

Case Study 2



Innovations in teaching, research and community engagement work at Rhodes University

History of the University (adapted from Maylem, 2005).

Any university's capacity for innovation is intimately intertwined with its history. Rhodes University in South Africa is no exception. Rhodes University, like all universities in South Africa has been institutionally embedded in the unfolding politics of the country from its inception in 1904. After the South African War (between the English and the Boers), the British High Commissioner, Milner, strove to 'reconstruct' the war-torn country along 'English' lines. His anglicisation policy rested in part on the promotion of 'English style' education. At the time Milner feared that a rising Dutch/Afrikaner culture in the Western Cape would threaten British supremacy. He thus established a university college in the Eastern Cape, with its cultural and political role unambiguously to be the 'engine room' of English cultural ascendancy in South Africa. The College was established to extend the 'Imperial idea' in South Africa. Initially a proposal was put forward to name the university the Eastern Cape University College, but in an attempt to raise funds from the Rhodes Trust, a decision was made to name the university after Rhodes (who had very little to do with the Eastern Cape during his life). In the first few years after its establishment, Rhodes University's ties with the British Empire continued to be strengthened in symbolic ways.



Almost 30 years after its establishment, Rhodes University was entrenching itself as a segregated university. It clearly expressed and conformed to the segregationist ideology and practice that established social and political order in South Africa during the first half of the twentieth century. It is important to note that the University initially chose to operate as a segregated university long before it was legally bound to do so in 1959. Some explain this in terms of not wanting to draw students away from its neighbouring Fort Hare University. Moreover, Rhodes was not alone among universities in its discriminatory practice in the English-speaking world. The Universities of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and Cape Town (UCT) for example, admitted very few black students in the 1930s. Wits had 10 such students, and UCT 40, although these two universities changed their admissions policies faster than Rhodes did. Rhodes was slow to 'open its doors' to black students, and it was only late in 1959 that protests against state- instituted apartheid were heard on the Rhodes campus. There was a 1000-strong march against the Extension of Universities Act and the Fort Hare Transfer Bill. Despite this, actions by the University in the 1960s (which reflect continued discriminatory practices) reflect that Rhodes University, while adopting an 'apolitical stance' was, in fact politically embedded in the segregationist policies of the country. As Maylem states "Founded as a university to promote 'Englishness' and further the British imperial project, Rhodes University for the first 65 years of its existence operated within, and conformed to, a social and political order based on racial discrimination".

There were, however, numerous academics and students operating within the institution that spoke out, and made significant contributions to the eventual overturning of the colonial and apartheid state. These voices became more prominent in the 1980s, when Rhodes University staff and students became more active and vociferous in the struggle for freedom in South Africa. By 1980 the University had a completely open admissions policy. Academic programmes were also beginning to reflect a broader engagement with the social politics of the country, and to respond more directly to development questions and issues. In 2005, during the Centenary Celebrations, a Colloquium was held at the University which was devoted to the Critical Tradition at Rhodes University (Hendricks & Vale, 2005). Questions raised at this colloquium included questions such as "Can critique help us resolve South Africa's many contradictions, now and in the future? And does a university, like Rhodes, have a professional responsibility to train critical minds? Indeed, what does it mean to be critical, in the past and today?" (ibid) This question lies at the forefront of studies on environment and sustainable development at Rhodes University. Students engaged in the environmental sciences and environmental and sustainability studies are exposed to pedagogies and processes



that foster critical thinking and a critically reflexive response to sustainable development questions that arise at the interface of society and the environment.

Vision and mission of the University

In 2000 the University reviewed its vision and mission. This vision and mission show a commitment to contributing to the development of South African society, and to affirming its African identity. Adénisà (2005) comments that it was only in its 87th year of existence that the University first affirmed a recognition of its Southern African setting. The critical change in the 2000 Vision Statement (see Appendix A) is primarily about commitment to affirming the African identity of the University. This represents a radical departure from its earlier anglicised history (as outlined). Part of the Mission Statement commits the University to addressing environment and development concerns in the Eastern Cape province (where the University is located) but also in a broader South and Southern African context.

This new Vision and Mission opened the doors to further development and expansion of environmental and sustainability-oriented programmes at the University. In 1990 the first Masters Degree in Environmental Education in Africa was established at Rhodes University, with the establishment of the Murray & Roberts Chair of Environmental Education. This is still the only Chair of Environmental Education in Africa. In 1990 the University also signed the Tailloires Declaration and immediately established an environmental policy which committed the University to expanding its environmental programmes, its research and its community contributions. In 1997 the University further strengthened environmental learning and research at Rhodes University through the establishment of an Environmental Science Programme in the Faculty of Science. This grew so rapidly that by 2000 it was established as a fully-fledged Department. By 2002 the University had established an Environmental Programmes Committee (chaired by the Vice Principal), which is now being reoriented to becoming a fully-fledged Senate sub-committee. In 2004 the Environmental Science Department, working with the Environmental Education Programme and the Investec Business School, established a programme offering modules on Environmental Management and Sustainable Development to Business Leaders in the MBA programme. But what has all this meant for teaching and learning in the University? Is there evidence of innovations in teaching and learning approaches? Has it influenced community engagement work?

Innovations in teaching and learning



There are many Faculties and Departments teaching environmental and sustainability-oriented courses at Rhodes University. Each discipline has its own approaches to teaching and learning, but there is evidence that some approaches are used in the range of environment and sustainability programmes across different faculties and departments. These are summarised in the following table for easy reference.

Innovation in teaching and learning	Description	Examples
Multi- and interdisciplinary co-operation	<p>Various departments co-operate in teaching programmes so that students are exposed to the multi-disciplinary nature of environmental and sustainability issues.</p> <p>Some courses (e.g. the Environmental Education Masters course) are interdisciplinary and draw on disciplines such as Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, Environmental Science and Education.</p>	<p>The Environmental Science Department or the Politics Department would teach sessions in an Environmental Education course, while Environmental Education lecturers would teach in the MBA Environmental Management & Sustainability Principles courses.</p>
Participatory approaches to curriculum and learning	<p>Students are involved in the design of the courses, and students' knowledge and ideas are utilised in the programmes.</p>	<p>Using participatory approaches to curriculum design, in which students choose directions within a broader, negotiated framework. Pedagogies that are open-ended, and allow for student participation (e.g. active learning approaches, problem-solving approaches, etc.) are used.</p>



<p>Deliberation of values, ethics and different ways of knowing</p>	<p>Students are exposed to different ways of knowing and valuing, and to different epistemologies (ways of knowing).</p>	<p>In the Environmental Education programme students are exposed to deliberative approaches to values (where they discuss different value orientations). They complete a course on environmental ethics in which they engage in cultural critique, dealing with ethical quandaries and deliberate solutions to ethical dilemmas.</p> <p>In the Environmental Science and Environmental Education programmes students actively investigate and work with traditional ecological knowledge and indigenous ways of knowing.</p>
<p>Use of case study approaches</p>	<p>Studying issues using in-depth approaches and real-life examples.</p>	<p>In the MBA programme case studies are used to probe sustainability approaches in business and industry. Business leaders are invited to present their approaches to students, and students complete assignments which are based on locally relevant cases.</p>
<p>Socially critical pedagogical approaches</p>	<p>Studying the underlying causes of issues and risk, particularly seeking to illuminate constraining structures, politics and other 'hidden' aspects of issues.</p>	<p>In the Environmental Education programme, students study the politics of issues, their history, their long-term and short-term causes and impacts, the structural factors that shape and cause issues, and power relations at play in any given context that may influence/shape the nature of the issue/risk. This allows students to develop a deeper and politically- and historically-grounded analysis of issues. Addressing the underlying causes of issues and risks is seen as being more important than addressing the 'symptoms' or the superficial manifestations of issues. Socially critical approaches also develop students' critical thinking skills and allow students to take more informed actions.</p>
<p>Reflexive learning for action and evaluation</p>	<p>Reflexive learning involves critical reflections, action taking and evaluative competence (to change situations as a result of reflection and action).</p>	<p>Examples would be involving students in local action projects such as water quality monitoring in local catchments, where they can critically analyse and investigate the causes of the problem, and then identify solutions, and take action. They are also encouraged to evaluate their actions, and their proposed solutions for effectiveness.</p>



<p>Responsiveness to economic, social and environmental context</p>	<p>Identifying case studies and learning opportunities that have contemporary relevance and value to the economic, social and environmental context of the university and its society.</p>	<p>An example includes participatory learning and research in the Environmental Education and Environmental Science programmes where students were involved in developing a Local Environmental Action Plan for the Makana Municipality as part of a collaborative project involving various stakeholders, University faculties and the Development Bank of Southern Africa.</p>
<p>Action research and community problem-solving approaches</p>	<p>A number of students use action research approaches to addressing environmental questions in their societies.</p>	<p>Some examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action research to address questions of ESD in participatory materials development projects in Zambia. • Action research to address farmer participation in sustainable development initiatives in Uganda. • Action research to involve schools in improving school food gardens as a source of learning about sustainable development questions in schools. • Action research for solutions to local waste management problems. • Action research to strengthen local small and medium enterprises, etc.
<p>Assessment as learning</p>	<p>Changing assessment practices to allow for student participation, critical reflection on their own practice and on the outcomes of their learning and practice.</p>	<p>Negotiating assessment criteria with students to establish the frameworks for their learning and learning outcomes. Encouraging participation in the assessment process through peer assessments and self assessment, as well as tutor assessment. Changing orientations to assessment, from judgmental processes to processes of learning and reflection for students.</p>

Learning and action

As can be seen from this table, there is a close connection between learning and action in the environmental and sustainable development programmes at Rhodes University. Students are involved in service learning programmes, and in projects that contribute directly to action and change. Other programmes are oriented towards developing action competence (i.e. the skills for taking action). Some of the features of these learning programmes include the development of critical thinking skills, the ability to reflexively review actions and evaluate changes, competences to solve problems and abilities to



evaluate different disciplinary insights in different contexts. Students are also encouraged to review reflexively action-based approaches to sustainable development, and to consider critically the emergence of an increasing dominance of action-based strategies in/for ESD!

Building networked learning communities

Rhodes University academics and students involved in environmental studies and environmental science at Rhodes are connected to, and make many contributions to a number of different environmental learning networks.

Local learning networks: Significant to environmental and sustainability practices is making practical and hands-on contributions to one's own community. In the Makana District (where Rhodes University is situated) academics and students have made various contributions to the development of a local learning network. For example, in 1990 the University's Environmental Education unit assisted the municipality to establish a community environmental forum, which now meets bi-annually to deliberate environment and development issues in the Makana district. The University has also provided support and capacity-building training to local community-based organisations such as the Millennium Tree Planting project, which provides a community greening service. In 2005 various faculties in the University were involved in research and development work to establish a Local Environmental Action Plan for the municipality, which is now in its second phase.

International learning networks: The environmental programmes at Rhodes University are also linked to a range of international learning networks. For example, the Environmental Science Department is working in an international learning network to develop methodologies for people's biodiversity registers. These will allow communities to assist with monitoring biodiversity at a local level. The Environmental Education Unit is involved in an international learning network consisting of a number of universities working together to develop environmental and sustainability education courses and programmes in African universities. Through its participation in a broadening international learning network, this course development network has contributed to the development of this ESD Innovations Course!

Innovations in research

Research design course: The Environmental Education Unit, working within the Faculty of Education have pioneered a research design decisions course for researchers working at the people-environment-education interface. This research design course



considers a range of research methodologies and their implications for exploring people-environment-education relationships. This course includes an overview (and critiques of) positivist research orientations, interpretivist research orientations, critical research orientations and post-structural research orientations, exposing students to a broad range of options for designing research. This innovation has been crucial in enabling students to engage in 'cutting edge' research at the people-environment-education interface. Through this they can also establish new knowledge through the application of a variety of methodologies which provide different vantage points on environment and sustainability questions.

PhD weeks: To strengthen the application and use of a variety of research methodologies, and to enhance the quality of Environmental and Sustainability Education research, the Faculty of Education has introduced a PhD week programme. This exposes students to advanced debates on social theory and research methodology (i.e. how ideas about society shape and influence research methodologies); evidence and analysis (i.e. quality in research) and advanced educational theory and practice (i.e. how theories and trends in the field of education) influence ESD practice.

Context-embedded research: New orientations to research design are emerging out of these efforts to conceptualise research at the people-environment-education interface in an African context. There is evidence in research programmes that studies are increasingly applying context-embedded research designs, drawing on broader theories and methodologies to guide research design (Lotz-Sisitka & O'Donoghue, 2006).

Innovations in community engagement work

Through these experiences in teaching, learning and research, have come innovations in community engagement work. In particular, the close relationship between teaching, research and community interactions has been an emerging focus in the environmental education programme at Rhodes University. An example would best illustrate this:

- As part of its community engagement work, the Rhodes Environmental Education Unit provides support to local teachers to implement Eco-School activities, and to improve lesson planning with an environmental focus.
- Out of this experience a short course called 'Schools and Sustainability' was developed. This teaching programme is used to support professional development of teachers around the country,



and is also included in more formal teaching programmes in the Education Faculty.

- A number of research projects have been developed that are based on, or linked to this community engagement initiative. For example, some students are researching the use of active learning approaches in Eco-Schools, others are researching the effectiveness of auditing activities in this course, and others have researched the relationships between schools and communities in the context of this programme.

Challenges

Despite many gains in terms of innovative ESD practices, there are always associated challenges. Some of these include:

- Changing assessment practices is not always easy due to institutional cultures and assessment histories;
- Changing approaches to research is also not easy, due to established 'norms' on what counts as 'good/valid' research. To introduce new approaches requires high levels of motivation and skills to 'defend' and 'introduce' new approaches in ways that convince others of their merit and validity;
- Inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary work is not always easy in a strongly disciplinary-oriented institution. At best, multi-disciplinary approaches are possible, but these are often dependent on good will and co-operative interactions between lecturers who are able to work together with each other;
- Action-centred pedagogies require time and commitment from both staff and students;
- Students are not always oriented towards an acceptance of participatory approaches to learning, particularly since they have been 'schooled' in authoritarian, expert-centred approaches to education;
- Changing the culture of an institution takes years, and innovative practices are often viewed as 'side issues' or 'side shows' in the mainstream of an institution's practices; and
- It is not always easy to obtain research support and funding for new innovations, and it takes time and consistent effort to institutionalise these in the existing systems of a university.

Adénisà (2005) in his critical assessment of Rhodes University's aspirations to affirm its African identity comments that the word 'African' may well have specific and limited effectiveness, given its situation in racial classificatory systems that underscored settler colonial and apartheid systems. However, he points to another perspective on Africanness, arising from a 'historically-determined rebellion against the domination of others'. He also poses the



challenge that achieving aspirations to establish an African identity in a university involves two sets of challenges: the discursive and the institutional. He then further comments on the idea of an African university as *practice*, and outlines how other universities in Africa, for example, the Ibadan School of History, have been able to establish agendas of relevance to the development of African societies. The Ibadan School of History was able to displace and discredit racist colonial historiography, noting that its contribution lay in *the will* to give African content and focus to the discipline of History. Similarly, the Dar es Salaam School of History was able to establish an emancipatory project for historical studies, as did the University of Dakar. These three clusters of intellectual work, with their epistemological and methodological foci were “driven by a shared commitment to their locales. For each, Africa was their locale” (ibid: 28). In his paper Adénisà argues that local relevance is never at odds with global and rigorous scholarship and being internationally reputable.

Is it possible to see the embryonic workings of an African agenda for social and environmental change in the ESD initiatives at Rhodes? Will this assist the University to ‘make meaning’ of its newly-formed aspirational vision statement? The answer clearly still lies in the future. Continued ESD work at Rhodes University over the next Decade, during the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, will surely provide us with deeper and more substantive perspective on this question.

Adapt the case study ...

This case study framework can be used as an example for the development of other case studies, in other universities.

Try to develop a case study of practice in your own university or in another university context.



References

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Appendix A: Vision and Mission of Rhodes University

Vision

Rhodes University's vision is to be an outstanding internationally-respected academic institution which proudly affirms its African identity and which is committed to democratic ideals, academic freedom, rigorous scholarship, sound moral values and social responsibility.

Mission

In pursuit of its vision the University will strive to produce outstanding internationally-accredited graduates who are innovative, analytical, articulate, balanced and adaptable, with a life-long love of learning; and to strive, through teaching, research and community service, to contribute to the advancement of international scholarship and the development of the Eastern Cape and Southern Africa.

Accordingly, the University undertakes:

- to develop shared values that embrace basic human and civil rights;
- to acknowledge and be sensitive to the problems created by the legacy of apartheid, to reject all forms of unfair discrimination and to ensure that appropriate corrective measures are employed to redress past imbalances;
- to create a research-based teaching and learning environment that will encourage students to reach their full potential, that is supportive of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and that will produce critical, capable and skilled graduates who can adapt to changing environments;
- to promote excellence and innovation in teaching and learning by providing staff and students with access to relevant academic development programmes;
- to provide an attractive, safe and well-equipped environment that is conducive to good scholarship and collegiality;
- to provide a safe and nurturing student support system as well as a diverse array of residential, sporting, cultural and leadership opportunities that will foster the all-round development of our students, the university and the region as a whole;
- to attract and retain staff of the highest calibre and to provide development programmes for staff at all levels;
- to promote excellence in research and other creative endeavours;
- to play an active role in promoting inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration within the Eastern Cape Province;
- where appropriate, to assist in the development of the Eastern Cape Province by making available the university's expertise, resources and facilities;
- to play a leading role in establishing a culture of environmental concern by actively pursuing a policy of environmental best practice; and
- to strive for excellence and to promote quality assurance in all its activities.

