

# What are universities for? Lessons for the University of Venda

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Universities deal with the universality of knowledge; they are concerned with human beings in all their manifestations – biological, mental, emotional, objective and subjective – and their social, cultural and economic organisations and interactions with each other; they are concerned with the physical world within which human beings find themselves. They seek to understand that which we do not understand; they seek to explain complexity; they seek to discover that which is hidden from us. They seek to establish what is common to all of us and what distinguishes us each from another or each group from another. These things are common to the whole of university endeavour whatever the discipline. They are not “academic” in the pejorative sense of the word, but are of profound, practical. Geoffrey Boulton & Colin Lucas (2008: 16).

## 1 INTRODUCTION

It was in 1992, more than 20 years ago as a student of the then University of the North (Turfloop) when I first set my foot on the soil of this University. On that fateful day the University was celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its existence. My visit here was necessitated by a meeting of student leadership of the two universities on the margins of a low key university ceremony to celebrate this important milestone. I was with a group of young students from Turfloop, as it was called then, driven by the imperative and the urge to contemplate as it were, the future of our country and its implications for students and their plight, particularly those attached to historically black universities at the time. During that year, as most of you would recall, South Africa was really on a precipice - under the grip of a fever of political settlement and negotiations for a free and democratic South Africa. Many of us as students were all outraged by the cold-blooded slaughter of more than 50 innocent people in their homes in Boipatong, in the Vaal by the apartheid government, with express intention, as we could read the sign then, to stall seizure of state power by the liberation movement(s).

Although the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary ceremony of the University was tempting to associate with, the task facing us at the time was that of unifying student leadership formations at historically black universities ideologically to fully appreciate the socio-political context within which our country found itself. One could smell an air of agitation and freedom simultaneously at the main gate of the University, and certainly experienced a prevailing atmosphere of engagement, discussion, interrogation, and deliberation – big words we used at the time in our meeting rooms to demonstrate, as part of our naivety as students, our (mis)understanding of the unfolding socio-political order. One should also indicate that this University was the youngest of them all in 1992, and could not be compared with other similar type of universities with established political track records such as University of the North (Turfloop), 1959, University of Bophuthatswana (1980), University of Zululand (1960), University of Transkei (1976), University of Durban-Westville (1961); University of Fort Hare (1916) and the indefatigable University of the Western Cape, (1960), which earned its stripes as the intellectual home of the left. Since 1992, I only came here again last year to meet with

the Vice-Chancellor Professor Mbatl on a range of matters relating Higher Education South Africa (HESA), my current employer. Prof Mbatl, I must say that when I came here last year and I should say today, the atmosphere is not as captivating, jubilant and jovial as it was in 1992 – perhaps because there is no exquisite ceremony in the background. In case I do not use big and scholarly words befitting the stature of this academic audience, please understand my disappointment.

Let me start off by thanking the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Venda, Professor Peter Mbatl and his team for inviting me to deliver this public lecture. The title of my lecture is ***What are universities for? Lessons for the University of Venda***. It is indeed an honour for me to share with you my views on this important topic. Before I stray to engage on substantive matters, I intend to provide a structure to my input as follows:

- First, I will briefly reflect on the historical context and conditions under which the idea of a university originated.
- Second, I would like to reflect on the various purposes and functions of university today, and the contradictions that such purposes and functions generate.
- Third, I also intend to bring all these constellation of developments both from historical and contemporary contexts to bear on what a University of Venda became and can become.
- Fourth and lastly, I will argue for a deeper conversation about the University of Venda, from the perspective of its challenges, prospects and possibilities. I will put forth about **eleven** theses to frame a conversation on the future of this university.

## 2 WHAT IS A UNIVERSITY?

As most of you would agree, this question has been part of university discourse since the day a university was established on planet earth. Many an answer was given to this question, largely from the perspective of the self-interest of the respondent. Even in post-apartheid South Africa, the question is still being asked although for different reasons and under completely different set of conditions. Again if one asks a related question, what is the purpose of a university or why do universities exist, one will also get a myriad of answers as there are people and their orientation of religious, ideological, political, cultural and economic nature. The diversity of views around an institution of a university is a testimony of its complexity, and highlights how difficult it is to pin down a generally acceptable definition for it. It is for these reasons that my views on this matter are debatable, and my purpose is not to conclude the debate, but to promote further discussion on this matter.

As Judy Blackhouse (2009: 18) observes, “the oldest institution that bears resemblance to the modern university is the *per-ankh* or the House of Life found in Egypt in the period around 2000 BC.” The institution was “located within the temple and served as a library that housed religious, philosophical, medical and scientific texts as well as administrative records. There were recognised professions in Egypt from around 3000 BC and the *per-ankh* offered training for scribes, astronomers, medical and legal practitioners, as well as priests.” (Blackhouse, 2009: 18).

An old institution with characteristic features of a university is to be found in Ethiopia where formal education was introduced by Emperor Ella Amida after his conversion to Christianity during the fourth century (Lulat, 2003: 16). Again, as Judy Blackhouse (2009: 18-19) puts it, “this system included at the highest level the monastic *Metsahift Bet* (or School of Holy Books) that educated the men of the elite classes for positions of leadership in the church and state, and at the lower levels the *Qine Bet* (School of Poetry) and the *Zema Bet* (School of Hymns) – the rather narrow curriculum reflecting the concerns of the church.” A point should be made that this monastic system of education persisted until the twentieth century

but, since it depended for funding on the ruling monarch of the day, the fortunes of higher education institutions waxed and waned in line with “the degree of interest of the ruling monarch in intellectual and ecclesiastical pursuits” (Lulat 2005:55, cited in Blackhouse, 2009: 19).

For the purpose of this lecture, I would like to start off by observing that a university just before the medieval period was part of the Church as an institution, and branched off from the Church to gain independence in part because it felt at the time that the Church was too conservative, and did not tolerate dissenting views. As Dr Max Price, Vice Chancellor of University of Cape Town puts it:

While recognising that the Church of old did produce many great philosophers and thinkers, like Thomas Aquinas, more often than not the Church was traditional and conservative in the literal sense of resisting change and new ideas. The universities parted ways with the church and the two have continued in parallel partly because, with the rise of scientific rationalism, universities offered a space which encouraged new ideas, controversy, argument and challenges to orthodoxy. This is the primary purpose of a university, and its success depends on a culture within the institution which is tolerant of heretical views (I use that term deliberately), which is *not* tolerant of attacks on people based on their background, what they believe in or who they are, but insists on the debate being about ideas and their evidence and their logic (2008).

Therefore, it should be understood that a university is the only institution in society where dissent is acknowledged and even celebrated, where difference of opinions is nurtured and rewarded, and in some cases even incentivised as an end in itself. It is a place where a Professor, irrespective of how many peer-reviewed articles he has published, is forced by tradition to explain the decision he or she makes. If s/he fails a student, and a student demands to have her script remarked, the Professor will have to accede to the demands of the student, if all manner of procedural protocols have been met. It is the only place where representative of students and workers can sit comfortably with esteemed professors in both Council and Senate meetings, as members of these university structures. It is the only institution where a peer-review system is relatively used and respected. Neither political parties nor the modern Church have this tradition ingrained in their DNAs.

In this regard, I would like to cite the observation made by University of Arkansas in relation to the meaning of a university, which I think applies to our context here in South Africa:

[It] is a place where truth is freely sought, where inquiry is encouraged, where new ideas and new ways may develop and flourish at the expense of the old. It is a seedbed of change in an ever-changing society. An academic community grows only when its members may act and express themselves freely and without fear.

A university is a place where thoughts and views are expressed, with an understanding that they will be challenged and refined. It is a place where various forms of knowledge(s) are supposed to be nurtured, and be given recognition for what they are and can be. In this regard, the name university should be protected, not only by a person of a Vice-Chancellor, but by all members of the university community, who are expected to uphold its meaning and traditions. One should also note that a university is a place where dilemmas are allowed to co-exist, and where paradoxes are allowed to find expression in a deliberate and intentional way. For an example, in our own country, our universities as complex institutions are continually required to balance a number of what seems to be a struggle of the opposites, which include the following:

- Knowledge and education on the one hand and skills and training on the other;
- Access and success;

- Higher Education as a public good and Higher Education as a private good;
- National relevance and international credibility;
- Humanities and Science, engineering and technology
- Teaching and learning and Research
- Undergraduate programmes and post-graduate programmes
- Local students and international students
- Institutional autonomy and academic freedom on the one hand and public accountability and self-regulation on the other; and
- Continuity and stability on the one hand and change and adaptation on the other.

A university is a complex institution where members of its community are continually mediating inherent tensions between these dilemmas and/or paradoxes.

### 3 PURPOSES OF A UNIVERSITY

There are four purposes of a university I would like to focus on for the purpose of this input: (i) knowledge production; (ii) ideological apparatuses; (iii) production of a skilled labour force; and (iv) selection and socialisation of dominant elites.

It is generally accepted that the first purpose of a university is the production of knowledge, in its broadest sense. Boulton and Lucas aptly put it as follows:

... universities operate on a complex set of mutually sustaining fronts – they research into the most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge and yet also seek the practical application of discovery; they test, reinvigorate and carry forward the inherited knowledge of earlier generations; they seek to establish sound principles of reasoning and action which they teach to generations of students. Thus, universities operate on both the short and the long horizon. On the one hand,... they work with contemporary problems and they render appropriate the discoveries and understanding that they generate. On the other hand, they forage in realms of abstraction and domains of enquiry that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit (2008:3).

What is clear from the above, is that universities must help society understand its challenges better. They must also question orthodox views, and bring forth alternative forms of knowledge to deepen society's understanding of issues and their complexity. Universities should problematise what is considered a generally accepted knowledge, and demonstrate its limits and possibilities, unpack its weaknesses and implications for society and humanity broadly. In other words, the knowledge that a university generates (whether basic or applied) should be used for the advancement of humanity, and should forewarn us about the dangers of the choices we make, either in the name of development or even democracy. Therefore, a university should not pre-occupy itself only with knowledge for the here and now, but also with knowledge for decades and millennia to come. In this regard, a university should pride itself with quality scholarship and research, both of which should position it at the cutting-edge of knowledge production and dissemination. In other words, since it is playing a role in a Higher Education space, rather than lower education, a university should produce knowledge that is different from other forms of knowledge produced at what one may call "lower education" institutions, including schools and colleges. Therefore for any university to be worth the paper it is written on, it has to pursue the production of knowledge as one of its most important functions.

The second major purpose of universities, as Manuel Castells (2001) put it, is that they have historically played a major role as ideological apparatuses, expressing the ideological struggles present in all societies. The point Castells makes here is that a university is in itself a site of ideological struggles, and a place where society's ideological contradictions are

either reproduced or reasserted. Therefore, a university can be a home for Neoliberal and Marxist scholarship without fear of contradiction. In fact, one can argue, that a university should create appropriate conditions for the two seemingly opposed ideological strands to develop and flourish, and where possible, feed each other, with a view to exposing each other's limitations, and thereby affording society the ultimate benefit of such ideological collusion or even collision. At the heart of a university should be circulation of views and ideologies, and their refinement over time, as they collide with other new ones discovered through scholarship and research (both basic and applied). . As Paul Newman (1852) correctly puts it, a university, in its ancient form denotes "... a *Studium Generale*, or School of Universal Learning". He further notes that "... this description implies the assemblage of strangers from all parts in one spot;—*from all parts*; else, how will you find professors and students for every department of knowledge? and *in one spot*; else, how can there be any school at all? Accordingly, in its simple and rudimental form, it is a school of knowledge of every kind, consisting of teachers and learners from every quarter. Many things are requisite to complete and satisfy the idea embodied in this description; but such as this a University seems to be in its essence, a place for the communication and circulation of thought, by means of personal intercourse, through a wide extent of country". To cite an over-used phrase by Mao Tse Tung, it is a place where "a thousand flowers bloom", and one thousand schools of thought contend.

The third, the most traditional - and today the most frequently emphasised – function of universities is the training of a skilled labour force. In an era of quantitative easing, bail outs, market volatility, nations and governments are looking at universities for salvation, particularly in the context of global economic recession like the one our generation is faced with. In other words, universities should respond to society's needs for a skilled workforce, and should produce graduates who are able to take up their rightful place in the commanding heights of our economy (Yesufu, 1973: 40). A number of studies have shown that if South Africa is to leapfrog its economic growth stagnation challenge, we have to produce a skilled workforce for our economy, in order to address shortage in a number of professions, including medicine, teaching, accounting, caring professions such as social work, nursing and so on. One should however, caution that although this is an important purpose of a university, it should not be seen as the only and most important function. It is indeed disturbing to hear political principals elevating this purpose almost to the exclusion of others. It should be indicated that if we allow this purpose to overshadow all the other two we have spoken about, the very *raison detre* of a university will be lost, and humanity will be poorer thereafter.

A fourth controversial purpose of a university is the one that is advanced by Manuel Castells (2001: 230), who opines that, a university is a mechanism of selection and socialisation of dominant elites. Although this might not be morally defensible, it is my view that a university which is a product of elitism, should not shy away from advancing the interests of elites, as long as those interests are inherently progressive, and are in the interest of broader national development. Stripped of all ideologies and persuasions, universities must and should pride themselves as protectors and promoters of elitist thoughts, because without an appropriate home for these thoughts, human civilisation as we know it will stifle, stumble and later fall. Even though our own country is caught up in the discourse of transforming universities to be accessed by all, it should be mentioned that a professor, associate professor, senior lecturer, lecturer, are not ordinary employees in the pecking order of a university employment hierarchy, but are important people who have been exposed through their scholarship and research to elitist views, and who are wittingly and unwittingly reproducing that form of elitism through the students they teach to graduate from the university into society. As they try very hard to become politically correct, it is my view that a university cannot be seen the same way as a Further Education and Training College, whose curriculum is developed centrally and examinations set at a central government department for all the 50 or so of them. Therefore, universities should protect, defend and promote their

elitism. Out of our universities flow graduates who end up becoming the dominant elites in society both in government and in business. As universities, we are both a product of elitism and purveyors of elitist thoughts and orientation.

Having sketched these four purposes of a university, I am really tempted to cite at length an observation made by Paul Newman (1852) about a university, with which I agree fully:

It is the place to which a thousand schools make contributions; in which the intellect may safely range and speculate, sure to find its equal in some antagonist activity, and its judge in the tribunal of truth. It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge. It is the place where the professor becomes eloquent, and is a missionary and a preacher, displaying his science in its most complete and most winning form, pouring it forth with the zeal of enthusiasm, and lighting up his own love of it in the breasts of his hearers. It is the place where the catechist makes good his ground as he goes, treading in the truth day by day into the ready memory, and wedging and tightening it into the expanding reason. It is a place which wins the admiration of the young by its celebrity, kindles the affections of the middle-aged by its beauty, and rivets the fidelity of the old by its associations. It is a seat of wisdom, a light of the world, a minister of the faith, an Alma Mater of the rising generation. It is this and a great deal more, and demands a somewhat better head and hand than mine to describe it well.

A university is all of these and many other things combined – some universities do other things better, and perform poorly on other important purposes we have described. The challenge for every university is to strike a balance between these and many other competing and sometimes contradictory purposes. In that way, a university will truly become what it was established for. To this end, in whatever we do and say, we should always remember to “... rehabilitate and preserve the notion, and to fight to reclaim the reality, of the university as a place of learning, reflection, and debate... it is indispensable that these spaces must be retrieved, nurtured and defended (Akilagpa Sawyerr, 2004: 45).

#### **4 WHAT DO ALL THESE MEAN FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF VENDA?**

I have raised all of these matters, Vice-Chancellor, to provoke a debate within the University of Venda, and implore the university community here to ask itself difficult questions about the purpose of this university, and how that purpose should be defended, protected and promoted within the entirety of the university community. One should acknowledge that this university is only three decades old, an infant really compared to the oldest modern university in the world, University of Bologna which was established in 1088, in Italy; and Universities of Oxford and Cambridge which were established in 1167 and 1209 respectively. In our own country, the first university was established in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope (UCGH), which was later incorporated into UNISA, and became the first examining university in 1918, in terms of education Minister FS Malan’s university legislation. As one talks about this 30-year old university, one should be mindful of the reality that in comparative terms, this university is one of the youngest in our system, and therefore still needs to grow in years and stature in order to fully claim its rightful place in our National System of Research and Innovation, let alone the global system. Therefore my provocative comments are meant to contribute to the debates and discussions already taking place in this university for it to better craft its future in the context of both national and global developments. I would therefore like to posit the following **ten** theses for the University of Venda to ponder on:

**Thesis 1: Identifying research and scholarship niche for the university:** The University should find a research and scholarship niche for itself and aggressively invest resources to realise maximum benefits and value. A cursory look at a number of the university’s performance indicators suggest that the university is on a growth path, albeit starting from a

very low base. Its research output has been increasing at an alarming rate for the last three years. As it pursues quantity of research outputs, it must also look at the quality of such research outputs. For an example, in which journals are the academics publishing, and how often are they cited by other researchers in our country, region, continent and even the world. In other words, what is the impact of the university's research in relation to the production and flow of knowledge? Once such a niche has been found, the university should pull all the stops to secure funding for the areas it identified as research niches, taking into account its geography, heritage, and profile of its academic workforce and so on.

**Thesis 2: Paying attention to graduatedness:** The University should also pay sufficient attention to the quality of the graduates it produces, and should take interest in the progress they make, upon leaving the university campus. In order to dispel some of the myths relating to graduate quality in some universities in our system, this university should ensure that its graduates leave this university with a range of skills including analytical, communication and critical thinking skills. In this regard, the quality of undergraduate education at this university should be put at the centre of the university priorities, lest this university will not be in a position to fulfil its historic purpose. The University, designated as a comprehensive university, should in addition to its normal undergraduate programmes, develop certificate and diploma programmes with a focus on the working adult market in the region and the province, particularly those who are attached to the public service, which has become a biggest employer in this province. The focus should be on the life-long needs of the knowledge-based economy.

**Thesis 3: Strengthening partnership with social partners:** The University of Venda should find practical ways of forging partnerships with government, industry and civil society organisations in the region, province and country to pursue activities of mutual interest to share knowledge, experience and resources. Given its location in the hills of Vhembe which are at the centre of agricultural production in this province, the university should find better ways of entering into partnership with commercial farmers in the region, and should think of developing diploma and certificate programmes for aspirant and serving agricultural extension officers for an example. In addition to begging the NRF to award research chairs to this university, a question can be posed: has this university explored the desirability or feasibility of creating an Animal/Crop Science Research Chair funded by commercial farmers in this region or even the Provincial Department of Agriculture or the relevant Sector Education and Training Authority? Without this partnership with government, industry and civil society organisations, this university will cease to exist over time and its relevance and responsiveness to the needs of society will soon fade into oblivion.

**Thesis 4: Prioritising the fight against crime and corruption:** The University should practically respond to the real and felt needs of the region, province and the country. For an example, with the intolerably high levels of corruption and maladministration reported on a regular basis in the Limpopo province, this university cannot afford to remain a spectator when political leaders are feeding at the trough, and when textbooks are not being delivered at schools on time – failures which adversely affect the pace of development and change in this country. Vice-Chancellor, I will submit that conditions have now ripened for this University to consider establishing a Centre/Institute for Ethical Leadership and Values, to research some of the deep-seated causes of rampant corruption and unethical leadership in provincial and local government, and how this scourge can be mitigated. As Dr Max Price puts it “.... universities have the unique opportunity of enormous influence over the future of our society through the fact that we educate and shape the future leaders of the country— both in business and government.”

**Thesis 5: Scholarship:** The University must appoint and retain good scholars from South Africa and other parts of the world. A key dependency for the growth of this University is the extent to which it is able to attract and retain reputable scholars from South Africa and other

parts of the world. Such scholars will be able to reinvigorate the research and scholarship activities at this university in ways that are unimaginable, and will certainly contribute to the stature of the university in our system of Higher Education. Given my own discipline, I was fascinated by Professor Mokgale Makgopa's plans to strengthen the MER Mativha Centre for African Languages, Arts and Culture at this university. However, it is my contention, as I have told him several times already that such a Centre cannot necessarily be built on the basis of existing and current academic capacity and capabilities of this university. Efforts have to be put in place to recruit other seasoned scholars from South Africa and other parts of the world to bring different perspectives to bear on the notion of African Studies, and how such a notion is evolving over time in the context of on-going debates. Post-Doctoral Fellowships should also be awarded to research specific dimensions of African Studies, and develop niche research areas in those.

**Thesis 6: In defence of democracy and rule of law:** This University should defend democracy and fight against any form of injustice. It is my view that this university should at all costs defend all the rights enshrined in our Constitution, and should become a living symbol of these rights. Such rights include free speech, free press, judicial independence, and socioeconomic rights, which are increasingly becoming threatened. A question can be asked: what did the university do or say when a number of provincial departments in this province were put under administration due to poor performance? To the best of my knowledge, no seminar or colloquium or even a public lecture was hosted to interrogate the developments and possible implications for citizens and the development agenda broadly. It is my view that this university should prick the conscience of those entrusted with responsibility to govern our country, and provoke debates and discussions in society. In this way, the university will contribute in practical ways to the promotion of democracy and educating students for good citizenship, in which rights and responsibilities are paramount. This university must become the conscience of the region and the province in which it is located. It must create opportunities for the academics and researchers to speak out against injustice in defence of democracy.

**Thesis 7: Dealing with the phenomenon of under-preparedness of first entering students:** Proceeding from the understanding that this university, for historical reasons, is enrolling a large cohort of under-prepared students, a majority of whom are African students from the rural areas, and are likely to be first generation university students in their families, compared to other universities located in urban and peri-urban areas; it is incumbent upon this university to take interest in the performance of the schooling system in this province. In addition to the normal "run-off the mill" work that admission officers of the university would carry-out with regard to feeder schools, a question remains, what can be done substantively to improve the culture of teaching and learning in some of these poor-performing schools in the province? What can the School of Education and the School of Engineering do practically to improve the performance of schools, particularly in Mathematics and Science subjects? Should this university explore the possibility of establishing a Research Chair in Mathematics Education, in collaboration with the Limpopo Provincial Government and the Industry here in the province? The point one is making is that this university has to take practical steps to impact on the performance of the schooling system in the province and the region. In his well known book, the *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844 Karl Marx argues that theory at all times should be married with praxis, "the dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question", a role an institution such as the University of Venda should play.

**Thesis 8: Internationalisation:** The University of Venda should make deliberate effort of internationalising itself, particularly in view of advances made in information and communication technologies terrain and the broader implications of globalisation on knowledge production and dissemination. Using Knight's definition of internationalisation as "a process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research

and service functions of the institution” (Knight, 1997: 8), this university must aspire to produce globally aware citizens, who value and embrace such attitudes as openness, interconnectivity, interdependence, reciprocity and plurality, all of which are a necessary condition for a cosmopolitan outlook to life. Therefore this university must create possibilities for students to (re)imagine themselves outside the geographic boundaries of this region, province and country, and refuse to promote any form of fundamentalist idea, which could over time threaten democracy. A critical hallmark of cosmopolitanism, as captured by Held et al (1999: 449) should be promoted at this University, because, as they put it:

In the millennium ahead each citizen of a state will have to learn to become a “cosmopolitan citizen”... a person capable of mediating between national traditions, communities of fate and alternative forms of life. Citizenship in a democratic polity of the future... is likely to involve a growing mediating role... which encompasses dialogue with the traditions and discourses of others with the aim of expanding the horizons of one’s own framework of meaning, and increasing the scope of mutual understanding.

This university should become a site of what Cope and Kalantzis (2000) call “productive diversity”, in which members of the university community “will live and work with this paradox of an increased social interconnectedness that throws differences into sharper relief; and of shared tasks and experiences which make dealing with differences more critical in our everyday lives”.

**Thesis 9: Wrestling with transdisciplinarity:** For the purpose of this input, one sees transdisciplinarity as methodology and approach in which scientists contribute their unique expertise while working entirely outside their own discipline. They strive to understand the complexities of the whole phenomenon under study, rather than one part of it. In this regard, one needs to make a distinction between transdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary, because the latter afford researchers from a variety of disciplines to work together at some point during the research project, but have separate questions, separate conclusions, and disseminate in different journals. The University of Venda must find a way of encouraging and rewarding its researchers and academics to work in a transdisciplinary way, as this will assist them in resolving complex socio-economic challenges facing our country through research. As Nassim Nicholas Taleb observes “... categorising (knowledge) is necessary for humans, but it becomes pathological when the category is seen as definitive, preventing people from considering the fuzziness of boundaries, let alone revising their categories” (2008: 15).

**Thesis 10: An engaged university:** It is important for the University of Venda to truly become an engaged university with ability to engage with its surroundings, neighbourhood and other key stakeholders. As John Goddard and Paul Vallance (2011) opine, a “... publicly engaged institution should be fully committed to direct, two way interaction with communities and other external constituencies through the development, exchange, and application of knowledge, information and expertise for mutual benefit. Such an engagement, they further argue, can take a form posited by the US Association’s Council on Engagement and Outreach seminal charter, *Returning to our roots – the engaged institution*:

- Engagement brings the University’s intellectual resources to bear on societal needs.
- Engagement is a form of scholarship that cuts across teaching, research and service.
- Engagement implies reciprocity, whereby the institutions and partners in the community both benefit and contribute.
- Engagement blends scientific knowledge from the university with experiential knowledge within the community to establish an environment of co-learning.
- Engagement involves shared decision-making.

- Engagement is a practice that enables faculties to be better scholars; enhances the learning experience for students; and multiplies the institution's impact on external constituencies.
- Engagement is actively listening to all stakeholders that reflect the diversity of our communities – especially those stakeholders who have not been engaged before.
- A university is engaged when stakeholders see the institution as the “resource of choice” when dealing with an issue or problem
- Engagement documents and evaluates its effectiveness through traditional measures of academic excellence.
- The quality of engagement is tied to public accountability and is measured by impact and outcomes on the communities and individuals it serves.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I did not only avoid describing the university in vivid terms, I have also contributed to the confusion, which was deliberate I guess, because universities cannot avoid attracting confusion as they try to examine and clarify a range of phenomena in the world, whose starting or end points is often confusion. I will however be grateful if any of the confusion I brought with me in this hall, could be understood to be well-intentioned – to clarify existing confusion on what a university is and should be. I am comforted by the fact that this confusion I have brought with me is at least a new form of confusion.

At the core of the mission of every university should be the commitment to the intellectual development and personal development of its students to have the capacity to think critically, analyze and solve problems, and confidently communicate with others across lines of difference for the benefit of an increasingly interdependent global community. Finally, in his 2005 monograph, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, acclaimed organizational researcher and author Jim Collins writes, as if he had our own South African universities, including the University of Venda, in mind:

*In building a great institution, there is no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, and no miracle moment. Rather our research showed that it feels like turning a giant, heavy flywheel. Pushing with great effort – days, weeks, and months of work, with almost imperceptible progress – you finally get the flywheel to inch forward. But you don't stop. You keep pushing, and with persistent effort, you eventually get the flywheel to complete one entire turn. You don't stop. You keep pushing, and you get two turns...then four... then eight...the flywheel builds momentum... sixteen...you keep pushing...thirty-two...it builds more momentum...a hundred... moving faster with each turn...a thousand...ten thousand... a hundred thousand. Then at some point – breakthrough! Each turn builds upon previous work, compounding your investment of effort. The flywheel flies forward with almost unstoppable momentum. This is how you build greatness. (Collins, 2005: 23)*

With these few words, I hope the university will contemplate and (re)imagine its future in the Vhembe region, Limpopo province, South Africa and the world in ways that are unusual. In its quest to do so, it should choose to answer the question with utmost honesty and frankness: how can it remain or become a university along the lines I have argued? In this way, we will keep the flywheel turning.

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