

Rhodes University postgraduates orientation welcome

9 February 2007

Good morning, molweni.

It is a great pleasure to interact with you this evening, to welcome new postgraduates to Rhodes and also say hello again to returning postgraduates.

To those transferring to Rhodes from other universities, a special welcome! You have made a wise choice and I am confident that you will confirm that this is so in the coming month and years.

To those Rhodes graduates beginning postgraduate studies, you are now entering a new phase of your professional and intellectual development, with a greater autonomy of learning and discovery. I trust you will find your programme stimulating and rewarding.

Those of you continuing with postgraduate studies, you know what is involved and I wish you good progress.

As postgraduates you make up 24% of the Rhodes student body. This is very healthy feature of Rhodes and as I will indicate you play an immensely important role at Rhodes.

Moving forward, as we further debate the ideal shape and size of Rhodes – between the different faculties, between local and international students, possible new undergraduate and postgraduate field and disciplines, and so forth, one of the important issues that we will address is our preferred balance between undergraduates and postgraduates.

Currently, we have a commitment to growing our postgraduate numbers – both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the total student body. If this is confirmed, and there are good reasons to increase postgraduate numbers at Rhodes, we will then have to formulate the strategies by which to pursue this goal, and also address how we can mobilise additional funds for whatever infrastructural developments will be required and also for scholarships and bursaries.

You come from X number of countries. The presence of international postgraduates is a very welcome feature of Rhodes. It contributes to the intellectual and social diversity of Rhodes and also enriches our institutional culture.

As you are aware, unlike in other countries, for example, the United Kingdom, international students pay a considerable premium on their fees. In South Africa international students, apart from necessary levy, pay the same fees as local students. In my view this is in the spirit of internationalism. It is also a practical application of the refusal of South Africa to embrace the commercialisation and commodification of higher education, which has been promoted by some developed countries who have sought to define higher education as just another service and make it subject to World Trade Organisation rules.

Importance

Postgraduates play an immensely important role at and make a valuable contribution to Rhodes University in, as far as I can see, at least 7 ways.

1. First, postgraduates serve as tutors and so contribute to supporting academic programmes and enhancing undergraduate student development. Of course, this also becomes a valuable mechanism for postgraduates to advancing their own academic development.
2. Second, postgraduates serve as role models for undergraduates, and hopefully inspire undergraduates to consider postgraduate study.
3. Third, you act potentially as catalysts of new knowledge production through inspiring and innovating new approaches to the development of knowledge or through helping to push knowledge production into new areas
4. Fourth, you may be a valuable support to leading researchers at Rhodes, assisting them in their research in various ways and potentially growing to become collaborators
5. Fifth, as postgraduates you are also potentially apprentice academics and the new generation of lecturers and researchers.

The French theorist Louis Althusser notes that every society at the same time that it produces must also ensure its reproduction. An issue of great concern to me is ensuring the reproduction (and transformation of the social composition) of the next generation of scholars.

From one angle, that of employment equity and the current social composition of our academic labour force, we have a serious and immediate 'crisis'. The roots of this crisis are well known.

From another angle - that of the age profile of our academic labour force, the remuneration of academics, the pull of the public (government, public enterprises and science councils) and private sectors that offer considerably better remuneration, the opportunity costs for first generation black graduates in terms of family expectations and deferred income, competition from other knowledge producing institutions, and the emigration of experienced and emerging scholars - the crisis is growing and could become grave. It is clear that if this problem is not to become dire and seriously debilitate our institutions, action is required.

We can also pose whether we are nurturing the next generation of critical scholars – the historians, sociologists, philosophers, educators and other scientists that are passionately committed to both justice, and honest, critical and independent scholarship, and who must be the critical voices and public intellectuals of our society.

It may be that sometimes supervisors and current academics put you off an academic career by saying that it is not financially worthwhile and the like.

I am the first to acknowledge that we do not remunerate our academics as well as we should and I am committed to looking at what can be done in this regard. Already a Rhodes task team is looking into this matter.

I very much hope that at least some of you will seriously consider academic careers. You will never be hugely wealthy as an academic in the financial sense, but the profession and calling of scholarship

allows you to become wealthy in other senses and can be a rewarding career.

6. Sixth, some postgraduates serve as sub-wardens and senior hall students in our residences. This is much appreciated as you have much to offer our residence undergraduates and can be useful mentors and resources.
7. Finally, through the Postgraduate Student Liaison Committee (PGSLC) you participate in and contribute to the governing of Rhodes University. The PGSLC is represented on the Council of the University, the highest decision-making body, the Senate, the Joint Research Committee, and various other committees, including the Teaching and Learning Committee and the Quality Assurance Committee. Last year, you were also invited to participate in the new budget process by which the 2007 budget of Rhodes was decided on. The Dean of Research has seeks to involve, where possible, postgraduates in conferences and activities of the National Research foundation and other bodies.

Clearly, you have myriad opportunities to have your views made known and to contribute to shaping the nature and direction of the University. This representation also offers the members of the PGSLC invaluable opportunities to development leadership qualities and skills.

The PGSLC must be nurtured and developed as it is of you and for you. Through the PGSLC you have an open door to the Dean of Research, the other Deans and I, and we will be very happy to engage with you on any matters related to the postgraduate experience.

There is, however, another reason that the PGSLC must be nurtured and developed. In my view, if you are imaginative and innovative, the PGSLC could play a vital role in contributing to postgraduate student development, either through your own initiatives or in partnership with the Office of the Dean of Research or in partnership with other bodies – the Women's Academic Solidarity Association (WASA) comes to mind here.

In closing I wish you a stimulating, productive and generally great year, and thanks for this opportunity to interact with you.