

Distinguished Old Rhodian Award

Acceptance Speech

Chris Brink
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1. Thank you, Mr Jacobs, for those kind words, and thank you, Dr Clayton and Rhodes University for this award. I am very honoured.
2. I went to Rhodes in 1972, having graduated the year before at what was then the Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit in Johannesburg, so you can imagine it was a bit of a change.
3. I must give thanks to Rhodes for three things. First, I learnt to speak English – after a fashion. Perhaps I should explain that I grew up in a small town called Upington, at the southern end of the Kalahari desert. In the 1950s and 1960s there was not much English spoken in Upington, and of course no English at the Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit either. So I was an adult before I learnt to speak English.
4. Secondly, Rhodes gave me a significant academic boost. I had graduated BSc in mathematics and computer science, but I also wanted to study philosophy. So, while I was doing postgraduate study in mathematics, the university allowed me – indeed, encouraged me – to follow modules in philosophy as well. Not only that, but after I had finished my Master’s degree in mathematics, they actually allowed me to enrol for a Master’s degree in philosophy. There was a provision at Rhodes called *ad eundem gradum*, which means ‘to the same degree’, but which was interpreted as saying that the university Senate could admit any candidate to any course of study provided Senate was satisfied about the academic credentials of that person. Because of that enlightened view I think I must be one of very few people who hold a Master’s degree in philosophy even though I do not hold a Bachelor’s degree in philosophy. I think it was on the basis of my performance in both Maths and Philosophy that I received a scholarship to go to Cambridge to do a PhD, which launched my academic career. So thank you to Rhodes for that.
5. The third and main thing I have to thank Rhodes for is a certain outlook on academic work and academic life, a way of crossing boundaries which we nowadays call interdisciplinarity. My academic area of specialisation is logic, which is a kind of licence to stick your nose into any other subject. As a logician, I have made a career out of interdisciplinary, having worked and published in computer science, in mathematics and in philosophy. It was Rhodes University that first gave me the realisation that such a career might be possible.
6. In later years, as you heard, I have worked at a number of different universities, on different continents. I’ve been an academic for about 40 years. Then, when you eventually retire, you ask yourself: what have I learnt?

7. For myself, what I have learnt is that there are two key questions any university should always ask itself about its academic work.
 - The first question is: 'What are we good at?' Universities are very practiced at responding to this question, and you only have to look at their websites to get an answer. A university might say, for example, we are very good at zoology, or chemistry, or journalism. Or: we have an excellent Law School, or a Business School, or a Medical Faculty. Nowadays, most frequently, universities will also respond to the question 'What are you good at?', by citing some ranking or university league table. So they would say 'We are number so-and-so on the ranking by somebody or other, in the field of such and such.
 - Very good. But there is also a second question. While the first question is 'What are we good at?', the second question is 'What are we good for?'. This is a different kind of question. It is not about our academic output, but about our role in society. How, if at all, do we respond to the challenges faced by civil society, globally, nationally or locally? How do we interact with our communities? How do we contribute to citizenship and nation-building?
8. I published a book recently, titled *The Soul of a University: Why excellence is not enough*. The book really hangs on the juxtaposition of these two key questions. The question 'What are we good at?' is a question about academic excellence, while the question 'What are we good for?' is a question about societal purpose. We must not only pursue academic excellence for its own sake, we must also (and I stress *also*) pursue it with a clear sense of purpose: seeking to deploy what we are good at in service of society.
9. At my previous university, Newcastle in the UK, we reached our response to the question 'What are we good for?' by the following train of thought:
 - Of all the grand challenges facing civil society, both globally and locally, which of these do we have the knowledge base and the expertise to help find solutions to?
 - Which of this set of challenges are particularly relevant in our own city and region, and of particular importance to our local communities?

From this starting point we then articulated a small number of societal challenge themes, which became key aspects of our research and teaching. We managed to make a positive difference to the city as well – and there is good evidence for saying so.

I tell this story because I know Rhodes University has a particularly strong symbiotic relationship with its city – the city I knew as Grahamstown, which is now Makhanda.

10. I would like to applaud this relationship between the city and the university. There is a whole school of thought nowadays that speaks of a university as an *anchor institution* in its own city or region and it seems to me that Rhodes performs this role very well.

11. From personal experience, I know that a university can, if it puts its mind to it, make a significant contribution to civil society, without in any way diminishing its role in the pursuit of academic excellence. It all begins with asking both of those two key questions, 'What are we good at?', and 'What are we good for?', and giving equal attention to both of them.
12. So I will leave you with a simple thought: that academic excellence is necessary but not sufficient. Beyond excellence, there is also the question of purpose, of our role in society. What we need, and what I believe Rhodes delivers, is excellence with a purpose.
13. Thank you again for the honour bestowed on me tonight, and all best wishes to the university that made it possible for me to receive it.

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