

#RhodesMustFall: No room for ignorance or arrogance

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KEYWORDS:

transformation; higher education; Rhodes; South Africa; University of Cape Town

HOW TO CITE:

Pather C. #RhodesMustFall: No room for ignorance or arrogance. *S Afr J Sci.* 2015;111(5/6), Art. #a0109, 2 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2015/a0109>

The 'Rhodes Must Fall' crusade, and its consequent movements, has had remarkable coverage in serious academic debate and in the popular press ever since the first rumblings of the protest began at the University of Cape Town. Comments on the news items have flourished; tweets have hit the highest song-bird notes. Former Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, Saleem Badat, has claimed: 'The recent developments at the University of Cape Town and at Rhodes mark the beginnings of a social movement. It comprises students and academics, mainly black, but some white. This social movement is likely to extend to other universities, expand, and strengthen over time.'

Jonathan Jansen, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State disagrees. He says: 'No, there will not be wholesale changes to memorials on or off university campuses. No, the country is not about to implode because some UCT students tackled the Rhodes statue. This turmoil will pass.' The Institute for Future Studies at Stellenbosch University has another view. Their commentary on the events is that this all amounts to (as their headline spells out): 'The Pyrrhic Victory of the War on the Past.'

However, a senior staff member at the University of Cape Town feels otherwise, and expresses her personal views below.

Editor-in-Chief

The University of Cape Town (UCT) ticks all the boxes required to be a research-intensive institution of higher education on the African continent. UCT regularly appears as the leading African institution on Westernised ranking systems such as the *Times Higher Education* and Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings, and, within South Africa, research indicators show that UCT consistently outperforms competitors. As such there seems to be no problem in attracting top students and staff. Our unique location on the slopes of the Table Mountain nature reserve is often cited as an attraction for staff, and many do not leave. It is this same land that was 'donated' by British mining magnate Cecil John Rhodes, on which three of our campuses have been built. Since 1934, a bronze statue of Rhodes has stood on the Upper Campus, overlooking the rugby fields and the Middle and Lower Campuses, as well as much of the city and the Cape Flats.

Without warning, on 9 March 2015, our desire to be a leading African world-class research-intensive university came under scrutiny, with the start of a critical examination of our position as a public institution of higher education in a country two decades post-apartheid. UCT played an important role in the struggle against apartheid, yet not enough has been done post-1994 to bring about freedom and change into its classrooms, laboratories and demographic profiles. Over these past two decades, critical opportunities for change at UCT were instead missed, including during the period 1997–2008 under the respective reigns of the first two South African black Vice-Chancellors, Dr Mamphela Ramphele and Professor Njabulo Ndebele. In his installation address in August 2008, current Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price charged that, despite UCT's success and guidance under the leadership of his predecessor, the 'record of assertive efforts at transformation is producing results through the recruitment of black academic staff, though this, and particularly retaining such staff, needs renewed focus'¹.

A few attempts by a group of UCT academics over the past few months to openly criticise and raise awareness about the lack of transformation at UCT, and specifically the lack of black academic staff,²⁻⁴ were not sufficient to gain the attention of the university body. It was only when the statue of Rhodes was defaced on 9 March, that the university – and indeed the country and beyond – sat up to take note of why there is an urgent need to acknowledge and tackle the transformation-related challenges facing the university.

However, as one looked deeper into the situation, it quickly became evident that the student-led protest was not about Rhodes or his fall. It was rather a symbolic physical representation of all that is wrong with our universities and the country – summed up eloquently by Dr Price in his installation address, with reference to the 'Mafeje Affair'⁵ that started in 1968 at UCT: 'That legacy still plagues UCT, and the university community has still inadequately tackled the need for attitude shifts, culture shifts, proactive redress, to ensure that black people and women feel at home here.' The reality is that the 'Rhodes Must Fall' (RMF) campaign would not have started if the university was successful in bringing about significant transformation-related change over the past two decades.

The RMF campaign has provided me with an opportune and unprecedented occasion for introspection, both as an administrative staff member of this prestigious institution, and someone who has spent half my life confined to the concept of segregation, inequality and injustice on the basis of skin colour. Despite my background, I have mostly neglected to give due consideration to the issue of transformation and my responsibility to the present-day needs of the country. The awkward realisation is that I find myself at an institution in which the structures, policies and processes work – but at a level that is relevant and acceptable to only those people, like myself, who have been less concerned with meaningful change and with a focus on 'getting the work done'. I now realise that we can achieve both – and should indeed aim to do so.



The defaced Rhodes statue (photo: Robert McLaughlin)

My self-examination and conversations with people on both sides of the RMF fence have raised a number of key issues:

- There is no room for ignorance, complacency or arrogance in our universities. Change does not happen on its own – as individuals we are the agents of change, and should take the lead in creating a vision for a transformed workplace and country. Importantly, there should be *acknowledgement* of the need for change, without which there will be no progress.
- Change also starts with leadership, and I believe there is a strong need for the design, implementation and monitoring of a consolidated UCT Transformation Strategy, which will enable us to move away from the Eurocentric and Westernised approach which typically governs our culture, towards an environment of representivity, inclusivity and relevance to the country. Importantly, this responsibility should be co-owned by staff (academic and administrative), students and management, and should come with the realisation that as a publicly funded institution, transformation is a *must*. It should address, amongst others, issues of institutional culture, affirmative action and race, access, language, organisational climate, staff retention, recruitment and training.
- There is an acute need for constructive engagement and platforms for discussion. I have been inspired by transformation-related conversations in my own department these past few weeks, and recognise the need for space for these conversations and debates to occur. These presently take the form of lunch-time seminars, working group discussions, online resources on a shared intranet site, and the use of Eskom's load-shedding 2-hour slot for what we call 'conversations in the dark'.

- There is a pressing need for the review of our curriculum and methodologies of teaching, taking into account our position within the country and continent, but not neglecting our desire to provide an education that is relevant to an international society.
- The RMF campaign has sparked debate at a number of other universities, including Rhodes University, and the universities of KwaZulu-Natal and the Witwatersrand.⁶ There are of course a number of inequities across our higher education system; these are not confined to UCT. I have been impressed – yet often intimidated – by the young generation of students (the true 'born frees') who have been vocal throughout the RMF campaign. But they are our future – and a common denominator across our higher-education sector.
- The setting up of a national independent committee or body that actively oversees transformation in the national higher-education sector is needed. Matters pertaining to academic transformation could further be embedded into the responsibilities of bodies such as the South African Young Academy of Science, thus shifting some of this responsibility to the next generation of academics. The Department of Higher Education and Training's nGAP intervention to create more academic posts at universities is encouraging (with at least 80% of such posts to be filled by black South African academics), and more of such interventions are needed to grow the pipeline of black academic researchers.

We do not choose to be born into a race or gender or even into a country. But for those of us who choose to be part of this country – irrespective of our origins – we should have as an ideal the need to contribute consciously to change and transformation on a daily basis.

The personal views of the author do not represent the views of the University of Cape Town.

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