

Rethinking Universities' Success Criteria for Community Engagement

By Eusebius McKaiser

*Opening Address of the Durban University of Technology and Rhodes
University Community Engagement Symposium 2021*

Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Vice Chancellor. CVs also just sound so over the top, don't they? Sometimes I wonder who is this person being described, and what are they not leaving out? He got drunk at the Rat and Parrot. He skinny-dipped as an undergraduate at Winchester. Second year Maths with Prof. Kotzer showed him flames and then he stuck to his BA degree after that. His first manuscript about being the first generation of Coconuts at Graeme College never got published because it wasn't good enough. It's amazing the CV that is not actually left out, that gives you a sense of the more holistic picture. So if you are a student in the room, not a mid-career professional, please always be suspicious of brilliant CVs. They only give you a partial story of the person in front of you.

That said, good morning. It's wonderful to be back at my alma mater, Graeme College and Rhodes University always have a special place in my life. And it's really, really fantastic to be giving this opportunity to speak to you, Di [Hornby] and the committee. Thank you for asking me to be one of the Keynote Speakers of this incredibly important symposium. And I welcome everyone who's physically present, as well as those who are tuned in digitally, as well as both members of the Rhodes University community, and the Durban University of Technology communities at large as well.

The title of my keynote this morning - I wanted to be very practical and not very philosophical, at least that's where I'm going to be headed - '*Rethinking Universities Success Criteria for Community Engagement.*' I specialised in ethics and epistemology as a philosopher, and in the last couple of weeks - and thinking about my remarks - I thought I could deliver a talk that is very academic way and reflect in particular on **exclusionary epistemologies.**

There's so many faces here that I recognise. When I come into Grahamstown, I was like, if you like your character in *Cheers* in the 1980s, it's just very weird. How are you?

But then I thought, part of the problem precisely when it comes to the way in which we think about Higher Education, is that we often collapse into that which we are most comfortable with, which is theorising about Higher Education. And there's a lot of excellent work that has been done. I mean, the Vice Chancellor referenced one of the most important books reflecting in particular on that question. So initially, I'm gonna make some principled comments, but after that, I really wanna get stuck into and provoke you into thinking practically about Community Engagement and what the implications are. And I thought that the foundation that the Vice Chancellor has given us for the symposium - and I'm not just saying it because I love him to bits - was excellent. In fact, rendering most of my talks superfluous. Thank you, VC.

And so I'm going to do three things: I'm going to make some preliminary remarks, some principles to get us going. After that, I want to talk specifically then about the first of my two more practical focal points in this talk. Some positive theses in terms of **who is the community that we should have in mind? What do we mean by community?** And then lastly, I want to end off by talking about some practical implications for teaching. What are the pedagogical and the administrative implications of taking community engagement seriously? But I think even the principle stuff, we will have to debate, because presumably, a lot of the converted self-select attendance at a conference or a symposium of this kind. But maybe not.

And so, some of you will find my initial remarks trite, but there may be others that will find it to be counterintuitive and may want to wrestle with it. And so I'm gonna state it anyway, boldly, so that you know what are the premises that are lurking in the background of my prescriptions for how we should think pedagogically about community, which is parts two and part three of my talk.

The first principle remark that I want to make is to and the VC touched on this, is to talk bluntly about **academic freedom**. We enter debates about who we teach, what we teach, what we research, on the assumption that the academic, the lecturer, the head of department, has got unbridled freedom to make choices about content and choices about methodology even in terms of how you approach teaching. And I wanna push back against that, and I wanna make a general point - which actually hurts the VC while I was eavesdropping waiting for the symposium to start, making a comment about democracy - that I think is part and parcel of the very first principle point that I want to make. And it is the following that: **with the exception of the rights to dignity, there's no other value or right in our constitution that is absolute.**

None can speak to any of your friends in the Law Faculty. The Right to Dignity is the only right that is inviolable, not even during a state of emergency can it be limited. But all other rights and all other values, even the other two foundational ones next to dignity, freedom and equality are subject to limitations, provided that they meet the demands and the norms in turn of a just and equitable society as defined obviously. From a legal point of view, in Section 36, but we can extend the legal norms and ask ethical and social questions under what conditions and to what extent can academic freedom be limited? And the only point that I'm making for now is that the very idea of limiting academic freedom tends to scare many academics. And I think that that's a mistake. It's a massive mistake because you are not entitled to absolute academic freedom. You are entitled to freedom. Not absolute freedom. And very often in South Africa, we've seen this across the country year in and year out, particularly over the last couple of years, controversial academic freedom debates, where the assumption of some interlocutors is that the opposite of tyranny is unbridled freedom. And that is a false dichotomy. It is not true. You have massive and important academic freedom as a species of your speech rights in the constitution, but they are not absolute. They are subject to certain considerations. And that's where the contextual considerations that the VC is talking about come into play. And I wanna drill down into what some of them are and what the implications are in a second.

But in the first instance, I'd be happy to box in the Q&A with anyone who thinks that we need to have an absolutist conception of academic freedom. I think that's absolute nonsense. The only thing you're entitled to ever in an institution, including public institutions, is for the institution to treat you with dignity. Beyond being treated with dignity, you can always be engaged and you can always be constrained provided that there is a justification that is consistent with the requirements of an open and democratic society such as ours. So absolute freedom is a notion that we need to chuck out. And the sooner we do so the more quickly we can have the next conversation, which is who are we and who should we be as Rhodes University, as DUT. But we can't have those conversations in a productive manner if we're gonna always be feeling as if it is territory that is being unfairly entered into when questions about our identity and our social duties are even being raised externally. And also by the administration.

So here I'm certainly on the side - and definitely would side with - the literal remarks and the spirit of the remarks of the Vice-Chancellor. Which then raises the question - okay, we might accept at the general level that absolute freedoms are identical to a complex society, but that doesn't get us very far because we still need to cash that out and then to make sense at a particular level of what the implications are for teaching maths or Geography or English Literature or Philosophy, for example. So where to from there and I'm going to get there. Like I said, I want this to be as practical as possible, but I do think that there are one or two further preliminary remarks that need to be out of the way first before we can get there. And it's uncanny, it's as if we plan to cohere our two sets of remarks.

I think this would also be true of private institutions, but we don't even need to get there because Rhodes University is a public institution. All institutions that impact society are subject to ethical and social debate about the ways in which they do so or fail to do so. But it must be in particular true of institutions that rely on public funding for their existence. They have the least entitlement to say, 'leave me alone', because it's my tax paying money, in part, that pays your salary as an academic and as an administrator of this great institution, that is Rhodes University. How dare you think that I'm not entitled as

a taxpayer of this country to be part of a conversation about who you are and what you do. It just does not make sense. So public institutions, all institutions, I would argue, but public institutions in particular, have got very little leg to stand on in terms of demanding immunity from public scrutiny. You are a public institution. The public is vested in what you do, materially so. And I use materially in all its ambiguity, both in terms of the detail of what you do pedagogically, research-wise, but also directly so in the sense that there are public monies that flow towards the Eastern Cape (the bits that don't get siphoned off) and then all the way to Makhanda. And that goes into running this institution known as Rhodes University.

I see we've stopped calling it the *University Currently Known as Rhodes*. I think that is a mistake and a little bit of a break. And so the question then is what returns for that public investment am I getting as a taxpayer? And I just can't understand. I haven't even staked an answer to some of the questions about how should we do business differently, from a Community Engagement point of view, which is part two and three of my talk. But it's amazing how many people get emotional just about these meta-questions being raised at all, as if they should be off bounds, which really does not make sense. If the public invests in an institution, the public is entitled to ask, 'are we *getting adequate returns on that public investment?*' Because if we are not, there may be an opportunity cost to investing in this particular institution. Perhaps more money should go to another institution or to a different way of trying to improve the lot of citizens in a country. So those two points for me are worth reflecting on. And if you find them tried, fantastic. If you don't, let's have a conversation during the Q&A about them.

The first being that **academic freedom is incredibly important as is our speech rights in general**. But academic freedom is not absolute and it is subject to the limitations as we have defined legalistically. I happen to be a law graduate from this fantastic university, but I think that legal norms are not the only norms that matter. I think there are social and ethical norms that are even more important to be asked about how you exercise your freedom. So I'm not trying to impose a legalistic analysis on academic freedom.

And then the second point that I hope is common cause between us, is that **the public is entitled to wonder whether it gets a net present value for public monies that flows into these institutions of ours.** And so this conversation about who we are, who we should be, how we conduct ourselves, should not be conversations that make us uncomfortable. So let's go there immediately then.

The question of society is really interesting and of community. Society and community - one can stipulate conceptually so that you don't talk past each other in the room when you're having a conversation about community engagement. As a philosopher, I'm not vested in how we define them. As an interlocutor, I'm more concerned that we have the same definitions in mind when we are in dialogue with each other. So that our conversations are meaningful, however you wish to define them. You are the specialist, you probably have got intellectual reasons why you prefer this definition over that definition. But I want to tell you for purposes of my talk, what I have in mind, and the definitions are less important than the insight that I wish to carry with them.

When I think about Community, VC, and I think about our university, I think about it in a couple of ways. You can think of them as concentric circles, closest to the center are particularly important. I think in the first instance community is about where you are located geographically, and if I think about Rhodes University the most important community is the most immediate community physically, and that's the community that is the community of Grahamstown at large. It has to be that's where we find ourselves. This is where we are located.

And it's not a trivial point because there are thousands of people who don't feel that Rhodes University belongs to them, who are physically roaming the city, come in and out of campus, looking for money, begging for food, for leftovers, gets chased away by security guards, are not even recognized just in terms of basic recognition, despite the fact that you've just handed in an essay on Ubuntu, you can walk outside your department and not show any towards that person from Grahamstown because they don't look like one of

your classmates or one of the staff members of the department. **So who is the community?**

The community of Grahamstown has got an ambivalent relationship with Rhodes University. And we've got to be honest about it. I went to see my cousins last night. My sister lives in extension 10 or 9, I think it is, then I've got cousins on Curry Street, on the other side of the bridge. They don't have a stake in Rhodes University. When I grew up, I didn't have a stake in Rhodes University as a young boy living on the other side of the bridge. That was just the reality. I hope things have changed. I cannot authoritatively critique our Rhodes University. The most I can say is when I was here for six to seven years, I gradually felt less alienated, but you still didn't naturally feel like the university is a university that is part of the community called the Grainstorm community.

Unlike the external markers that the VC rightly use as one success criterion, because my talk is all about what counts as successful community engagement. I think for most people, if we're to do a survey, my intuition would be that they would see the community of Rhodes as being an internal community of stakeholders rather than seeing themselves self-defined as being part of the Rhodes community. And this doesn't help us as Rhodes. But if it's any bad consolation, it's probably true of other institutions in Grahamstown as well, including some of the schools in Grahamstown. I was sitting in the kitchen last night with my cousin, having a look at the AGM notes for Graeme College. And I went to Graeme College myself. And the one thing I can say about Graeme College, the teachers work very hard. I wouldn't want to ... on the score of hard work, but it is amazing how there's an unreflexive reproduction of certain family names in those schools. You know, you've got the Bradleys, you've got the Fundermillans, it's like all these families who just, you ask, let go already. We need a fresh pair of eyes. Our mothers also want to be the chairperson of the mothers committee. The same names year in and year out. And you see this person is now in charge of the old boys union. I'm like, didn't you have enough like hard work when you were running Bambi's down New Street? Why do you still want to get involved? Retire already. I never felt despite doing well at Graeme College, being one of the top students in the province, deputy head prefect. I still felt

like an outsider the day I left. I had imposter syndrome until I left, even as a top old Graemian. I don't think I left Rhodes feeling like I was an imposter. I drank myself into familiarity. But I do think that the community at large doesn't necessarily feel that Rhodes plays that role. And we have to ask ourselves, whether the public gets the necessary returns on the investment if a large number of the road of the Grahamstown community doesn't have a stake in Rhodes University. And I really, I'm not convinced that they do. I could be wrong. Maybe things have changed. I don't come home often enough, but when I tell my family I'm coming to give a talk at Rhodes, I may as well say I'm coming to give a talk in Port Alfred. And that's just the reality.

Then the community is also the students, the staff (academic, and the administrative staff). And I say administrative deliberately to include everyone in admin. And I'm not just talking the familiar admin, Mrs. Wicks. I'm also talking about the ground staff, the technical staff, many of them do not get the kind of Rhodes experience that I would like them to get as a proud alumnus. When I hear a driver telling me I've been a driver for 14 years and I've been on level four in the hierarchy of employment, there's no career trajectory that goes on in that person's life. I do not understand how my driver manages and kudos to him to have his children at one of the best schools in the country in PE or protect his privacy. Insane. Hard work and perseverance. Not because Rhodes is helping him, but probably because the Department of Health is doing a little bit better as an employer than Rhodes University, which is where his wife is working. But he's been here for 14 years, stuck in the same position. He is Rhodes - not Sam's Rhodes, not my Rhodes. (Sorry, Sam)- and that is something else we need to do justice by.

When we talk about community, are we talking about students and academic staff or we're always also talking admin staff? And if we are talking admin staff, who do we have in mind? John Gillam or do we also have in mind the *sisi* that works in the Hall? And we've got to be honest about it. And that's the level of practicality with which the symposium must be tackled. If not, we're simply going to be two years from now be proud to produce a proceedings from the 2021 Symposium with some beautiful letters showing

that we know the singular of symposia, but we haven't changed the landscape socially.

I want to move on.

Having defined community to two very practical sets of themes that I want to explore now. What does it all mean? What does it mean practically? I want to in turn address first lecturers and also the academic overseers. And I come to this last part of my talk with humility. I, like a good would-be academic acknowledge that I do not teach and I've been away from the academy in a public role as a broadcaster and as a journalist. So for all I know, things have fundamentally changed and I would be delighted. Try and wrestle with the moral and the principles that I want to articulate, less so the examples. The examples may be dated, and I'm secretly hoping that they're very dated, so much so that you will push back in the Q&A. But the examples are heuristic devices with which to make more general points. So that's the deal between us. And I fully take that I could be completely wrong. If you are and academic, mindful of the fact that academic freedom is not absolute. I think it is critically important to think about what we teach, how we teach, who we teach and what we research. And to do so by asking ourselves, are we with the community? Not anthropologizing the community, but as the VC said, *with* the community.

When we think through those questions of what we teach, how we teach, what kind of research it is that we are focusing on and who we are teaching. Because my suspicion is that we could play example, table tennis across departments, across faculties with levels of community engagement in answering those questions. And that our ultimate fallback in terms of defense lines is to say, leave me alone. I was hired to teach, Coetzee, that's what I did my PhD on. Why do you want me to teach Niq Mhlongo? Who's this guy anyway? I don't regard him as a real novelist. Leave me alone. And if you don't, I know UCT wants me. I think that's pathetic, attitude-anally. You may still arrive at the same conclusion, but I think you should do it based on a reasoned defense of why you should be left alone and why you should be teaching, whatever it is that you are teaching and how you are teaching it.

The dated example that I have unfortunately are from two of my favorite departments at the university. So I'll pick on them, my Department Philosophy and English. Many years ago, and I must stop telling the story because I'm sure it's false by now, Samantha.

Mandla Langa came to visit, remember the incident, in the Politics department. Now, Mandla is one of the best novelists in the country, and you could get two for the price of one. It was recommended to someone in English that perhaps this is an opportunity for their students to meet Mandla. And the response was essentially, 'who'? Which is absolutely pathetic, because Mandla is one of the most important writers that we have in the country. When I did philosophy at Rhodes, women were not taught. Black people were not taught. And I wasn't taught by black people. And only when Samantha Vice came back from Reading, fresh with her wonderful PhD. was there a woman philosopher in the department for the first time. First time I saw a black philosopher were two Americans who came to visit when Tom Martin had a legendary conference on racism in the late 90s, could it be 1999? I think it was. When we had Charles Mills, brilliant professor who passed away recently of Caribbean descent who gave him. Fantastic keynote. And Gordon Lewis, who's one of my favorite living philosophers in the world, one of the best for non-specialists. And two things happened when I saw Lewis. He was teaching with a baby in his hand, and I thought, oh my God, you can take a child to work as an academic? A man with a baby? A black man is speaking philosophy and, everyone, a black man with a baby in his hand speaking philosophy and everyone is listening, and he's got dreadlocks. You can't imagine the impact that has on a black boy from Grahamstown. My lecturers were cool. Marius Vermaer is the best Master's supervisor any young person can hope for. Tom Martin transformed Rhodes' philosophy department immeasurably. We suddenly you don't have to write interget mathematical non-prose to be a philosopher, you can read Satre, and it makes sense you can think about death and about the meaning of life. It took an Australian, and I'm coming here to one of my disappoints about the refusal to think about community. It took an Australian. To develop a curriculum on the philosophy of race in the South African philosophy department. I mean, that's pathetic. And all of my philosopher teachers at

Rhodes are brilliant. I am a good ambassador for Rhodes. I'm not taking anything away from the people who taught me in undergrad until Tom arrived. Francis Williamson, absolutely brilliant. One or two lecturers that left and therefore we got new lecturers. Maurice Verma who was absolutely brilliant. Prof. MacDonald who was absolutely brilliant. But here's the problem with a comfort zone.

One of the reasons why there's this false belief in absolute academic freedom across the country is because laziness creeps in when you don't. And again, I promise you we didn't compare notes. If you don't embrace uncertainty, then you will be defensive about that which you've always taught and you will pretend that academic freedom is a reasonable justification to end the conversation with. But actually, it is simply fear of uncertainty and fear of challenging your general skill set. and applying it to a new problem. So we get an Australian to come and take seriously the question of race. We get an Australian to invite black philosophers. And only when Jeremy came back from Cambridge that we start getting women being taught and feminism being taught, even if it was for five minutes. And then an American has to arrive in South Africa, Therese Aman, before we have a South African philosopher seriously, at least in the English departments, working on Ubuntu as an ethical theory. Meanwhile, I've got to know this until Gordon Lewis introduced me to some of them.

There are black African men and women in this country, including at universities, I was subliminally taught not to respect. If you're in the North West or in Limpopo, I can't think of anyone who's there as a scholar. We've been working on questions such as Ubuntu, for example, works of Satre being produced by people who are not phenotypically white, but you won't find them on the curriculum at UCT, at Stellenbosch, at Natal, at Rhodes, even at Wits University. And then you get sent in an American accent, traveling the world as the English speaking philosopher expert on Ubuntu. How jarring is that? I put that question to a South African philosopher at the University of Johannesburg with my penchant for awkwardness, to which her response was, well, I get taught. And that's why what I said earlier, it wasn't, I wasn't making it up. In fact, I was being, as young people would say, gaslit, if that's

the right verb, because she turned it around and made it seem as if I'm being anti-intellectual. You know, while a good philosopher is someone who teaches what they are an expert on, so can't expect me to be teaching Ubuntu. It's not my specialism. And the subtext was, '*you think you're asking a great question, Eusebius, but actually you're revealing why you're not an academic. And academics stick to what it is they did in their PhD.*' Well, I call bullshit. If your PhD is worth anything, then knowledge doesn't end there. You have general research skillset that you should be able to apply.

I mean, you don't have to think and write about Emmanuel Kant for the next 50 years. What stops you from taking an interest in someone else? Sure, you can do your PhD on [J.M.] Coetzee. Coetzee is my favorite South African author, novelist. I'll happily get into Coetzee, and I have at the right hand parent, many a Coetzee defense. I love Coetzee, but I mean, for goodness sake, there's so much rich black woman writing in South Africa at the moment. If you are incapable of teaching an undergraduate class on black South African contemporary writing, for example, then you really shouldn't be employed. It's a waste of public money. And that can live side by side with your deep interest of a fourth reading of whatever your favorite could see in novelties. And so you have to challenge yourself ethically to think about what it is that you are teaching and what it is that you are not teaching. I'll speed up a little bit. So if you are an English South African literature teacher and you are unfamiliar with the likes of Zukiswa Wanner, Miq Mhlongo - I don't know, have we cancelled Thando? - Mandla Langa, Zakes Mda, then I think Houston, we have a problem. I really think we do. Those should be the absolute baseline. I specialise in epistemology and ethics, but Wits University, when I was a lecturer there, could call on me to teach Introduction to Philosophy of Religion. There are just certain basic things any lecturer should be able to do in their discipline. And if you can't, it's quite revealing. Reveals something about you, or about your teachers, or about both of you. So you've got to challenge yourself to make sure that you ask relevant questions.

And then lastly, and I'm sort of speeding up here because I'm trying to catch up on time, concomitantly - HODs, Deans, and all the way up to the VC, and Council - don't be scared to demand accountability. It so recently, and I

can't give the details, but in some private conversations around Diversity and Decoloniality that I facilitated, it was really interesting. There you have a Higher Education institution that from the outside is regarded as one of the most diverse cosmopolitan places where you can study, teach, or be a member of in the UK. But you speak to black students, staff, stakeholders, and it's amazing how similar their grievances and experiences are. And many of them are annoyed that the brochures of the institution that managed to get overseas students to get excited about applying, give a deceptive picture of actual life at SO-S, right? And the Adam Habib moment has allowed them to have some really deep, urgent conversations around Who are we truly? Who should we be? And what does decoloniality really, really look like? And one of the difficulties they face, which is why I foregrounded it, VC, is that even there, the resistance to tough questions about *'what are you teaching this year, Eusebius,'* the resistance was always on the normative basis that academic freedom is absolute. Don't dare ask me that question. If you do, I'm gonna try my luck and see whether I can get into Birmingham or to Oxbridge and can take my excellence elsewhere. And it raises a question of accountability.

I think it is really important to be willing. And in fact, I think that you have an ethical duty and an administrative duty to ask tough questions and academic staff must stop being so touchy about these conversations. There's nothing wrong with the head of department saying to me, *'Eusebius, how are you thinking about the people of Grahamstown next year?' 'Eusebius, you have an incredible reputation - generation in generation out - for the world in crisis (subtweeting Julian Cobbing) but maybe you wanna do something different this year. No idea what, but have you thought about your brilliance? You're the only class where we have two classes. People sit on the aisles because you are that popular. Have you ever thought about whether there's something else we might be able to do with your popularity? I don't know what it is, use it, don't use it.'* But there isn't that culture in our institutions because the unexamined background premise is that it is wrong to even raise questions about *what are you teaching, what are you not teaching and how are you teaching?* And that should not be the case.

Part of Community Engagement should be to raise those particular questions. I would go so far, if I was here, a part of the administrative leadership, I would push to make your formal KPAs in part links to measurable Community Engagement. Otherwise, this is just talking shop every two or three years, but you've got to find ways to measure. If you can't measure it, then you can't know whether you are making progress in the right direction. And given that we've all agreed to bring it all full circle, that freedom is not absolute, that accountability doesn't imply tyranny, then the question is, how do we measure community engagement and impact in your teaching choices, your research choices, and what your community project is as a department, as a faculty, articulate it at the beginning of the academic year, check in every six months and see how things are going and build in incentives or if necessary, ways in which there are disincentives if you fail to comply.

Is that unacceptable? Absolutely not. Because you belong to the community. You can't come to a symposium where you are waxing lyrical about community engagement on Monday or Tuesday, but on Friday when the VC wants to talk to you about measuring community engagement in your department, then suddenly you want to write a strongly worded letter to Grocott's Mail. Or then you are contradicting yourself. Then it means that you were simply being performative and virtue signalling on Tuesday. Because the true measure of your commitment to what happened on Tuesday is whether you are willing for that to be cascaded into a practical conversation that is measurable in terms of output and for that to be linked in turn to your performance. Thank you.

**There may be errors in this transcription. The original recording is available.*