave them voice on committees and structures which they had not had when they were more junior.

*For me it is about the length of time it took to gain the confidence, so what time does it take that it gives you confidence and it gives you a sense of how the institution works, and you have the confidence to say well I am part of the institution, so I can say or make the point that I want to make.*



### 5.3 LEADERSHIP

*Firstly, I have had an HOD who has been very supportive of the changes that I have made and I have never felt that my change is going to be a burden or is going to be troublesome – why is it that you need to do that? I have never felt that at all.*

*So I did get support, I spoke to people and I was also given guidance and support in going about this and I felt that I had buy-in from the then HOD.*

*.... the VC, the deputy VC, they set the tone for the University.*

*.... it needs to come from the Vice Chancellor's office. If the Vice Chancellor's office takes transformation seriously, the University will take transformation seriously. Whatever the people are doing at the grassroots level, if it's not taken seriously by the Vice Chancellor's office, nothing will come of it.*

Many participants identified leadership, whether at departmental, division, lab or institute level – or of the institution as a whole – as critical to whether or not they personally felt able to act in order to effect change. When someone said they had 'not met with any obstacles' it usually went along with a statement about having enabling leadership in their department, suggesting the enormously influential role that HODs have and which is perhaps sometimes not recognised in the institution. Predictably, for academics, enabling leadership was often seen as leadership that allowed people the space to innovate and be their best selves rather than attempting to impose rigid rules and structures on staff.

*No I haven't met with any obstacles. I think the leadership in the department is very accommodating and understanding and lets you do as you wish, obviously within the boundaries of the University regulations. So no there was no resistance or anything [when I introduced change].*

*I think also assistance from the department and the faculty when I was trying to effect change. I think that those are probably the major contributors to my ability to effect change.*

*I think it has got to do with my academic leader because he respects one's opinion and doesn't tell you what to do; you can always tell him your ideas, bounce it off him, what do you think would be the problems, what do you think I can do to improve it and he would always assist you.*

*[My HOD has been] exceptionally supportive of me and I think that in terms of me feeling validated in the department that was the turning point.*

People who were themselves in, or had been in, positions of leadership also acknowledged the power attached to such positions to effect change.

*Well I was the Head of Department so that gave me enormous power and again I didn't simply make the decision myself, I discussed the matter with colleagues in the Department but I was able to put the matter on the agenda, motivate for it, I think one or two colleagues might have had one or two reservations about this but I got the support of the department and as the Head of Department I was responsible for motivating for the appointment and getting the appointment accepted by the selection committee. So my part as head of the department was crucial because another head of the department might have done a very different thing, might not have motivated for this person.*

*I don't think it has to do with me being white and being male, I think it's the position of authority that one has as the Head of Department and I was quite a long standing head of department, so that can give you a platform from which to propose change and as you become a more senior professor in the Department that in turn increases your leverage.*

*I think it is the position you have within the University that is important, I [have an influential position] and that brings influence with it and I suspect if I was a non-European in that position I would have even more influence. [My skill set] seems to be valuable, so because it is rare it influences most things such that you can get things done quicker, for example to everyone apparently IT are [a problem]; it's very, very rare for them to leave their offices to help out but we had our computers set up and he came over and one of the lecturers just said oh [because of your position]. I think it just perhaps makes things easier in general. I think it does help with finance [division] for example as well.*

*What gives me this power is simply seniority, and maybe power is almost too strong, influence more than power. I would like to also think that people respect my views as an individual, not just my professorship or something.*

HODs also set the tone at the departmental level in relation to for instance how incidents of perceived racism are dealt with.

*I have on a number of locations had to deal with miscommunication between staff and students and staff and other staff and part of the process is trying to instil in*

*people this idea of respect and particularly I have had real run-ins with some of the students with what had been lack of respect towards certain members of staff in the Department because I think there is this mind-set that they are students and somehow they are better than some of the staff and I have on numerous occasions sent out emails indicating that behaviour is frowned on and represents a serious breach of conduct in this Department and as such I will take disciplinary action against them, students or staff, I have no time for that.*

Others spoke of the limits of their power in relation to the overall hierarchy of the university within which the HOD has limited authority – being there simply to ‘implement the policy of the university’ rather than being able to make or influence policy. It is particularly frustrating for HODs to be held accountable for failure to transform their departments but to have no real power to implement their ideas and decisions.

*As the head of Department or as an academic within the institution, you have limited abilities, so you can't implement, you are ultimately, you are limited by the institution and the hierarchy of that institution. I mean the reality is that there is a policy that the universities use, the job of the HOD realistically is to implement policy in the University but at the same time represent the academic staff, so it is a balancing act. So for example if I wanted to, if I identify a transformation candidate who is really good and has a lot of potential, whether I wanted to appoint a person or not is irrelevant because that will have to be at the go-ahead of the administration and there have been two occasions where as a department we identified candidates and it has fallen through because of an administrative issue. You know I can identify and I have had a number of postgraduates who are from designated groups but it is really difficult for me to offer anything beyond their degree, it is out of my control so as the head of Department I say I have a lot of responsibility but no real power and I think we, it is not just me but a lot of people, we find this process extremely frustrating because the onus of transformation is placed on the head of Department but the Head of Department cannot really implement. All he can do is that he can be a mouthpiece for the administration but if he has problems with senior administration or HR, or finances, those problems supersede anything that I can do and that has been difficult.*

For some people, a present HOD might constrain their ability to act and hope lies then not in challenging that person's leadership but in waiting for ‘something new’.

*... but something that is new and something that may help change is that we have a new HOD now ... and I am thinking that things will change, but I don't know, that is very new, so it remains to be seen.*

For some participants, leadership at the departmental level was immaterial because they felt that the institution does not have ‘proper leadership’. In contrast to those who identified the absence of management breathing down the necks of academics as central to their experience

of themselves as having a sphere in which to act as agents of change, this is a view of leadership needing to be much more assertive in putting forward its own vision and bringing people along with that vision. A more hands-off approach was seen as management 'sitting in their offices'.

*I find the management of this University very disappointing, very disappointing, just lack of any managerial skill .... I don't know if you're a Christian but where there is no vision the people perish. We have to have visionaries and leaders to inspire. If I was the Vice Chancellors of the University or the Dean of Students or whatever I would wander into a class and sit down and listen unannounced to get a sense of the attitude of students and interactions. You're not going to get that sitting in your office, you're going to get that by walking, sitting down where they have coffee and talk to them, ask them. When I was a manager we did that, it's called managing by walking around, you walk the walk and talk the talk and if you wants to know what is going on in the storeroom, you ask the store man. I am very disappointed but I think it's the nature of academics, they are poor managers. We don't really get good ones.*

#### 5.4 ONE'S 'RACE' OR GENDER AS ENABLING/INHIBITING ONE'S ABILITY TO EFFECT CHANGE

Recognising that the category of 'race' continues to have meaning in the South African context, we asked participants about their own perception of 'race' in relation to enabling/inhibiting transformation. Some flat out denied that the premise had any validity:

*Race I don't think it makes any difference at Rhodes, I'm not convinced it makes any difference at Rhodes.*

For others, race continues to be entrenched – and even further entrenched – in the post-apartheid context.

*In this country because race is entrenched whether you are a white person or black person, there is this constant referral to people's race, so the issue of race is in my opinion still very much on the table and it is because we are defined by race, we define people first by their colour and then by their skills which is an unfortunate situation because it entrenches a situation that we have been trying for the last 25 years move away from. Apartheid did that, it defined people with regards to their race, even at the University which I think is unfortunate because the University should be at the forefront of social change, we are still very much entrenched with race and I can understand why because there hasn't been much transformation, but it does make it difficult because we are defined, we do recognize people and define people according to their race. So we always talk about the number of black students, the number of white students, the number of black staff, the number of white staff, in essence what*

*we're doing is reducing those people to that race, so we still carry that and we still will for a very long time, understandably so but I think it is a difficult situation.*

### Blackness as enabling/constraining

*I think also probably the fact that I am black and I tend to almost attract students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds -- that has probably helped me and again that I understand where they come from and things that they struggle with you know -- I have gone through a lot of it myself, so that probably does help me as well.*

*I think in our department seeing that it is predominantly white, if a non-white speaks and they know what they are speaking about, I think they would be heard more loudly and because a lot of white staff members would also not want to offend and in that case race and gender will definitely play a role.*

Some black academics report that their being black enables them to facilitate change either by being a role model or example of black achievement or at least to be a resource for black students who are negotiating their entry into the university space.

*Obviously it's going to be a biased answer but I do think it does play a role in change because for instance one black student told me once that she feels more comfortable coming to me and talking about for example for an LOA or just asking something, that she can relate to me compared to maybe going to a white counterpart. So that's only one student's response but if one student has got that response, then also the other students have got the same sort of feeling, so I think it's maybe an advantage.*

*I think my presence and my position as a lecturer is influence enough in my opinion to the young aspiring black female. They have someone they can at least see and say ok I can actually be like her. I think that speaks volumes more than going to speak to individuals, it's more role modelling ... a practical example of someone that has worked and they see that they can also do that. So that is on its own a very big contribution to the African female students and to even changing perceptions about lecturers. It brings another dynamic of lecturers being male and White .... So okay so the black females actually have brains, so in that sense it is sending a message and it is speaking volumes.*

*I think probably the fact that I know what it is like to be one of the minorities, to have other people think that they're better than you just because of the colour of your skin and I was never going to do that to anybody else and if I could do the opposite, just make people see regardless of who they are, they do have a voice. I think it actually*

*motivated me again because I was determined to show everybody that even if I wasn't a white I was still as good as they were and my marks will be better than everybody else's, so I try and instil that attitude in everybody else if I can.*

*Sometimes you can actually see the difference that you are making in students' lives, just by being there for them by listening or showing them that the work that they do is important and that they are important and I have been surprised by students before, who just seem very apathetic when you start working with them but when you show that you are actually interested in them and you do care, you do see differences very quickly. I know that it is going to make a difference to how that person sees himself or herself, so just knowing that you do have the power to make a difference in someone's life actually motivates you to do it again and again.*

Sharing a background or a set of experiences with black students can be seen as helping to provide insight and understanding – as one put it, a 'bit of a head start in effecting transformation'.

*I think it does put me in the position, maybe gives me a bit of a head start in effecting transformation because I come from the experiences of the black culture if you want to call it that and that background [gives me insight into] what the issues are and what the struggles are of the students; I think it does give me a bit of insight; it's a bit of a help I think.*

A shared background can also make one more effective as a mentor.

*I feel that sometimes our black South Africans the pass rate is sometimes up to 20% lower than the white South Africans and I think one of the reasons is, for a white South African, from their backgrounds, they come from a background where they have an uncle or a father, they have mentors which are there to lead them and advise them, whereas a lot of the black South Africans don't have those mentors. When people say mentors, yes everyone can be a mentor but a mentor that has actually gone through the same motions and can actually advise from the point of view to say I was there and I made it. So I think a lack of mentors among the black South Africans is contributing to them having a lower pass rate, so what I wanted to get involved with was that I don't mind being a mentor to them because I am a black South African and I have come through. My upbringing or background was as dire as a lot of my students that I lecture, but I don't want to be someone that just sits back and complains and does nothing about it*

As one participant pointed out however, being someone that black students can turn to is one thing, but being able to have one's voice heard and acted upon in a context in which that voice is 'different' and speaks of 'different experiences and a different background', is another.

*Yes I think it does have an effect because maybe I have a different point of view, different experiences and different background so I can maybe add my comments but once again it all depends on would the Department do something about it if I voice my opinion or if I try to effect change, it sort of, it comes from both parties, so will either party do something about it that's the question, but I do think it does have an effect.*

Some white participants also seemed to think that being black was an advantage, but in a different way.

*From what I have been told, the most powerful academic in the university is a black woman, so I am adding two and two together and making five but I'm assuming.*

Black participants, for their part, felt offended by the assumption that because they are black, transformation is more their responsibility rather than being a responsibility of every member of the institution.

*Because they don't want to do it, so they make you seem like a voice, they don't want to. As long as Rhodes is semi-stable for white South Africans of a certain kind and they are okay here, they can tolerate a bit of this noise [from black lecturers] and it makes them feel a bit of legitimacy -- oh look we have got our people that make noise, really it is tiring. I have got a life, I have got a family, I have got a job. I have got things I need to achieve, I have got responsibilities as an academic, I have also got bills to pay, I have also got a car to maintain, I have also got a pension to worry about, I have also got all these things, why must it be my duty to be a voice of something that should be everyone's problem? It becomes that because they don't care, they don't give a shit, they don't care so it becomes my burden*

#### Whiteness as enabling/constraining

*Of course being a white person itself, I would not presume to understand the issues around transformation and I think that's a bit of a naked truth because I think often, a white person trying to work towards transformation, people view you with some kind of scepticism, like do you really care, so I think if you're a black person working towards transformation, it is a kind of, people expect that and I think as a white person it is a bit difficult sometimes.*

*I am well aware that at times my whiteness is a hindrance with other people and sometimes it is very enabling, sometimes the fact that I am woman is a hindrance, sometimes it's enabling. When my whiteness becomes an issue I tend to step back and rather, part of what one is socialized into doing is that when one is questioned in any way or challenged in any way then you push back because you can, because you*

*are white, because you have the power and that is who you are. I don't know if you spoke with Samantha Vice or read her work around whiteness, when she talks about the moral, she speaks very deeply and personally about the moral dilemma of whiteness and there is a moral imperative for white people in post-apartheid South Africa to rather keep quiet and listen rather than assert their own views and that spoke very much to choices that I have made on how I see my identity as both an obstacle and enabling factor. It has taught me the importance of listening and not [always only asserting] the right to speak.*

Some white people felt that their whiteness has made them more, rather than less, aware of the imperative of transformation.

*I am aware of the social and economic history of this country, the injustices and the need for there to be some form of transformation, so as a white person I suspect I am more sensitive to it, there is a certain amount of guilt about what happened and the need to make these social adjustments.*

*So transformation is everybody's responsibility but I do feel that it is incumbent, that I am responsible in whatever way, that it is now because of the history of apartheid and the benefits that all white South Africans derived from an unjust society, that it is more incumbent upon white South Africans to make sure that that happens.*

While some white participants felt that their whiteness was no impediment to being able to act as an agent of change, as one put it, 'I don't feel the least bit impeded, I don't feel the least bit marginalized', others felt that whiteness is a constraint.

*If I was a black African professor, I think I would have been able to do more I would have thought but it's hard to say, as a role model that's the point I was trying to make. It is easier for you as black person to affect transformation than a white person.*

In stark contrast to the railing against essentialism that was seen in answers to whether or not curriculum or pedagogic change ought to be seen as a component of transformation, for this person, being able to have influence and have one's ideas listened to is dependent upon 'skin colour, gender and age' and white and black South Africans are seen as 'alien' to one another.

*I have got a problem because of skin colour, gender, age. I think you can give orders to your heart's content, you can be a big man if you like, if I can use that term, but to get people to really believe what you are saying and the ideas you have, that's a problem. I mean it's in their nature that people believe their peers more than somebody who is so alien to their world and different from them but this is South Africa, we have to embrace diversity.*



*I have grown up in South Africa and I am acutely aware of how the country has kind of turned some pretty serious corners. It really is not about "white guilt", it is about being a bit more positive about our country which has a huge amount to offer the world in my field and I think it is important that people like myself, in the position that I am, play a role in trying to fly the flag, get, you know, students who are from previously disadvantaged backgrounds to come through, come and study with me. My role in education is an extremely important role that I think I can play in the lives of South Africans and transforming South Africans from being disadvantaged to being empowered and being able to know things, to know about the world, to have important skills that they can use going forward and building the country. So I think as an educator, a teacher and a researcher, I think it is very important in my position certainly as a white male that I play a proactive role in transformation, and I think I can, and while it might be viewed as very small ways, I think it is very important.*

*I think it's more about attitudes and if you want to, if you believe that you can't make a difference, you are going to hide behind that essentially and say oh well I can't do that here in South Africa because I am from a white minority and I am never going to get a job and I would never be able to be successful and I don't think that that is actually true. If your attitude is proactive, that doesn't have to be the case but if you're going to hide behind the sort of oh I am not going to get anywhere situation, I think you are on the road to failure, so I think it's all about being proactive and having a much more optimistic outlook, because I think white males in black universities can make a significant difference in terms of transformation and it is about wanting to do it. If you don't want to, you are not going to do it. Where your priorities lie essentially. I don't think it is necessarily a hindrance, it is not going to prevent me from being involved and I don't think it should prevent people from being involved with transformation.*

### Gender as enabling/constraining

The male participant who felt certain that 'race makes no difference at Rhodes' was equally certain that gender does make a difference.

*I am well aware that men have more influence than women, simple as that and my age is very much in my favour because I have seniority, I have titles and things like that.*

Several participants felt that gender discrimination is a reality in the university albeit sometimes subtle in its manifestation.

*In this Department it is mostly women [who are disadvantaged] because women do tend to get overlooked because some people feel that they're only going to become wives anyway or teachers or something and I don't think that we should try to play God with people's lives, if they want to do something we should help them.*

*I think it is just in terms of getting heard sometimes, it seems like females in this department somehow are not heard as much as the more vocal male, again it might just be because we are not as vocal or I don't know.*

*The infrastructure people will just come and just kind of assume that I don't know anything about building structure or electricity because I am female, I feel like they do talk down to me sometimes.*

Some women felt that being female acted as a resource that they could draw on when it came to having insight into the challenges of transformation.

*I think many woman, being a female already you have experienced something of how can I put it, gender discrimination, so as a woman in the workplace, working your way up the corporate ladder, you have experienced discrimination to a certain extent, so you can kind of understand a little bit about the challenges of transformation, you can kind of understand the constant fighting against a kind of pre-existing tradition, so I think yes one has a little bit more sensitivity to it as a result of being a woman as opposed to maybe being a white man.*

*I think I am just sensitive to stereotyping and condescending attitudes because I think, I would say I have experienced this issue of men sort of having their own commonality and as a woman you are automatically regarded as second-best and so I think having come against that and having had to work against that in the workplace, yeah that's what I think I understand a bit more about transformation. I think that a lot of people miss that, you know especially sensitivities around what black people feel in the workplace, that they are discriminated against. I think just as human beings we maybe stereotype people and so there is maybe discrimination kind of in different ways.*

*My own feelings of injustice of having felt injustice as a woman have certainly propelled me in certain ways to take up this course, situate myself as a feminist, to be vocal about my, be outspoken about the position as a feminist scholar, so yeah I think experiences of injustice of whatever kind can open your eyes to the possibilities for change or desire for change, not only in that arena but I think it has implications for other sites of transformation.*

This participant spoke of her own passionate belief in change which carried her through the fact that students may resist change or resist being pushed out of their comfort zone when the lecturer attempts to institute pedagogical change.

*A lot of the students found it hard frankly, preferred to do something simpler, a lot of students have commented in retrospect they are pleased and glad that they did this course some important things , challenge them in important things, but not all students what to be challenged you know, they are those kind of hurdles in trying to do a course like that.*

## 5.5 PERSONAL/INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Personal characteristics identified by participants as accounting for their ability to act in order to effect transformation ranged from belligerence through to passion, commitment, upbringing and attitude.

*I suppose it was the way I was raised ... you had to voice your opinion, if you didn't voice your opinion, someone was going to voice theirs louder and you were going to be shouted down, so I was taught to stand up for myself as a child. I still don't think I do it sufficiently, I still think that I don't feel fully entitled to my voice at times but I think on the whole what has allowed me to make comments was the way I was raised.*

People who are widely recognised in the university for being agents of change or having had a large impact in their particular sphere of influence, often put this down to individual, personal characteristics and personality traits rather than having to do with the absence or presence of wider institutional or structural conditions.

*I do feel I have the power to make the change, I don't think there is any limitations. The only limitation would probably be time but I do feel I do have the power, there isn't any sort of institutional constraints or whatever that is stopping me from doing that.*

Asked what gives them this power to act to effect change, this participant replied, 'I would think hopefully my own personal conviction to try and make a small change'.

### Believing in change

*First thing is a commitment, passion and want to do it.*

*If you as an individual don't prioritize it, it is not going to happen. So I think that that is really important. [If we blame] the lack of funding or we try and pass the buck and say it's the leadership but ultimately we need to look introspectively and say, you know well can I do something about this or will I do something about this and if we are going to say ah well let me just not bother – it's somebody else's problem, things are not going to change, are they?*

As one participant put it simply but perhaps making the most important point of all, the main impediment to being able to implement change often has to do with wanting to do it in the first place.

*My own personal desire to see transformation achieved is a big one as well because you've got to really want to see that in order to drive it, it is very difficult to say I would do this because someone else is telling me to do it, but when you really want to see for yourself, when you want to see change happening, yeah that's the big driver....*

Or, as another put it, 'it has got to be the individual who is committed to this'.

*Change is possible, change is important, change is a good thing to embrace, you know for me it's felt right, so I think in that sense I feel less guilty, so I don't feel a powerful sense of unease about living here, I feel like I belong here, I feel like I am trying to contribute. I might be delusional thought that's how I feel, my identity is very much one of yes I am a white male, I am privileged but I don't feel I am necessarily undermining development or transformation in this country, I am trying to contribute to that. I may not be but that's how I would like to see myself or that is where I am placing myself, so in that sense it feels like I am in a river and I am moving with a lot of other people down the same stream, I am in the stream, so in that sense I feel I am on the right side of history, I do feel that sense of agency, I am part of something bigger, I am part of something exciting, I am part of an awakening. I mean this country is so much better than it was when I grew up, it is just beyond belief actually, so that's is incredibly inspiring actually.*

The question then becomes whether the institution simply accepts that some of its members are interested in contributing to transformation and some are not. This participant suggested that rather than just accepting that some people aren't interested, the point should be to motivate such people either through providing an insight into 'fully understanding the scars' or by sharing 'success stories' which would act as an incentive for more people wanting to take action in their own sphere.

This participant raised the important issue of accountability:

*I feel that people still do not see the needs to transform, they are not willing to change, maybe they see that it is supposed to happen but they are not willing to roll up their sleeves and be part of making it happen and a reason for that is they do not fully understand the scars of transformation or what people went through. I also feel, I think people need to be incentivized based on transformation success story and after a while people will start doing it on their own.... Because they get something out of it but initially it is very difficult to get someone to contribute unless there is a reward or an incentive because a lack of incentive is also stunting the growth. And accountability, I think there is also a lack of accountability because people come with an excuse and we cannot just accept excuses, more investigation and interrogation of those excuses need to be done.*

In the following participant's experience it was his dislike of being told he is 'not doing something' or 'can't do something' that lead to him implementing far reaching changes.

*In organizational psychology I am a finisher, I like to achieve goals, when somebody gives me a goal, I like to achieve it. What drove me mostly down this line was a frustration ..... I always felt as though we were going to meetings and we would be hammered with transformation, how are we doing it, why are we not transforming, why why why and you pick up the newspapers and you see the Minister of sports complaining about the lack of transformation in Rugby, in Cricket, you name it, so for me it was maybe a frustration of how can we do this? I don't like to be told I am not doing something, I don't like to be told I can't do something, so how can we do this?*

The idea of personal conviction and the inner fortitude that comes from a sense that one is on the side of right came up on more than one occasion as a resource enabling individuals to withstand criticism and lack of support for their efforts. Sometimes this sense of being in the right acts as a bulwark *against* change, though, insulating us against critique and the possibility of seeing our practices through different eyes.

*Because I am doing the right thing, I have no doubt that's what I am doing is working, what I am doing is appreciated by the students, what I am doing in terms of our pass rate, there is no difference between pass rates from the different race groups, ... yes I am very confident that what I am doing is working and I will not implement a change or any sort of innovation until I am convinced that it is going to be to the benefits of student.*

Sometimes a person who has been able to be very successful in their careers and who has been a powerful agent of change can be impatient and possibly blinded to the real structural limitations that might prevent, say, a black woman from having the same opportunity to be heard or listened to. So as much as certain individuals are exceptional role models for what is

possible, their very success may legitimise the status quo, suggesting that it harbours no impediments for the individual who is willing to work hard and take on the world.

*They are not limitations, it's really is up to the individual. No one can say anything because there are simply no stumbling blocks at Rhodes, it is an enabling environment, it is flexible, non-demanding, so you can do anything [you like].*

This very individualist approach has of course been criticised by social scientists who point to enduring structures of racism and sexism that result in for example women having to work harder and better in order just to be recognised as having equal merit.

*Attitude I think, I think it is all attitude, it's what you decide to do. Don't be, everybody is a victim, and that drives me insane and it's all I couldn't do this because the dog ate my homework, and it is all passing the buck to someone else, I can't do the job in South Africa because I am a white male, I can't get a job in South Africa because I am a black female, it is nonsense. They putting the blame onto somebody else, there are massive opportunities. Take responsibility.*

Personal characteristics of grit and determination were also invoked not so much as what had enabled a person to take actions that are transformatory but as what had enabled someone who experiences discrimination to survive without throwing in the towel.

*I think just being determined not to be put down and to prove and not allow myself to be intimidated and so yeah I guess that's it, I have a right to be here and yeah you just assert yourself and sometimes just have to remind people that they need to just accept you for you who you are, and work with you.*

## Apathy

In contrast to the image of the change-oriented, action-oriented individual, some participants cited 'apathy' as inhibiting transformation efforts – both apathy of fellow staff members and student apathy.

*Apathy, I mean I have come across South Africans who would sit and complain, not only white but others, but predominantly white and then I asked them what are you doing and the answer is I pay my taxes, which is actually a coward's way out because everyone pays their taxes, so that has hindered transformation. Sometimes the speed at which I would like to see transformation happening is not shared by other people.*

Some staff members, referring to themselves, explained why they might be apathetic towards change, referring to a sense of hopelessness in the face of challenges that seem outside of our control in the university and that seem too large and inchoate to tackle meaningfully.

*For me as an aged white professor to try and think that he has anything to offer in this hugely intractable and problematic situation, I don't know, I just don't see what I can bring to the table, it is just a feeling of almost hopelessness .... Then to think that the universities either with extra lessons for the grade 12s or through taking in disadvantaged youngsters and then bringing them up, it is an impossible proposition, you know transformation is as you know -- you are an expert -- is just so big, it must filter through the pores of society, everybody must buy into the idea.*

Where transformation is understood as helping disadvantaged students, lecturers sometimes cite student apathy as the reason why their efforts are unsuccessful.

*Sometimes student apathy, you know students don't see it as being beneficial but don't want to take the time that is required to get the benefit out of it.*

*You can take the horse to the water truck but you cannot force the horse to drink and if these students are there for reasons of money, or the parental pressure to the right career there is nothing the most enthusiastic educator can do to inject in them a willingness or the need to learn and that is a huge problem.*

## 5.6 SUPPORT OF TEAMS/NETWORKS/PEERS/ A CRITICAL MASS OF LIKEMINDED PEOPLE

*I think they has been a number of things, probably first and foremost is that I have [the support of a team] and I think I have selected like-minded individuals so that it is seen as a collective, that we all embrace transformation, we all do it in the right way and I have had incidents where I have employed people who have not and we have parted ways, so I've got a good critical mass of people who assist with this and people who think in the same way. I think that has been the biggest influence for me.*

*I think it's a relational thing, if one has good relations and you feel that you're working together and you have a purpose, and then you can be more effective in making these changes.*

While some enjoy a position of influence in the university such that they can structure teams and 'employ like-minded people' that is of course not everyone's experience. Those who are not in positions of power and who do not command decision making and budgetary resources, often find themselves isolated not least in racial terms and unable to lean on the comfort of like-minded peers. Like the participant above the following participant feels that a support network is critical but is unable to muster one not for lack of personal initiative or ability but

due to the realities of the structural conditions within which she is operating. As a result she finds herself having to ‘kind of succumb’.

*You know majority rules and you ... need to have your comrades if I should put it that way that you're going to have to work with, that you can strategize with. Now in the academic world in [my field] it is very rare to find a black person, let alone a black female. So how do you then plan transformation from that kind of base, where you don't have a wide base, you have got to pass the baton, you have got to have people that you work with, you have to have strategy, you can't do it on your own. So that on its own puts you in a very difficult position and you are most of the times forced to kind of succumb to what the environment is as it's brought to you, what the culture is as it's brought to you.*

A great debate has waged in higher education transformation circles concerning whether ‘the numbers matter’. Briefly, on the one hand there are those who argue that numerical change is critical – campuses should in the make-up of their staff and students reflect the demographics of the country otherwise they are not ‘transformed’. On the other hand there are those who argue that this focus on numbers risks neglecting the deeper issues of transformation – structural change, policy change, pedagogic change, change in institutional culture, for instance are said to be markers of transformation that cannot be measured numerically. This participant effectively weighs in on this debate suggesting that not necessarily a numerical preponderance but at least a ‘critical mass’ is required for these other shifts to take root.

*For instance I cannot say let the tea room change [in this or that way] the way that I want. I can't because the rest of the people want it that way, so you can never have an environment that is going to fit the minority. As long as you are in the minority, you will always have to suffer the consequences of having no voice and just having a voice that's will not get a backing and you end up having not to speak because sometimes if you speak about something you know you are not going to get support, it is a waste of your energy, so it is not a very enabling environment for one to actually think about such transformation strategies because you need the support of other people and contributions to whatever strategies you are making.*

Being a lone voice as another participant pointed out, often means that as a result of the sheer burden of repetition, that voice comes to seem shrill and amplified, thus losing its efficacy. Women in particular therefore report a strategy of ‘choosing their battles’ or, what might be termed strategic self-censoring.

*I mean if you voice your opinion all the time about everything that happens, your voice becomes the background noise, so it is sometimes better to choose your occasion to voice an opinion so that when you do it is heard.*



*I sometimes try not to drive transformation too strongly because at the end of the day I want people to feel comfortable with me, so I think I am in a good position where it is something that I really believe, but sometimes it can get hard because I don't want to offend people. I don't mind to offend a racist because the racist needs to change but if this is someone that is truly innocent and does not understand I sometimes like taking the middle ground for those type of issues.*

For some people having powerful people in one's network can enable one's transformation efforts.

*I think it can be important to have links with even more powerful individuals but I mean that is something that is brought about at the personal level whether you know the vice Chancellor for example or not could potentially play a role in you being able to leverage more power in terms of transformation within your own department. Personally I don't necessarily have those sort of links to be able to use when it comes to it.*

Having a critical mass of people with common, pro-transformation values, was cited by members of one department as the reason why their department had been relatively successful when it came to recruiting and retaining black staff.

*That kind of thing is an illustration for me of how the formal transformation needs to grow out of a critical mass of people who hold values and beliefs in common. Because I know other departments have had problems with appointing people of colour to positions for instance who then don't last or don't even take up the positions. Whereas there is something about the organic way in which the values of this Department over a long period of time has sustained the transformation process because it has made sure that people come through the system who share those values and can take this new generation of leadership, can take the Department way beyond the previous generation of leadership. Because the transformation has to be risky if it is going to be real because we don't know where it is going but if it is value based and it is made up of people who have travelled the inner journey as well as that understanding of how structures and power works, that's when for me it become sustainable.*

## WASA

For some participants a structure like WASA was a way in which younger women academics could be supported to find voice in the institution more quickly than they otherwise might have done. WASA has acted as a mechanism for creating networks for some people.

*I think WASA plays that function particularly for young women staff and not only staff but young students.*

*WASA I was like okay these people are making sense, they are making the University makes sense, they are making this academia thing makes sense, okay so it's not because I'm stupid.*

Others suggested that having a structure like WASA shifts the burden of 'transformation' onto these structures in the minds of some.

*My feeling is that sometimes people who referred the transformation question to WASA just shows you the contradiction of the situation, it shows you that while transformation should be a University project, everybody, the HOD, staff member should actually embrace the whole process and do their best to facilitate it, in fact it does become the burden of a few because other people don't see why it should be their problem, why should it be our problem to worry about the fact that there is only this many black students in the faculty of science, why should they be my problem, I did not create this system, that is how people see it, I'm just here to teach, I just do my discipline, and doing what they do. Transformation becomes a burden of a few activists rather than a culture of looking forward for the entire University academic body.*

## 5.7 INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

*So I suppose that if I had to say what I would do, to gain more black academics and to be able to keep them would be to create an environment that is stimulating for them and that they feel welcomed and motivated and challenged.*

The institution's inability to retain black staff was sometimes attributed, by both black and white respondents, to an institutional culture that is, as one put it, 'sort of colonialist'.

*Well it is a very sort of traditional, can I even venture to say it is sort of the colonialist institutional feel. I think a lot of the history relates to that going back to the 1820 settlers, so I think, I guess that's probably that institutional culture. I am not sure how a potential black staff member for example, if that was off putting? For me, I am white English speaking, it is not an issue for me but I think it might be a bit of a disconnect for a black non-English speaker.*

The culture of Rhodes is sometimes described as 'all talk, no action'.

*I don't know how other people are to effect change, because it's one thing by talking about it and something else by doing something and I think there is a lot of talk but I fail to see where sort of concerted effort is done to make some other change.*

*I think I think essentially is to actually, with all the surveys that have been going on is to actually look at what the response of staffs are to the questions being asked and look at what changes that I suggest they could be implemented in action plan. Because there's no point in getting feedback from the staff and not doing anything with it, I think definitely for me my idea will be that that is something the University could work on.*

Others identified the institutional culture as characterised by individualism and failing to make the space for everyone's voice to be heard and which was experienced as intimidating.

*Also to give people to an opportunity to make themselves heard and to participate, so even if it's people just having a tea to ensure that everybody feels equally encouraged to come to the conversation. If you are at a staff meeting that everybody gets the opportunity to make their voice heard and even if they are coming from a different perspective and to encourage people to listen to what they have to say.*

*I found the academic culture here very hard because it is very individualistic, it is all about individual academics' progress within the institution. There is very little, that I could perceive from my colleagues in terms of an interest in an engagement with their broader social environment and there was very little interest in collaborating with each other in the University to achieve social goals.*

*Everything was intimidating, everything made me feel [intimidated], fortunately [my department] was a safe space ... all my colleagues, everybody was just nice, I was shown how to do things, everybody was there to make it work for me and then that basically gave me kind of a foundation to start exploring things. Here in this Department there are no hierarchies as such, this is a collegiate space so we all are respected for being colleague. I knew nothing about the University, I did not know anything, so my job was to just get into preparing lecturers and working out my Masters and figuring myself out and all the support was given here, so I would say that mentoring of that kind and having a good space gave me the ability to then start recognizing, oh I can do this stuff.*

## 5.8 INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

Some participants felt that the small size of the University makes it difficult to get things done and places much bigger burdens on individual academics to provide their own administrative and support functions in addition to teaching and research.

*I think at the bigger universities there are far more people working there and everybody has a specific jobs so you know exactly who to contact to do what. Here it doesn't seem to be the case that such structures are in place and it seems that there are a few people that tend to run most of the University and it does mean that it is hard in a way to get things done. It is just the structures of support, they don't really seem to be here as much as it was for example in [my previous university] and I am expected to do a lot more for myself than previously. Just the office that I am in, just getting it into a shape: I wanted lights to be seen to, things like that. It has just being a nightmare and I have just given up on that. I think support in the Department is not as it should be. We have one secretary for the entire department, who is expected to help the students as well, so like for my research a lot of [what I needed] to use for my research, I have to source for myself, I have to seek for the funding for myself, which previously I wasn't used to doing. Things like HR support is really bad. They take a long to get back to you. Support from the research office is almost non-existent, it is very different from the way I am used to doing things.*

Others referred to aspects of the physical and institutional environment as constraining them as individuals in their ability to achieve their goals.

*Again I think the structures of support and that they, you don't get the support from the head of Department or your Dean that one could expect and I think it is the same for the students as well. There is really no one looking out for them. I mean I feel it and I'm sure the students do as well, so I think that is a big negative. Again just the fact that things take so slowly to get done, you are dealing with a few individuals and where you just don't get a response that is seriously frustrating. Other negatives are things like crime on campus, I don't really feel safe here, you do find people wandering around the buildings, things have disappeared from the buildings, that I find a huge negative as well. Things like water being off, things like that.*

Accountability, it was pointed out, may be more difficult to achieve given the particularities of the Rhodes environment.

*You are dealing with very few individuals who kind of seemed to work in a closed system and it is not like you could go to someone's boss and say okay well this person is not doing his job, there just doesn't seem to be anyone with their finger on the pulse of what is happening. [The institution] is not very transparent. You are not quite sure who is responsible for what or exactly who is supposed to respond to your email or what we are doing to actually change things or if they are doing anything at all or they are just ignoring you.*

For some the environment of the town was the problem as well as an absence of support from within the institution.

*No I don't really feel at home, the reason is it is not just a very stimulating place to be. Grahamstown itself is very very small and there is very little to do. It doesn't seem to be a very nurturing community. In the Department you are basically on your own, there is very little support. And as a young academic you kind of really do need that support and that's really not there and it is support that you will get at other universities. They would try a lot harder to foster mentoring relationships and again to provide funding sources to help you through the whole process of writing funding proposals, that type of thing. The Department itself, the University as a whole, I don't feel at home and just the city itself, just does not appeal to me on a variety of levels.*

### Support for teaching

Some participants who identified curriculum and pedagogical transformation as central to their goals, felt that they had been enabled to achieve these goals by institutional support for teaching innovation.

*From an undergraduate point of view, it is certainly the attitude and the enabling environment surrounding teaching. Teaching at Rhodes is viewed as a very important part of your own personal development and it is a significant component for academics when it comes to personal promotion. So if you don't engage with your teaching and really work at it, at a personal level, you can be really disadvantaged. From that point of view, it is your interest to do that and the environment and the colleagues who are within the university really do assist with that, so if you have particular problems in dealing with large classes, for example in a large class, you have a huge range of students, and when you have colleagues who can assist you with various techniques in improving or essentially transforming the academic abilities of the students, that is particularly enabling. So we have the Center of Higher Education Teaching and Learning and academic colleagues in there are very helpful in improving and assisting in the teaching environment.*

### Postgraduate funding

*It is also a very competitive funding environment external to the institution so being able to access funds from various funding bodies such as the National Research Foundation and so on. They are very competitive when it comes to your existing track record. So in order to try and turn the tide as it were, you have to have a track record already and without a track record, they are unlikely to fund you. It is sometimes a bit difficult to tap into those development funding sources but with a little bit of ingenuity*

*you can and with time you can build up things like track records and then be more competitive. But certainly at Rhodes, our internal funding for those sorts of positions certainly, there are no dedicated funding sources for disadvantaged students to be attached to, let's say at the Masters level, in particular, supervisors. We have various bursaries and scholarships and so on and that's also on a competitive basis and often don't always go to students from previously disadvantaged groups. There are some that are dedicated just for those sorts of students but there certainly aren't any in my field that I am aware of in the university. So I think funding is a big issue.*

## Red tape

*I think probably to get something done [you have to] get through all the red-tape. I think that could be an issue as well.*

*For example if you need an electronic device the best way is to wait for it to get approved and go through the whole system. If you want to make a change to your teaching methods by the time you get what you need, those people have got a degree already and you are in the next year already.*

*There is a very poor reaction time, that's one thing, it has not really affected me because I don't employ people but I know people have tremendous difficulties getting things through HR.*

People who are interested in effecting change and who style themselves as 'doers' are clearly valuable resources from the perspective of transformation efforts. However such people, perhaps especially when they are the kinds of people drawn to academia, are seldom able to tolerate delays and bureaucratic procedures – or what they term 'red tape'. Others who want to simply pursue their own discipline rather than having wider goals do not find the existing structures constraining.

*I think it depends a lot on my personality and obviously what I studied, I sort of like the structure and the setting and rules and regulations, that is the kind of environment I thrive in as an individual, so to me it doesn't really affect me in a negative way.*

One approach adopted by powerful individuals who do not like the constraint of rules is, as one participant pointed out, to circumvent them. One participant suggested that as much as she might find rules constraining, the possibility of circumvention that exists in our institution is not desirable.

*... there is far too much circumvention that goes on and I won't do that. I have access to the VC, I can pick up the phone today and make an appointment and go and see him. That system is wrong. My line of command is that I should go through my Head of Department, then to my Dean then to the Deputy Vice Chancellor, then to the Vice*

*Chancellor and so I think that there's a lot of circumventing that happens and so what happens is they say just don't worry about it, for you I will just sign off on it. That is not the way it's supposed to be. If there is a problem then we need to deal with that problem whether it be a capacity problem, a resource problem or a policy problem ..... Sometimes it works and sometimes you bash your head against the wall and I guess you just keep bashing.*

The point that this participant is making is rather important – she is suggesting that the possibility of circumventing rules or stipulated processes and procedures that are not optimal from the perspective of innovation means that we fail to get the rules and procedures right. Failure in the system can be beneficial if it leads to improvement but circumvention means that we leave things as they are at a formal level and a few influential people are able to work around the sticking points. This can in turn compound inequities.

#### Consensus decision making

*It's difficult partly because I had to collaborate with five or six colleagues and not all of them are equally committed to the ideas in this course. There are quite a lot of things going on, but it is like herding cats, to bring everyone to this vision, if it's your vision, it feels like you are imposing your vision on other people, it has to be a negotiation.*

While the idea that curriculum transformation is part of what might legitimately be seen as a goal of transformation was unacceptable to some, others who wanted to see fundamental curriculum change argued that norms of consensus decision making were sometimes a constraint, given small pockets of vociferous resistance to the idea of curriculum change.

*One of the obstacles I guess is being trying to get consensus with our staff that you need to overhaul our curriculum, we need to really engage with how we teach aspects, there is this understanding that there is tremendous diversity in our current student body and that is going to continue and become even more diverse in terms of academic abilities, cultural background etc. and so initially there was a reasonable amount of resistance to the idea. Oh we don't have time, we can't just change the curriculum etc.*

In this case external support from someone in a position of authority backed up with concrete resources was decisive in being able to bring about change.

*But something that was quite important in getting through that impasse was the assistance from the Dean of Teaching and Learning. She said we have got funds for you to do this and by her saying we will fund this, we have been able to generally find agreement among the staff that this is a good thing and that we are going forward with a view to reviewing and revising our curriculum which is a good thing and I think without that enabling funding we would have would have remained at that point.*

Even if someone is in a position of formal authority, such as being HOD, the strong ethos of autonomy and decision making by consultation can be seen as restricting the amount of power that such a person has in practice.

*Even though I am head of Department, I cannot operate in a vacuum and I cannot operate in an autocratic type of way, so any decisions or any changes that occur in the Department must be discussed by the academic staff and I am a representative, I am elected by the academic staff, so in essence my job is to fulfil the mandate that staff gives me.*

*So I think the sort of levels of power are quite complex and difficult and the thing is universities often run on a kind of consensus, so it is not as if the Dean has all the power or the HR director has all the power or the VC has all the power. You know the flows of power go up and down and around and you have got to get all these people and levels in agreement with each other. It's not like a business where the managing director goes yes we are doing this and everything aligns behind him. He has the money, he has the authority. I mean universities are complex in terms of power. Structurally I think it is very difficult, they are strange places to work.*

*I think most of the experiences that I have had in this kind of territory, it is unclear, it is difficult to manoeuvre, it is contested, it is complex and it is fraught with anxiety and worry because for instance the processes are very long, they go on because of the contestation, the backwards and forwards. So very often you need someone to be in place by let's say the start of a term or the start of an academic year but the process pushes on way beyond that. So it places a great deal of strain. So for me it is always in this kind of like contested difficult stressful terrain, it goes like this all the time, there is no easy resolution one way or another.*

## Autonomy

As with all the identified factors enabling whatever it was participants interpreted as 'transformation', 'autonomy' emerged as having *both* enabling and inhibiting potentials.



*Well departments, academic departments in general have a degree of autonomy and they resent interference from other departments. I sit on the faculty and in the Senate but again even within the faculty, one did not really intervene in the affairs of other departments. The point at which one might intervene is if I was a member of the selection committee choosing a lecturer in another department.*

As this participant pointed out, the institutional culture is one of critique being regarded as legitimate but that did not necessarily correlate directly with action for change.

*The extraordinary thing about universities is that they do recognize the space and the importance of intellectual autonomy and the funny thing is in some circumstances one has no authority and power -- like sitting on a selection committee. I am one of many. I can put forward my objections and I can say whatever I like, but ultimately that it is a very contested space. Within a classroom or within my research, I am given intellectual authority to decide what is important or unimportant or whether an entire disciplinary trajectory should be abandoned in favour of a new trajectory. So I think maybe that's what keeps us in this institution, keeps us working is because if you're a person that values that, that is the space in which you can work, you can decide that the cannon up to this point is inadequate, insufficient, it's doesn't take account in any sort of way the African or South African experience and you can decide, I am not working in that tradition any longer, I am working over here and I am going to make an entirely new set of intellectual arguments for why this is important. So I suppose that's the kind of weird contradiction. You can use [the ethos] to critique. There is space for all sorts of things to be raised and critiqued and argued fiercely over. Businesses don't do that. Businesses have got very clear lines of authority and power which we don't have. We do have the ability to turn around and bite the hand that feeds us. We actually can turn on our own institution, stick it under the microscope and be extremely angry, critical, vocal about it. You can never do that in any business because they will fire you for disloyalty. So that's a bit of a saving grace, you can safeguard, a space that allows transformatory thinking to actually be aired. This is exactly what we stand for as an institution, is allowing this kind of critique to happen. The thing is does that lead to the actual change we need to see?*

Academic autonomy is seen by many participants as a distinct characteristic of the ethos of Rhodes University and as a factor that can either help or hinder when it comes to effecting change. For example, in the hands of an academic who is determined to change the complexion of a lab or post graduate class, autonomy to choose students based on criteria of their own choosing will lead to rapid demographic change. Clearly the opposite would be equally true.

*I think academics have quite a lot of autonomy in their teaching, supervision and so on. So I don't think that has been a hindrance at all. Your popularity amongst your peers may decline somewhat but because of the autonomy when it comes to our teaching and our supervision, it is completely up to me which students I choose for*

*postgraduate study, I choose to say yes or no, I have that power. I decide who is going to be one of my students and I decide whether I care or not about the way I am teaching But I think the autonomy afforded to us particularly here at Rhodes as academics is really important and that is why individuals can play a role in moving transformation forward.*

As this participant put it, in teaching, having the autonomy ‘to act’ regardless of whether others in your department agree with you or why you are changing things, is critical in allowing individuals to take transformation forward even in the face of the opposition or disagreement of their colleagues. This is made possible because of a strongly felt ethos of academic autonomy which delegitimises actions perceived as ‘meddling’ or ‘interference’.

*I have got a little latitude to do things like run a service learning course and nobody will stop me, they just let me get on with it.*

The hands-off neutrality of ‘autonomy’ discourse has the effect of not preventing anyone from taking action and therefore there can be no criticism that transformation is actively being inhibited but as one participant put it, ‘it is not that it is discouraged, it is not just encouraged’.

Some called for still greater autonomy, decision-making power and budgetary control as the solution to stalled or failed transformation efforts including the decentralisation of such processes to departmental or faculty level as the capacity for implementing solutions in a creative and innovative way is seen to be hamstrung by centralisation.

*One of the ways which is can be dealt with in this University is I suspect that each faculty should be given a certain amount of money so they themselves can identify transformation candidates. I don’t believe the way we have it structured is working. There has been some instances that some positions have been advertised nine times and we still haven’t been able to do transformation and that is to do with the fact that there needs to be more creativity in the way we operate. We need to look at novel ways in which we can attract transformation candidates.*

## 6 CONCLUSION

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This is a report in quite a literal sense of the word – it reports in great detail in the words of the participants, what was said during interviews conducted in the second half of 2014 at Rhodes University with academics in four departments from three faculties. The verbatim citing of what the participants said is meant to provide readers in positions of influence with the basis on

which to reach their own conclusions about how this might inform our conversation about transformation at Rhodes University.

The report shows that academics in the study are operating with very different understandings of what 'transformation' is and that these understandings are often quite different to what one usually encounters in the literature on transformation, in government policy, in statements by the university's senior administrators and in the university's own policy documents.

Interpretations of 'transformation' are clearly significant in determining a person's attitude to transformation as well as a person's diagnosis of what might constrain or enable transformation. Individuals who see themselves as agents of transformation and see transformation as both desirable and their own responsibility, predictably, are also individuals who seek to make a difference regardless of their age, 'race', gender, status, position, qualifications or discipline. *What* they seek to make a difference to, is determined by their interpretation of what transformation is and what, in their view, is desirable.

The character of the university is such that there are quite wide possibilities for individuals to innovate without being constrained by management whether in teaching, research or community engagement. The opposite is equally true. Individuals who believe that transformation is nothing to do with them, who believe it is externally determined or reliant upon 'race', age, status, position, etc. or who believe that it is meaningless, superficial, politically rather than morally inspired and/or undesirable in some way (for example, is tantamount to racism or reverse discrimination) tend, predictably, not to want to have anything to do with it and see themselves as simply being, in a neutral way, good academics, delivering a good service to students and the institution. The absence of tight managerial constraint on individuals means that those who do not wish to change their practice in any way are also at liberty to continue with business as usual and to defend their own particular status quo as colour-blind, based in criteria of individual merit, international standards and disciplinary requirements.

It may be that what this indicates is that there would be merit in deepening our conversation about what 'transformation' is and how particular practices may harm some and advantage others in ways that are not always easy to discern but which require some careful introspection, genuine exposure to ways of seeing and being that are not our own and a willingness to allow for the possibility that one's existing convictions might not all be entirely without fault. This after all is what we pride ourselves in doing at universities. What the evidence here suggests however is that those in leadership positions in the institution will have to work to establish the legitimacy of such a project and to win respect for it as a genuine endeavour founded on mutual respect and common goals rather than, as some label it, a 'tick box exercise' imposed by those hell bent on 'building their own empires' and undermining the efforts of world class academics.

The last word goes to a participant:

*When I see some of the issues that go down at Rhodes where huge conflicts break out, people end up very bruised, very battered and it doesn't have to be that way. Transformation can be such a beautiful, exciting, life-giving thing that makes the place we are living in fit for human habitation but we have got to climb out of our fear for that to be possible.*

## 7 APPENDIX ONE: PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN

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