# Conversations on Race discussion series

# Transcript for Friday 14 May 2021

## Dr Rebecca Surender, Co-Chair of the Race Equality Task Force and

## Professor Saleem Badat, Research Professor in Humanities at the University of Kwazulu-Natal and former Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, South Africa

Dr Rebecca Surender: Good afternoon everyone and welcome to the first in our series of conversations on race discussions. I'm Rebecca Surender, one of the co-chairs of the Race Equality Task Force which is organising this series of discussions. The task force was of course established by the Vice-Chancellor at the beginning of the academic year to accelerate our commitment to advancing racial equality across the University and ensure our University is doing everything it can to understand and articulate and dismantle the existing barriers to full racial equality. The Task Force is intensely scrutinising the many strands of work taking place internally within our own organisation, but it's also keen to learn about the experience of other institutions both within the higher education sector and more broadly. What are some of the strategies, the approaches, the pitfalls we should learn about, should emulate and we should avoid. This series is part of that endeavour, to think about how to drive change with key individuals who have led successful transformations within their own organisations.

And I'm really delighted and honoured to introduce Professor Saleem Badat from the University of Kwazulu-Natal as our first guest. We couldn't have asked for a better authority to kick off this series. I can't do justice to his impressive CV in the time available so I will highlight a few things. After completing his graduate work in the UK, Dr Badat began his academic career at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, where he became the Director of the Education Policy unit. Following the overthrow of the apartheid regime, in 1994, he became in 1999 the first Chief Executive Officer of the newly created Council on Higher Education, the body which advises the South African minister on higher education on HE policy issues. He was chair-person of the University South Africa and chair of the association of South African university scientific committee on higher education.

In June 2006 Dr Badat was appointed Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University in South Africa, first black South African to hold this post in 102 years. In 2014 he became the programme director for international higher education at the Mellon Foundation in New York. Focussing on grant making and the arts and humanities, to research universities in particular in the global south, and to pan-African and pan-Arab institutions. Despite high-profile leadership roles, Dr Badat has always continued with his own scholarship. His writings are concerned with concerns of equity and social justice through universities and the decolonisation and transformation of universities in societies that were colonised - all things that are going to be highly relevant to the work of the Task Force. His many publications and books include *Black Student Politics, Higher Education and Apartheid* in 2002, *Black man you are on your own*, 2010 and in 2013 *The forgotten people - political banishment under apartheid*. He's currently completing a book on apartheid and social justice and another that reflects on his tenure at Rhodes. He's currently directing a research project on the histories on universities in South Africa.

A very warm welcome Saleem, at least to Oxford, very jealous to hear before we went live the weather in Durban is considerably better than it is in Oxford right now. Thank you so much for making time to participate in this important discussion that we're having in Oxford. I have only had a few minutes to sketch out the bare bones of your trajectory and I wonder if I could ask you to begin by telling us a little more about your own personal academic professional background, the context and the opportunities available to you growing up in South Africa under apartheid, where HE was the thing that you chose to dedicate your professional life to, perhaps if you tell us a little bit about that.

Professor Badat: Thank you for this opportunity to have this conversation with you. I come from a lower middle-class background. My parents only had 12 years of formal schooling between them. My mother instilled a love of reading in me. So I am a first generation student and I have to say thank you a supervisor 40 years ago for putting it into my head I should consider becoming an academic.

Even my early biography and apartheid context, it was not something that had entered my head at all. I became very deeply involved in student politics and served in the leadership of the national student movements in various capacities. And so in a sense my relationship with universities and higher education is one, a romance of 40 years, but it hasn't been one of just someone who has been a student and who has passed through a university. It's been a consistent engagement over a 40-year period which has been very exciting for me. In 1983 I gave up my studies, a Masters on the basis of a scholarship and became a full-time activist, became very involved in the United Democratic Front and as editor of a community newspaper, to which I learnt a whole lot that no university could teach me actually. I suppose today we try and use community engagement to learn some of those things that you can learn in social movements and in liberation movements, but they are poor substitutes to be honest. There's no substitute for that actual involvement in social justice causes, and what you learn intellectually, organisationally and in many other domains.

So at some point, I was banned in 1986 which meant I couldn't set foot in a media institution and I moved over to the UK and that's where through assistance of scholarships I began at University of York where I finished a PhD in sociology, that resulted in the first book on black student politics. Then interestingly in the transition to democracy an opportunity in the political arena was opened to me giving my involvement in the liberation movement but I took a choice I have never regretted and that is to commit myself to scholarship and to universities and more generally to civil society.

I joined the University of the Western Cape under remarkable Vice-Chancellor, who was trying to create it as the home of the intellectual left. That was a fantastic ten years I spent there, where I was given every kind of support as a young black intellectual and early career scholar. I have had very positive experiences of my time at university. I have had an opportunity to see it and experience it as an immobilising adventure, a real intellectual adventure which I recognise immediately is not the experience of every student and certainly not the experience of students who come from working class rural poor black backgrounds and perhaps women students for certain reasons also. So I'm passionate about universities, I'm passionate about higher education and the promise they have for creating equitable humane democratic societies. I think they have a huge role to play in terms of creating a better world. Much of my life and I will stop there, much of my life, when I look across the 40 years of activism, scholarship and even what I do today, has been trying to understand how societies reproduce themselves and what role universities play in reproducing those societies. Because with what reproduction is inequalities, unemployment, poverty, a terrible life for the vast majority in this world. But at the same time, I have also been trying to grapple over the last 40 years because of apartheid, how do we transform societies, how do we transform universities so they can play a particular role in creating a just world. That's been my life work if you like. Trying to understand the mechanics and the dynamics of reproduction, in order to intervene and then trying to think about how you transform society and transform universities and what roles and purposes one can attach to universities in that process.

Dr Surender: I don't want our audience to think this is too slick a rehearsed conversation because it certainly isn't, but you have given me a great segway into what I want to talk about next, which is just to fast forward a little bit to your time at Rhodes. Can you just talk a little bit about what you inherited at Rhodes when you began as Vice-Chancellor there. It was barely a decade after democratic transformation. It's a historically white university.

What did it look like, what did it feel like in 2006?

Professor Badat: The first point to make is what Rhodes, and we can also talk about the name if you like, what Rhodes University was in 1904 when it was established, was not what it was in the 1970s and Rhodes in 1994 was not what it was in the 1950s and certainly when I became Vice-Chancellor in 2006 Rhodes in 2006 is different from what Rhodes was in 1994. Some of the changes might be imperceptible.

We always need to keep perspective. Indeed, any institution that's not changing is on its way out. Because if you don't change all the time for various reasons, while holding on to a core and a kernel of what a university is, then you are in trouble. It is the job of leadership and managers to make sure that you are bringing about the changes and transformation that keeps you at the cutting edge of knowledge and teaching and learning and engagement and so on. So despite that and acknowledging the changes that were happening at Rhodes, I must be honest and blunt that in many respects the institution I had become Vice-Chancellor of in 2006 was historically and in part in 2006 a white, colonial, racist in parts, patriarchal English language university that imagine it was in Princeton or in Oxford, hence the idea Oxford on the felt is what Rhodes was called. If you looked at the gowns I had to wear and if you looked at the ceremonies and rituals, you may have been there to see some of this, Rebecca, you will understand what I am speaking about. And indeed when I came Vice-Chancellor in 2006 when I was interviewed one of my referees, who was the President of the National Research Foundation, made an interesting comment to Rhodes University. He said "I have worked with Saleem for many years Saleem is ready for Rhodes, the real question is whether Rhodes is ready for Saleem". He was confronting Rhodes with that quite openly, about being very deliberate about what kind of Vice-Chancellor they wanted next given my background and so on.

So in a sense what I inherit, the legacy I inherit is 12 years into democracy in 2006, Rhodes was still predominantly comprised white South African students. In a society that's 90% black. We must hold this figure in our heads. 60% of the students at Rhodes are white in a society that's 90% black. Probably between 85 and 90% of the academics at Rhodes were white. Again, in a society that's 90% black. Probably 60% men. The senior leadership and senior management was largely men and white. The institutional culture, and institutional culture is a slippery term and concept - we can argue for months and years over the concept of institutional culture - was in serious need of transformation. Which is where I came up with the notion, which I am thinking about all the time, that the idea of a home for all, and what a home for all may mean intellectually and academically and socially. Many of the buildings, the icons, the images at Rhodes left you in no doubt about the whiteness and men and this is a university that's almost 60% women and 40% black in 2006. And I think fundamentally, this institution needed to make an apology, and acknowledge its shameful conduct during the colonial and apartheid periods, in order to settle certain matters it had that opportunity two years before I joined when it celebrated its 100th anniversary. Anniversaries are important, as we know, but it didn't make that apology and didn't acknowledge its shame. That was something I had to confront as the first black Vice-Chancellor. Many people thought I would make that apology in my inaugural lecture in 2006 but my own attitude was I didn't have anything to apologise for. If there was going to be an apology and acknowledgement of shame it would have to come from the institution, through the Senate of the university, the faculty boards, the council of the university, not Saleem Badat, the Vice-Chancellor, it had been an institutional apology. So we settle certain things and move forward. Without imagining we could face that history and that past entirely.

One of the fascinating things in my first six months which I had decided I would simply move around the university and listen to every constituency, union, students, academics, departments, Deans, just listen. I came across a mantra that was rather predominant “if it ain't broken, don't fix it”. I took my time to think about this mantra, and I eventually responded to it I think six months later in the university Senate. My response was it seems that from the perspective of certain social groups at Rhodes there's a sense that it ain't broken. And nothing needs to be fixed. Well my experience is from the perspective of other social groups, people who are black South Africans, people who are rural students, women, that there's a lot that's broken. It's just that it cannot be seen or perceived by those who are dominant within Rhodes.

And so, we are confronted with a choice if you like. Let's name and own our problems, as a fundamental basis for moving forward. So not everything that is faced can be changed at least in my years, not immediately necessarily, but nothing can be changed until it is faced, until it is confronted. So I had a number of gatherings, where you bring people together across the university. Within the first six months I brought 60 people from across the university - students, workers, academics, Professors, early careers scholars, men and women, carefully constituted together with different intellectual ideas, different voices, to really think about this institution called Rhodes, to build a consensus about what we're good at, what we would like to be, and what we are not so good at and what are the kinds of things we would like to change. And for me, that kind of process is fundamentally important. I come from a very rich democratic tradition. I don't believe in posing ideas and strategies. I really believe in a democratic participatory process where we own our problems and decide together how we're going to pursue them, with all the messiness of that.

Dr Surender: Let me challenge you a little bit on that. Winning hearts and minds is clearly the preferable thing to do because it means you are building consensus, taking people with you, and any change that is enacted is likely to be much more sustained and embedded. But you talked about the long history of Rhodes, you talked about an institutional culture that was slow to change. What happens if colleagues, students don't wish to change? How long do you wait to convince the hearts and minds?

Professor Badat: Sure, I think you are absolutely right. I don't think one should be naive or dishonest about this. In one of those gatherings was a question from a Professor who said “Vice-Chancellor, you would like to change this institution democratically, are you sure it will work?” I think it was he was alluding to the fact there were going to be interests, that we're going to stand in opposition to the kind of changes that were going to be required. He said it's a question I think about all the time in my critical reflections on Rhodes and I will confront that in the book I am working on also. But what I did know is that imagining you can change a university by administrative decrease was not going to work and those changes were not going to be sustainable. I don't think in terms of transforming a university there is any substitute for persuasion, intellectual engagement. No matter how long it may take and how frustrating it becomes in that process. I think you have to confront as we have to do with ideas of decolonisation, the trepidation, as I call it, that exists. Many quarters, including outstanding scholars, how do we take seriously that trepidation and really work with that. How do we win people over to progressive change.

Dr Surender: Trepidation in a sense of being concerned about a managerialism or...

Professor Badar: It wasn't that kind of trepidation. Rhodes was fairly clear to me corporatisation and managerialism, I made it clear Rhodes was not going to go that route. I made it quite clear that those who were interested in rankings were not going to find support from me. I like the Japanese Vice-Chancellor who says if you really want to build something concentrate on the nutrition, don't weigh the cow every day. That's not going to make it a healthier cow. Rhodes University is one of those that still today takes no part in rankings, because it's a burden, a destructive phenomenon that has no basis in social signs, yet universities collude with this idea of we are number one rank or number five.

Even though it is based on lousy social science. You have to focus on the things that are really important. When you focus on the important things, I think, the idea that we are a university and our fundamental purpose is to make knowledge, that we are a university and our fundamental purpose is disseminate knowledge and cultivate high quality graduates we can argue about the engagement aspects and what kind of engagement with communities however defined, but when you focus on the kind of fundamental educational purposes, you find a lot of support. When it comes to what are the social purposes of universities and what roles and functions you must play in society and questions of equity and so on, that's when the problems arise. Your experience is probably the same as mine.

The fact that someone has a PhD doesn't mean that they are equitiably inclined. They have all the fears about whether their sons or daughters are going to get a post at Rhodes.

You have to gently tell them that for a long time your sons and daughters have been the beneficiaries of affirmative action for white South Africans.

They are going to have to now compete with my children and other people's children. There's no guaranteed posts at Rhodes any more for white South Africans. But if they are really suitable, and I use the word suitable rather than best, because that word best needs to be unpacked often, too often best is clones, racially, and gender-wise, that we are looking for, so yes, I understand your anxieties, these are one to one discussions, these are discussions openly, I was in the process of putting into motion series similar to yours that was going to be called “Race Matters”. Race matters, *race matters*, we talk about these issues, no matter how difficult and painful it's going to be, because we need to talk about this if you are going to change the institution. It's difficult.

Dr Surender: I am tasked with keeping an eye on the time and I know just this beginning discussion is going to generate a lot of people who want to ask questions. So I will move us on a little bit and to leave as much time for Q&A. Could you just talk a little bit about some of the pragmatic, some of the practical strategies. It was really helpful to hear you talk about the broad approach you took in terms of consensus building and avoiding imposing decrees. Could you talk about one or two of the specific interventions, initiatives that you used to actually very quickly, because you were trying to catch up on 100 years, grow the black professoriate to grow the number of black students at Rhodes. What kinds of interventions did you employ?

Professor Badat: As I said 85 to 90% of academic staff were white South Africans. So let me just preface that by bringing together some things. Because I think as much as we want to intervene practically, I think we must get certain things right intellectually and conceptually also. For me, there are three bigger terms, that are always in front of me. Equity, diversity, inclusion. Equity, fair and just treatment is necessary for greater diversity at Rhodes. We have to look at who gets access to Rhodes in terms of students and staff. Sustaining diversity requires both equity of access and equity of opportunity. Because otherwise if you don't provide the opportunity, you are not going to fundamentally change Rhodes, or historically white institutions. But fundamentally important, understanding diversity is not inclusion. You may become more diverse, it doesn't mean you are a more inclusive university.

There may be many more women, there may be many more people of different nationalities and so-called racial groups and so on but it still doesn't create an inclusive university. In fact, it generates new interesting challenges and problems, the more diverse you become, because you haven't confronted the fact of inclusion. You have been only focussed on diversity. And a point that I made when I was interviewed, assimilation is not inclusion. I made it quite clear I'm not coming to be assimilated at Rhodes University. I'm coming to work with the institution to transform the institution, so that we create something new together, all of us. And that was really referring to the challenge of a new institutional culture, the bedrock of everything else that we do. So the message also then conceptually intellectually was value difference, see difference of all kinds, except obscene inequalities in income and wealth. See difference as a real spring for vitality, institutional, academic intellectual and so on.

Predicated on that kind of thinking, the thinking is important. Sometimes we are rushing into actions without thinking sufficiently and I don't mean thinking for five years as a way of kicking the ball to touch, which happens too often. But really thinking hard and deeply about what strategies and tactics we are going to be using and what are the implications of those may be for the institution five to ten years down the line. Because I am completely opposed today what I call blind equality initiatives. Which actually run the university into the ground and do not create a basis for the ongoing development of the university. By doing a whole lot of things that are only about demographics and playing games with numbers. I have a wider conception of transformation that is just about demographics.

So first point I have already mentioned. You need to get people together in gatherings.

To really talk about issues at the institution. Secondly, how do you intervene, my approach is not about creating black and women, my approach is a more general run. How do we build the next generations and the new generations of scholars who must replace those who are going to be retiring. And let's agree, we have to do it in a way that ensures there are far more black and women scholars, so the first point is just more scholars, the second point is can we agree that in the light of our apartheid past, our present future, there must be more black and women scholars. And then thirdly, how do we ensure that these new generation, the next generations that we are producing have the capabilities, the intellectual academic capabilities to move the institution on to a new path. Better teaching and learning, more research and more profound scholarship, engagement with communities and so on. So it's not just about women and black, it's about what kinds of scholars do we want to produce. For that, you need institutions.

One of the first things and wisest things I did was to keep an outstanding scholar who has been head hunted by the University of Edinburgh and speak to her and say we are going to build the Centre for Higher Education and Teaching at Rhodes. That's going to be hugely important to cultivate new generations of scholars at Rhodes. Scholars that we are going to be proud of and that will hold their own anywhere in the world. Secondly, we know that we need to intervene in serious academic development initiatives at Rhodes, in order to provide equity of opportunity to the black students who are coming in who through no fault of their own are not as well-prepared because of the problems of the schooling system. Especially if they are coming from rural areas. So how do we provide programs with equity of opportunity and success. Thirdly, my own mantra, a home for all, how do we appreciate respect a firm difference. How do we ensure that features in everything that we do. And difference not only terms demographically in terms of - I'm talking about theoretical, methodological, how do we avoid dull plodding conformity with the past, which have alienated many staff, not just black and women. Because there are certain traditions, certain intellectual ways of doing things, certain ways of knowing, how do we open up that to new generation of scholars.

These are big challenges. But if you don't have the hope that you can bring about the change, then I'm not sure what you are doing at university. I think I am clear, if you want to lead a university, it's not helpful to be a Usain Bolt. It's not 100m race, it's better to be a Kenyan long distance runner. These are 10,000 metre races. You are not going to transform a university in two, three or five years. It may be a generation programme. But you need to start otherwise you will be playing catch up for a generation.

Dr Surender: There's so much I want to come back on. But I am being told that questions are coming in thick and fast. So I am actually, with your permission, going to take a few of the questions from our audience, if that's all right. Can I say to colleagues who are attending, please do feel free to post things anonymously if you wish, but equally I think Saleem would be delighted to know who the audience are and so if you want to tell us your name and your department or college, please do. I'm going to start with a question which says can you say more about why you use equity and not equality. Did you make a shift from equity and equality as an institution at Rhodes. Two questions, conceptual one and then were you successful?

Professor Badat: Great question, that is precisely what I was saying, we need to think about these things before we rush into strategy and tactics and practical action. There's a fundamental and important difference between equality and equity. In terms of equality, it tends to be defined as sameness, we treat everyone equally. So we all have a single vote. Whether you are a billionaire or whether you are a working class person, you have one vote when you vote. It’s treating people equally. The problem is treating people equally in some cases it’s not treating them fairly. So we have the concept of equity as fair and just treatment. Without the idea of equity as fair and just treatment, you then cannot intervene in terms of positive discrimination, affirmative action. Affirmative action is really about positively discriminating in order to ensure fairness and justness. You have to treat people sometimes unequally in order to bring about equality. And bring about a more just and humane world.

So when it comes to access, you have to ask yourself, especially if you pride yourself with having very high entrance requirements, as I used to joke at Rhodes, not only were entrance requirements high, we like to put an electric fence on top of the wall, so that you couldn't scale over. I had to ask the question, very simple question, that young man who walks over from the private school on the doorsteps of Rhodes where his parents paid 350,000 Rands a year and who has three meals a day and has six Bs, is he better than the young woman who has six Cs and comes from a rural area where she has to walk five kilometres to fetch water every day, where there is a single headed household who is a survivor because she is only one of 50 who might get to matric. Who is the better student? Which is the student that shows better potential? If you want to treat them equally, you are not treating them equally. You are not understanding the fundamental context from which they come. So that's my distinction between equity and equality. Certain things we have to treat people equally of course. In other areas, if you want to really bring about change we need to have the concept of equity.

Dr Surender: Next question, it talks to the determinates and drivers of institutional change and the question says in the UK research funding is attached to progressing gender equality, so we have a number of accreditation programmes and charter marks, some will be familiar to you. I think this one is the person is talking about something called Athena Swan charter mark. Which meant that you can, certainly the medical schools and sciences could only apply for certain funding if they were accredited with this programme. The question is saying this catalysed change, are there any examples of similar initiatives that you have seen or believe that could deliver racial justice in higher education? This is about wider institutional levers on universities.

Professor Badat: If you want to bring about change in institutions, apart from thinking about these things correctly, you need to have what I called pullies and levers, for bringing about that change, so at Rhodes through the support of various donors, we created these accelerated programmes, which were targeting young black and women scholars. We were providing them with the kind of support, extensive support that you need to succeed. You have to work through the kind of issues of where some scholars were seeing this as simply affirmative action candidates. And those young scholars themselves were being affected by this idea of being affirmative action candidates. So you had to do a lot of talking with them, to say you are not affirmative action candidates, look at your CVs.

The fact there is a perception out there is not something we should be buying into. In any case, what's wrong with affirmative action given the context and history of apartheid. Don't we see the affirmative action around us at Rhodes University. Why do we think we are 90% white in terms of the academic workforce? That was a major affirmative action programme under apartheid and colonialism. There's still the stigma around affirmative action which you have to deal with.

So these programmes that we are mounting entirely with donor support, we're starting to show the efficacy, but you cannot locate it in my view in an HR department. You need to actually have a place like the centre for higher education research teaching and learning where there are scholars thinking about these things, working with this new generation of scholars, working with the HR, and of course, this requires leadership from the Vice-Chancellor. It's the Vice-Chancellor who is chairing every meeting that is appointing one of these scholars. Because it is a massive investment. Both for the institution and in these young people. And so you have to get to know all these young scholars, you need to be attuned to their needs and interests and have an open door for them. So we were succeeding on the basis of that success, I said I would raise the funds and set up an initiative that became national and out of that national initiative came what is now funded as the end gap, the next generation programme. It was handed over as a programme to the Ministry. The Ministry is now funding this nationally. So it's raw beginnings, entirely donor funded, it has been now supported by the state. It's a good start, it's not enough. We need more of these kinds of programmes. But you need to have the right environment, the right culture, people with real commitment and expertise to really support effectively young black and women scholars.

Dr Surender: Another question picks up on that kind of programmatic initiative. It says, we have something called the Race Equality Charter award in the UK that many have seen as indicating that the university is serious about anti-racism or a lever for change. And currently it's an initiative that's just a few-years-old and Oxford is one of the handful of early universities that is part of this programme, is accredited. The questioner is saying some see it as an indication that the University is serious. Some see it as a tick box exercise. Rather than a tool for change. How do we deal with these two perspectives when you have that kind of programmatic intervention? How do you keep it honest and not allow it to become emblematic and tick box?

Professor Badat: I hear and empathise with that concern about these things can become tick box, and in South Africa, the department of labour needs a strategic plan from you virtually annually where you have to account for the racial composition of your staff, how many women, African, Indian and so on. You have to engage with them, we are not dealing with a factory here, we cannot manufacturer professors as you would like. There's a long lead in time. These things are going to take a generation sometimes.

We have to be honest about some of those things. We have to insist on holding together equity and quality. Because if you compromise on quality, if you compromise on the quality of the education, the training, the experience, you are creating problems for yourself as a university and you are creating problems in the wider public, by the quality of graduates you put out in society. So I am adamant that we need to talk about equity with quality, quality with equity. To really debate also ideas of standards and merit and things like that.

Because there's a lot of conventional wisdoms what quality standards are. When you integrate those, some of that starts to shift. I don't think there's a single universal standard. What might be good for Oxford is not necessarily good for Rhodes. And vice versa.

Place matters. Context matters.

So we have to adapt our strategies and tactics in relation to place, South Africa is a 90% black society. It must matter, whereas the UK is not. So how we set our targets and so on, we have to argue and debate about that, what is appropriate, what is meaningful, what can we achieve in the next three to five years. It's too easy in a tick box to say we will become 80% black academics and we all know it's a joke. It's never going to happen. It's not going to happen for many reasons, including something called money. It's about resources, too. Not just about human, about people to work with the next generation and how much do you have to invest in these kinds of programmes, whilst still maintaining your research, your teaching and learning and all the other things that you have to maintain within the university. You also have to fight about whether the state adequately supports you to bring about these transformations, and I don't think the South African state has supported these transformations at universities adequately. But it's very happy to hit you on the head when you don't meet certain targets, without acknowledging the fact that it's been remiss itself in terms of providing you with the support and the resources to bring about certain changes and so on.

All these thing happen in context and we have to be very sober about them but all the time being purposeful about bringing about these changes, finding new ways to do it, to win over people who are a little reluctant to get involved. I think there's a lot of honesty required about this. I can tell you at Rhodes University there came a point where I don't think we could put young scholars in certain academic departments. And sometimes I might want to say those academic departments are staffed with the most politically progressive people.

Dr Surender: Why couldn't you place certain scholars in certain departments?

Professor Badat: The institutional environment in that department was hostile or young scholars were going to get destroyed in that process. So much in-fighting in those departments, they were taking their eyes off the ball, that they have a responsibility to these young scholars. It's really about finding people that you can work with sometimes. And not, in terms of you as a Vice-Chancellor, as an institution, wanting to make a point, put people into departments where you know they may get destroyed. At the same time while you work through those issues, how are we going to sort out you as a department so we can put young black scholars. That was creating incentives for departments, because those young black scholars were guaranteed posts at Rhodes University. These were sometimes super-numeri posts, you were given an extra post in your department on condition that when there's a retirement or resignation in three to five years' time, you will replace them of course on performance, this is not sheltered employment, so these processes require leadership within the departments, it requires all kinds of infrastructure and activities to make sure you succeed.

Dr Surender: I want to change tack a little bit with a slightly different kind of question and a really important and salient one right now for us in the UK, I think probably globally. This is from somebody who you know, David Johnson, he says hi Saleem, nice to see you again. The case of Adam Habib, the Director of SOAS recently appointed, has shown how fraught conversations of race are in the UK, and the fact that there are those in South Africa and here who prefer a narrower definition of black. That it seems Adam did not fit. So for colleagues who don't know this, Adam Habib would be classed as somebody of Asian, Indian descent in South Africa. Does it raise questions about transformation of higher education society both here and there? What are your thoughts?

That is a fascinating issue about language. When I was growing up in the UK, somebody who was born in India and is of an Indian family, I would class myself as a black Briton as a black person in 1979, in 1980. Increasingly that is a contested issue. Are you somebody of colour, what are the categories, what is the terminology? South Africa has dealt with this with bells on, what are your thoughts about language and about the direction of actually talking about people who are from an Asian background, from a Caribbean background, from a Chinese background, rather than talking about people of colour or categorising people as black?

Professor Badat: I have a little familiarity with the UK having studied there and having close friends there. But I want to stay away from the UK situation, I don't know enough about the categorisations and histories and so on. Let me stick to the South African situation. So Adam Habib is a colleague and I have been observing the whole scenario and one of the things that I really think reading some of the recent documentation from SOAS is that I feel very much, unless it's being addressed somewhere else, they have missed a real teaching learning moment here. That goes beyond the question of whether the word was used or not used and whether it was appropriate or not appropriate and so on. There's one point I would like to make because I was struck by the very same students, certainly a student organisation at SOAS who takes offence at Adam's use of the term. Still issues a statement or in a statement speaks about non-whites. When referring to Adam and to me. I think David Johnson will probably be aghast at that, too. Because non-white, my fellow students at SOAS is offensive and derogatory term to people like me. And in South Africa.

When I was being interviewed at Rhodes University for the job of Vice-Chancellor one of the questions they asked me is give us an example, big or small of what you would change. I said I have the perfect example for you. The day I come into Rhodes University I'm going to be engaging with the people who produce the university statistical digests and I will compliment them on many things about how useful the digest is and then I will get to the point where you say you call me a non-white. This is 2006 in South Africa at a university. So the very same students who assume should be familiar with this use the term non-white, which is offensive and I haven't heard anyone there really take issue with that. As a teaching learning moment. To say this is wrong. In the cut and thrust of politics and battles you may be having with Adam Habib, you need to be mindful of this concept non-white. We are black, a positive identity and black by the way in South Africa I would like to think is not about pigmentation, it is a political idea, it is about those who were oppressed under apartheid, African Indian and coloured South Africans, it is the chauvinists in South Africa who want to move us away from that black consciousness definition into a narrow Africanism, so now we have an Olympics of who is black and who is not black, who is more black and who is less blacker and so on. Words matter. I think we must think very carefully about the kind of words we use.

We need to teach people in South Africa about the K word. We need to link the K word to forms of colonial opression and exploitation, what the K word did, coming from the Arabic word ‘Kafir’, ‘non-believer’ and white moved to natives, no non-whites, to plurals, how all those words have a function in our society and in our universities. Are we going to give up those teaching and learning moments? I think we need to think more deeply about these issues. It's not about academic freedom or freedom of expression. It's about what do we do with historical terms and how do we come to grips with them and how do we talk about these things, because that K word is still being used in South Africa today. I can imagine there are many young people in South Africa when you say K word, they won't know what you are talking about. Am I prohibited from going into a classroom and using Bernard Magubane, who speaks about this, the role that language and terms like K and so on play in society. I'm feeling at an institution like SOAS a wonderful opportunity has been missed. In some sense there's been more heat generated than light.

Dr Surender: I appreciate that you don't want to particularly comment on the UK case, but if I can just push you a little bit to say that one of the challenges is that actually categorising populations as white or the terminology here is BME, Black and minority ethnic or BAME, Black Asian minority ethnic, actually is too heterogeneous and it actually masks and disguises very important differences between racial minority groups that experience of a Black African is different to the experience of a Black Caribbean person, different to the experience of a South Asian, so language does matter and increasingly people want more specificity, more differentiation. What you lose there is the exact point that you made, which is that these terms are social constructs and political constructs, but any further thoughts about that?

Professor Badat: So I think we must problematise some of these concepts of Asian and India and coloured and so on. The one thing I am highly fearful and I have spoken about in my graduation speeches, is the ossification of these terms of African coloured when I think in South Africa the challenge is to build a genuinely non-racial society, in where race does not come to matter any longer. That must be the prize. Of course, in terms of how we get there, we do have to pay attention to these categories. Child infant mortality much higher amongst black than white. If we don't keep those categories and concepts, how are we going to measure change. I think it's the scoundrels who want to do away with it entirely because then you can never measure. Because you are not categorising people for hopefully reasons of transformation. But at the same time I think as we pursue that, we must also constantly ask ourselves the questions of the danger of these things becoming ossified, and the competition around this ossification in terms of resources and who gets access and who gets opportunity and things like that. So I think this is really a double edge that we must be thinking about. You know from the tradition that I come from, Rebecca, the concept of black in some of this is political. It is not about race. As you say, race is a social construct. Even who is Asian and who is something, are we using geography now to categorise people? I think we must think about these things very deeply in the context of colonialism, segregation, apartheid, inequalities of a race class generation in the UK.

What work are these concepts doing for us? How do we go beyond these categories? Because is that not the kind of society you would like to live in, where these categories don't really matter? Where we celebrate difference really in the widest possible sense and appreciate and affirm that difference.

Dr Surender: I'm so, so sorry, but we really have to stop because the people with the power here to turn us off are going to do that very, very quickly. So I have to say thank you to the audience for attending. Sorry if we didn't get to your questions, but most importantly Saleem on behalf of the Task Force and our audience, thank you so much for joining us. I said at the beginning that we were honoured to have somebody with your experience and authority come and open this series, and you have absolutely lived up to that introduction.

Thank you for sharing all your considerable experience, for challenging us to get the thinking right before we rush to action, but not take too long about it. And to be bold in what we do. Thank you very much. We look forward to remaining in touch with you on this conversation and hopefully inviting you to Oxford in person at some point soon. Thank you and good luck with all the things on your agenda in the coming year.

Professor Badat: I wish you all the best with these conversations they are very important.

Dr Surender: Thank you everybody, goodbye.

ENDS