

Rhodes University Council Statement

Council decides about the future of the name of Rhodes University

At its meeting held on 30 November 2017, the Rhodes University Council considered a number of issues, the most pertinent of which being that of the University's name.

It is necessary to reflect upon the context and process of the consideration and decision by Council on the name of the University.

In 2015, Council initiated a process to advance transformation at the University and to solicit views of all stakeholders on the future of its name within the context of its long-term sustainability. Following a number of delays in implementing the initially agreed process, Council resolved that the transformation of Rhodes University was ultimately the responsibility of the Rhodes University community and that an inclusive process had to be pursued through a broad Institutional Transformation Summit. The aim of the Summit was to consolidate, and provide impetus to, the University's transformation journey and devise a less cumbersome process to address demands regarding the name of the University. The desired outcome of the Summit was to focus the University's attention to the imperative of transformation with a view to building a stronger, more resilient and sustainable University that could inspire pride in all its stakeholders.

Rhodes University held its very successful Transformation Summit at the end of July 2017. One of the recommendations of the Summit was that Council should devise a mechanism to design, within a six-month timeframe, a process that would enable the University to resolve the issue of the future of its name. Council was mandated to deal with the matter, taking into account inputs from stakeholders and all related factors, which were pertinent to such a decision.

The University is facing a number of challenges which we must address while striving to maintain and enhance our academic endeavour and social responsibility agenda.

First, the University continues to grapple with its **financial sustainability**. The situation requires that we remain focussed on building and deepening a culture of fiscal prudence and austerity to ensure that the University remains on a sustainable path. The balance between our income and expenditure remains untenable and unsustainable. Government funding is on the decline, thus placing pressure on our finances and creating uncertainty concerning the funding framework for universities in general. Various initiatives are being undertaken to deal with this significant challenge. We continue to rely on everyone's participation in this regard.

Second, our **staff remuneration** is not competitive and as a result we lose academic staff to other universities and private and public sector employers who can make better offers. In addition to remuneration challenges, we recognise that some aspects of the University's **institutional culture** are experienced as alienating by segments of our community.

Third, is a critical issue of **employment equity** which we must address. Rhodes University and the higher education sector in general, face a serious challenge of the scarcity of black academics, particularly at professorial level. Our University has invested significant resources to address this challenge. We have at some stage received funding from the Mellon Foundation and Kresge Foundation to recruit black staff and in particular, women, to give them an opportunity to develop their careers so that they are able to rise through the academic ranks at a pace faster than they ordinarily would without dedicated support. The intention is, partly, to address staff equity. We have also invested our own resources to advance this objective.

The new government initiative, the 'next Generation Academics Programme" (nGAP), is helping us to recruit young black and aspiring academics to Rhodes University.

Fourth, **Student Financial Aid** continues to be one of the University's biggest challenges. There are many academically capable young people who, through no fault of their own, cannot afford to access a quality higher education. Every year our University invests about R38m to assist academically deserving students who are in financial need.

Fifth, we have an important contribution to make in the **upliftment of our local community**. Grahamstown has some of the best schools in the country interspersed with some of the most dysfunctional schools educating most of our town's youth. Alongside this, we have Rhodes University, which produces some of the best graduates in the country and continent. We cannot sit and watch when young people are condemned to a life of hopelessness and despair because of the failure to provide them with the education they need and deserve. The University continues to seek new ways through its community engagement programme to embed itself in the life of our local Municipality and Province. We appreciate the need to remain, simultaneously, locally responsive and globally competitive.

Sixth, in terms of **infrastructure** – more capital is required for maintenance. In the past we have had to balance our budgets by deferring capital expenditure. In addition, there is an urgent and pressing need to modernise outdated university systems to ensure that we remain at the forefront of advancing our knowledge endeavour and social responsibility.

Seventh, the University's capacity to grow is, to a significant extent, constrained by the capacity of our Local Municipality to provide basic services. We are heavily dependent on the Municipality. We therefore have to work closely with it to create the necessary capacity for it to provide the basic services.

Eighth, is the need to create and sustain an **institutional culture** that is welcoming, supportive and affirming of all. Institutional culture includes residence life, teaching, research, social interaction, working life and many other areas. The challenge is the pervasive discriminatory

practices that are often reproduced at the level of everyday life in ways that may seem intangible and difficult to notice. We have to find ways to surface and challenge these practices in our institutional life to enable everyone to thrive, benefit and contribute in equal measure. Part of the need to create and sustain an institutional culture that is welcoming and affirming of all is the need to respond to calls for 'decolonisation'.

It follows therefore that in a financially constrained context, with a multiplicity of pressing and competing needs, all decisions have to be taken with due regard to the above context and challenges. Given the financial strain that the University has experienced over the past two years, following the #FEESMUSTFALL campaign, Council has had to approve a deficit budget for two consecutive years. We continue to press on Government to factor, in its funding determinations, amongst others, the peculiar challenges faced by universities in poor communities and away from the major economic hubs. We continue to reach out to our Alumni, current and future donors and generally to the corporate sector for support.

Since the issue of the name of the University came to the fore in 2015, strong views have been expressed in support of, and in opposition to, its retention. It cannot be disputed that Cecil John Rhodes was an arch-imperialist and white supremacist who treated people of this region as sub-human. There is also a general consensus that there is not much to celebrate about him and the way he went about doing things.

Centuries after the proponents of oppression and injustice have been laid to rest, their shameful legacies linger. This much can be seen in the lives of institutions whose values and contributions to society far exceed the desires and imaginations of those they were named after. Among such institutions are the likes of Brown University, a reputable Ivy League university in the United States that bears the name of the Brown family, some of whose members had traded in slaves; the University of Fort Hare, which counts amongst its alumni some celebrated liberation heroes, which was built on a site of a military fort of the period of the frontier wars and named after Colonel John Hare; and Rhodes University.

It is worth noting, however, that there is consensus about what Rhodes University has come to represent in terms of academic excellence and the brand it has developed to stand out amongst the best universities in the world. This point is held both by the proponents and opponents of the name change. Indeed, it cannot be disputed that Rhodes University has, over its 113-year history developed and sustained an enviable reputation for academic and research excellence. Among other things,

- Rhodes University has the best pass and graduation rates of any other South African university;
- We have outstanding postgraduate success rates and enjoy one of the highest research outputs per academic staff member of any South African university;
- Each year our university produces PhDs of the highest calibre;

- We have one of the best residential systems in the country accommodating more than half of our students in well-appointed residences and serving more than 11 thousand meals daily; and
- The university is committed to the town and surrounds in which it is situated, and has not outsourced the provision of regular services.

Notwithstanding the challenges of financial sustainability brought about by the decline in state funding of higher education, Rhodes University's student profile now reflects a preponderance of young people from poor and working class backgrounds arguably because of the commitment the University has made to providing funding for them from its own budget.

Given its commitment to social justice and public good, the University continues to play its role in responding to the challenges of building a new and better society.

Rhodes University has, over more than a century, developed a unique identity of its own, which is separate from, and far transcends, the person Cecil John Rhodes. The values that Rhodes University embodies and celebrates are very different to those that Cecil John Rhodes espoused.

At its meeting on 30 November 2017, Council received a report from a seven-member task team that had been mandated by it to collate and present for Council's consideration all available and pertinent information and issues to be considered, in arriving at a decision on the future of the name of the University.

Council deliberated extensively about the many aspects and possible consequences of the decision under consideration. Council members accepted that when it comes to the issue of the name of the University it could not reconcile some of the differences and that it was unlikely to emerge with a decision immunised from significant consequences.

Our University has been pursuing a path to re-imagine itself as part of its transformation drive. Council acknowledges, however, that some members of the Rhodes University community and the public would continue to believe that, ideologically, even if all of the transformational objectives being pursued by the University were attained, such transformation would remain incomplete as long as the University still shared a name with Cecil John Rhodes.

Others believe, however, that Rhodes University has purposefully carved for itself enviable credentials as an institution of higher learning dedicated to excellence, which have enabled our University to have an identity distinguishable from that of Cecil John Rhodes. They add that, in circumstances of the current grand challenges the University is required to address for its sustainability, it would not be prudent to rename the University and invest significant financial and other resources in a major international rebranding project with limited, if any, guarantee that the identity and reputation that have drawn learners and leading scholars from South Africa, the African continent and across the globe to our University would, at the very least, remain recognisable.

Given the aforementioned differences that remained irreconcilable and the University's Transformation Summit's call that a decision be made on this matter within six months of the Summit, and having regard to the consultations and submissions that had been made by the University's internal and external stakeholders, Council considered itself ready to make a decision at its meeting of 30 November 2017. It was determined that a decision would be made by secret ballot. It is significant to mention that our Council has not, at least in recent years, had to face a situation where consensus couldn't be reached on a decision, despite the rich diversity of its members.

Members of Council who desired to make a statement prior to a motion being introduced and voted on were granted an opportunity to do so.

A motion was tabled for the change of the name of Rhodes University. Out of 24 members of Council who were present and eligible to cast a ballot on this motion, 9 members voted for the motion and 15 voted against the motion to change the name of Rhodes University.

The matter of the name of the University has been taken very seriously by Council. It set in motion processes that would facilitate its speedy resolution. Given the University's precarious financial position and the need for the University to prioritise transformation and be responsive to the challenges facing our society while maintaining its enviable academic credentials, the University cannot embark on a process of changing its name that will divert the limited resources it has.

This has been a difficult decision to make and, regardless of the results of the ballot, there are no winners from this process. While democratic decision-making is, and must always be, respected as a cornerstone upon which we build the University, Council accepts that further actions must and will be taken to ensure that appropriate recognition is given to the hurt generated by the legacy of Cecil John Rhodes.

It is incumbent on us to accept that, as is the case with many great institutions founded in the 19th century or earlier, contradictions have enabled positive changes that have sustained Rhodes University as the place "where leaders learn". It was at Rhodes University, in 1967, that Stephen Bantu Biko led black students out of the National Union of South Africa Students (NUSAS) slating, amongst others, an incomplete integration of student politics. In 1991, again at Rhodes University, the South African National Students Congress merged with NUSAS and formed the South African Students Congress. In Steve Biko's honour, the Rhodes University student union building now bears his name. There are many other South African liberation struggle icons who have been honoured in different ways, including through naming buildings and academic programmes after them. The families of Enoch Sontonga, Charlotte Maxeke and Robert Sobukwe have recently agreed to the use of the names of these icons to rename some of the buildings on campus. These new names were approved by Council following requests from the students who live at the respective residences.

Rhodes University has been, and remains, committed to the redress of the wrongs of the past and to build an even stronger institution that every African, including all the residents of Makana local municipality can be proud of.

Further announcements will be made at the appropriate time on additional actions to be taken to ensure that, while acknowledging our historical contradictions and the pain caused, the University continues to deepen the decolonisation and advancement of the institution.