

Xenophobic violence is deplorable

By Orla Quinlan

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In 2009, a statement by Rhodes University Deputy Vice Chancellor, Dr Peter Clayton read “Rhodes University, whose fundamental aspiration is to be Indawo Yolwazi – a place of knowledge, a place of learning - for all who study and work here, both South African and international, vigorously rejects all forms of xenophobia. We believe that the diversity of culture, experience, and viewpoints, that international students and staff bring to our university, add substantially to the richness of our intellectual space”.

The recent news of an upsurge in xenophobic violence is deplorable. As in the past, we continue to reject Xenophobia of any kind.

The International Office is the key driver of the internationalisation process at Rhodes University. Together with other divisions and departments, it assists the university to enhance the quality of the institution by contributing to and sharing international perspectives across all of our academic work. The institutional culture of the University is greatly enhanced by the contributions of international staff and students.

Teaching and learning are a key component of every university; this is true particularly in relation to students within universities but it is also in part the role of Universities to contribute to public thinking and to provide analysis on issues like xenophobia.

In a recent newspaper article, the Centre for Human Rights in the University of Pretoria, called on all tertiary institutions to address the issue stating: "We need to start formulating plans on how to incorporate the issue of xenophobia into syllabi, create better awareness around xenophobia, and disseminate information about the scope and protection of the South African Constitution."

For Human Rights Day in 2012, the International Office organised a panel discussion taking a quote from the Constitution and entitling the discussion “Is South Africa a home for all?” All the panellists had experience of working with immigrant populations and South Africans, either at a practical or an academic level and, the panel concluded that South Africa had a

long way to go to be a home for many of its indigenous people, as well as international immigrants. Professor Barney Pitso, who chaired the debate, concluded that we needed to increase the frequency of discussions on xenophobia in South Africa.

While more thinking and awareness-raising at tertiary level will be a very welcome start, this in itself will not be sufficient to address the underlying issues that manifest as xenophobia. The forms of extreme xenophobia recently manifested in South Africa are prevalent in communities, where inequality and poverty continues to dehumanise and divide. Tensions are heightened when internationals are perceived to be doing well economically, while locals are doing less well economically. It is clear that unless there is economic empowerment of the local population, incidents involving internationals can quickly escalate into a violent outburst of xenophobia. This problem has to be dealt with by both the government and South African society.

Racism and xenophobia are not unique to South Africa, it is a global scourge. We can draw on global experience and ideas for combatting it. I was impressed, for example, by a recent “national cup of tea campaign” when Muslims resident in Norway invited local non-Muslim residents into their homes for a cup of tea, in an effort to curb racism against Muslims. The two part strategy involved Muslim people organising tea-parties and inviting people into their homes; then high profile citizens were invited to events to ensure that key media covered the Muslim community’s determined efforts to increase the awareness of people who didn’t participate directly. The campaign had very successful outcomes in reducing negative attitudes towards Muslims. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_bi9yiCZr8

In the UK more recently, a racist protest outside a Mosque was diffused by people from the Mosque coming out to talk to the protestors and offer them tea. They later ended up playing football together. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-22689552>. I am not suggesting that the primary, structural causes of xenophobic violence must not be vigorously engaged with. Rather that all avenues for addressing xenophobia must be actively pursued, starting with an increase in social interaction, which includes something as simple and humane as having a cup of tea together. People who get to know each other, as other human beings, are less likely to resort to immediate violence, when there is a critical incident and they are looking for someone to blame.

Through creating new spaces for people, who might not have the opportunity to meet each other, to come together and do things together socially, we can start to make familiar the unfamiliar and slowly develop an understanding of our common humanity.

The Rhodes University International Office organised its third International Parade on the 18th May 2013, where approximately 1000 International and South African students; children from local schools and members of the local Grahamstown community, took to the streets in celebration of the uniquely international and intercultural nature of our community. The event was advertised in the local newspaper and an open invitation was issued for all local residents to join the Parade to ***Celebrate our diversity, highlight our international links and to say “no” xenophobia!***

The following day, local people and church groups were enthusiastically asking if they could get involved in the Parade in 2014.

Activities like this may not be appropriate for every situation in South Africa and are not in themselves a solution to xenophobia. They do begin however to model a way of reaching out to people from other places, when grinding poverty and inequality threatens to erode our humanity towards others.

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