

THE POWER OF VOX POP

We live in times in which opinions matter.

Opinions are relative – it depends on the sources on which they're formed, and on the fact that they tend not to be equal.

The question could be whether the power of the people and the power of reason are one. A case in point is the rhino.

We're all aware of the appalling statistics when it comes to our unsuccessful efforts around saving the South African rhino.

I think we struggle to balance the power of the people and the power of reason. Seemingly, neither the power of the people nor the power of reason prevails.

Regardless of everything (all the awareness campaigns, the articles in the media, the legislation, the public hearings, the dehorning initiatives, the marketing...), the horrific increase in rhino poaching keeps on soaring [83 rhinos were killed in 2008; 122 in 2009; 333 in 2010; 448 in 2011; 668 in 2012; 200+ in the first three months of 2013].

The fact that the huge groundswell of public concern is apparently not working, points to something else. It appears to me that social power and media power are really not enough to drive the point home that something serious is wrong. It could be the lack of strategic effort. It could be seeking for a reason on whose opinions matter; and whose opinions are more equal than those of others.

Which brings me to the importance of this notion - also in the higher education environment.

Opinions matter when it comes to tertiary education. Here also it is important to discern whether the power of the people and power of reason are similar. It is also important to find out whether there is alignment in regard of strategising opinions.

Let me make this practical and use the North-West University as another case in point.

This university is extremely serious about its core business and has reaped the fruit of this concerted endeavour over the past few years.

It is equally serious about transformation. For the sake of measuring what we're managing, we do this by means of a strategic effort in which we work with 10 equally important transformation indicator goals – some of them generic, and some NWU-specific. We manage and monitor the progress we're making in very meticulous ways.

If we do not deliberately manage this process, transformation will also become a metaphorical rhino around which there is only a groundswell of public concern, but no results to show.

In addition, I think – and the journalists amongst you might agree... – that we might need to start challenging the official story of higher education and other issues in South Africa. I mean with this that we (the populis) might need to start challenging the fact that politics are seemingly becoming more important than the business of whatever endeavour – be it service delivery, police service, local government, deploying of soldiers into Africa, rhino poaching, basic education, and also higher education.

If we do not challenge the poisonous overriding of sound principles by political agendas in our higher education environment, this sector would not be able to enrol 45 000 SET students by 2030; it would not improve its graduation rates to 25%; it would not increase participation rates to 30% (a doubling of current university students). Its potential contribution to the very important National Development Plan – without which this country can hardly face its future – will be null and void.

Indeed, we live in times in which opinions – those of the people and of reason – matter. We need to take up this responsibility more seriously. We need to keep on challenging the official stories of our society.

For this reason, the North-West University prides itself in its relationship and involvement with the National Press Club. As you, we stand for the power of reason.