

**VC's WELCOME AT THE RHODES UNIVERSITY  
HOUSE COMMITTEES AND SUB-WARDENS WORKSHOP**

**30 January 2013**

Molweni, good morning, goeie more, dumelang, and welcome back to Rhodes University. I hope you had an enjoyable vacation and are looking forward to the new academic year at Rhodes.

To begin with, I wish to thank you for serving as sub-wardens and House Committee and I also thank the Dean of Students Office for organising this programme.

As Rhodes University we leave little to chance when it comes to ensuring a positive and rewarding experience for our students. We are committed to support you, our much valued partners, to navigate your challenges and undertake your responsibilities as House Committee members and sub-wardens.

One of the special and distinctive features of Rhodes is our outstanding residence system. A recent national report has confirmed that we have the largest residence system of any South African university, in terms of the proportion of students that are in residence – in our case almost 50%; and that we also have the best residence system in South Africa. This is not accidental: it is because of the great efforts that you and we make to ensure that our students enjoy a wonderful and positive res experience at Rhodes.

This morning, to help you undertake your duties, I want to share with you the institutional context of your activities and responsibilities as house committee members and sub-wardens.

First, and foremost, it is very important for you, and for all students, to understand why there is a Rhodes University, what are its purposes and commitments.

Rhodes exists for three purposes.

The first is to *produce knowledge*, so that we can advance understanding of our natural and social worlds and enrich our accumulated scientific and cultural heritage.

This means that we “test the inherited knowledge of earlier generations”, we dismantle the mumbo jumbo that masquerades for knowledge, we “reinvigorate” knowledge and we share our findings with others.

We undertake research into the most arcane and abstract issues and the “most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge”. At the same time we also strive to apply our discoveries for the benefit of humankind.

We “operate on both the short and the long horizon”. On the one hand, we grapple with urgent and “contemporary problems” and seek solutions to these.

On the other hand, we “forage” into issues and undertake enquiries “that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit” (Boulton and Lucas, 2008:3).

Above all, we ask *questions*. We don’t immediately worry about the right answer or solution. Instead, we worry *first* about the right *question* or the better question.

We seek to become more postgraduate and research-oriented in coming years without compromising the quality of undergraduate education. We are well-positioned for such a trajectory: we take research seriously and strive to provide our academics with effective support; have the third best research output per capita staff member; we have the second highest percentage of staff with PhDs (56%), and we have very good postgraduate graduation rates and the best rates at PhD level. Despite being the smallest university in South Africa, and comprising only 0.8% of South Africa’s university students and 1.9% of all full-time academic staff, we possess 7% of all prestigious research chairs that are available to universities as part of the South African Research Chairs initiative (SARChI).

Our second purpose is to *disseminate knowledge* and to cultivate minds. Our goal is to ensure that you can think imaginatively, ‘effectively and critically;’ that you ‘achieve depth in some field of knowledge;’ that you can critique and construct alternatives, that you can communicate cogently, orally and in writing, and that you have a ‘critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves.’

At the same time, we also seek that our students should have “a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times”; should be “able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it”, and that they should have “some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems” (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000:84).

Our final purpose as a university is to undertake *community engagement*. On the one hand this involves our students voluntarily participating in community projects undertaken through our Community Engagement office.

On the other hand, it involves service-learning, where, through your academic courses, you take part ‘in activities where both the community’ and *you* benefit, ‘and where the goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance (your) *learning* through rendering this service.’

In coming to Rhodes University, students embark on a voyage centred on learning and knowledge, but also self-discovery. The time spent at Rhodes is an opportunity to discover who you are.

Our goal is for our students to graduate as not just capable professionals, but also thoughtful, sensitive and critical intellectuals and citizens – people who think about ethical issues, and questions of social justice, democracy and human rights and are committed to act in the common public good.

It is for good reason that the Rhodes University motto is Strength, Virtue, Truth, and our slogan is ‘Where Leaders Learn.’ This expresses the kind of graduates Rhodes seeks to produce – knowledgeable and visionary, but also ethical and compassionate.

We are very keen to ensure that learning and education, and the intellectual and personal development of our students, is not confined to only the lecture and tutorial rooms and laboratories.

We also wish to find ways of creatively using other spaces – such as the residences and sport and cultural clubs and activities - to realize the potential and enhance talents of our students.

As House Committees and sub-wardens we will very much value your assistance in finding answers to questions such as:

- How can we creatively and imaginatively use the residences so that they become part of the overall education and development of students at Rhodes?
- How can we develop the attributes of our motto - Strength Virtue Truth - through the residences?
- We have the wonderful slogan, 'Where Leaders Learn.' How can we develop leaders and leadership qualities and attributes through our residences?

There are many opportunities at Rhodes for developing and exercising leadership - the Student Representative Council, clubs and societies, community engagement, House Committees, and sub-warden, mentor and tutor posts. All of these also provide opportunities for students to develop intellectually, socially and personally.

Our students, both in res and in digs, must be encouraged to make use of these opportunities, and we expect you to lead the way through your own participation in sport, cultural and other activities.

Ladies and gentlemen, if it is important for you to appreciate the wider social purposes and goals within which you undertake your roles and activities, it is also necessary for you to have some understanding of Rhodes' student body.

- We hope that this year our student body will be 7 645 students – which means that we will remain smallest university in South Africa by far
- 3 467 students – 65% of our undergraduates and almost all of our first-year students - will live in 50 University residences and be attached to one of our 12 dining halls. As you know, there is a 13<sup>th</sup> hall, the Oppidan dining hall, in the Bantu Stephen Biko building, for students in digs
- 47 residences are for undergraduates and 3 are for postgraduates

- This year we will build a new undergraduate residence and a new postgraduate residence, complete a new Faculty of Education building, and start to work on a new Life Sciences building and a new School of Languages building.
- The students at Rhodes and in our residences come from a rich variety of social, cultural, religious, educational, linguistic and national backgrounds and lived experiences.
- 59% of our students are women and 41% are men
- 57% are black and 43% are white
- 77% are South Africans and 23%, or 1 in 5, are from about 57 countries around the world
- 29%, or over 1 in 4, are postgraduate students
- Our students will be enrolled in one of six different faculties and many different academic programmes, each with its own knowledge interests, academic requirements and expectations and demands
- Our students come from private, the previous model C schools, and other public schools
- Some students come from modest working class backgrounds, others from middle class backgrounds and yet others from extremely wealthy backgrounds
- Our students come from urban areas and rural areas; from big cities, small towns and little villages
- Our students have different national and cultural traditions, which may shape how they interact with others, express themselves, communicate and dress
- Our students may be monolingual or multilingual; and they have many different languages as their first or home languages – we must not assume that everyone at Rhodes has English as their first or home language
- Our students may be apolitical or have strong political views; they may have different political sympathies, may vote for different political parties, and may have different opinions about the state of our world and South Africa or other countries
- Our students may have different religious commitments or no religious commitments
- Our students may be heterosexual, bisexual, gay or lesbian
- Our students may consume alcohol or they may be teetotallers for various reasons
- Our students may eat meat, or be vegetarian or vegan
- Our students may have different preferences with respect to sports, television programmes, music, leisure activities and how they like to chill.

I emphasised at some length the rich diversity that exists at Rhodes and that will exist in the residences. Why?

For the simple reason that it is very important for you to be mindful of the rich diversity that exists among the students in our residences as you plan your activities as House Committees and undertake your responsibilities as House Committee members and sub-wardens.

You have, however, to do more than simply recognise this diversity. You also have to unequivocally respect this diversity, and embrace, or learn to embrace, this rich diversity as part of ensuring that everyone is treated with dignity.

See this diversity not as a problem but as exciting and a fountain of great vitality and strength. Tap into this rich diversity and harness it as a means for the personal, social and intellectual development of students.

Finally, we look to your support to help instil in students a few key messages.

You will acknowledge that unacceptable conduct, prejudice and intolerance continue to linger in our society and at Rhodes.

So one key message to students is to make it *absolutely clear* that at Rhodes there are no first class and second class students and people; and that at this institution there will be *no* accommodation of racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic or any other kind of chauvinistic behaviour.

Students must understand that one's 'race', sex, gender, nationality, previous school, religion, first language, residential area, the make and model of one's car, the size of one's pocket money, and the status and wealth of one's parents confer on *no* special rights or privileges on anyone.

At Rhodes everyone is treated equally and equitably, and conduct, relationships and responsibilities are guided by the values of the South African *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights* – respect for human dignity, human rights, equality, non-sexism and non-racialism.

Examples of socialization and lack of sensitivity – 'pecky/maid/barbaric'/etc. Everyone at Rhodes - other students, academics, house and hall wardens, technicians, secretaries, messengers, cleaners and garden staff - deserves respect and dignity.

A second message is one that must be conveyed specifically to men.

There is no place at Rhodes for despicable and violent conduct against women, and the University will not under any circumstances tolerate such conduct.

Men must know that such conduct will lead to prosecution, and where necessary, exclusion from Rhodes and in effect from all other universities.

There is also a message for women: Don't allow anyone to subject you to any painful and humiliating abuse. Have the courage to report such conduct, with the confidence that we will act and support you.

A third message concerns the irresponsible excessive consumption and abuse of alcohol by some students.

Abusive drinking is *not* what it means to be a Rhodent. Every year, irresponsible behaviour results in much grief for individuals, their families, and the University. Heavily intoxicated students sometimes feature in unpleasant social and sexual incidents.

As you know, the Dean of Students works diligently with local club and pub owners to encourage responsible drinking and will continue to do so. Numerous activities have also been instituted as alcohol-free events.

As House Committee members and as sub-wardens, you are vital partners in ensuring that Rhodes is the kind of university we wish it to be: an outstanding university that provides students with a wonderful education and social experience, and a place where all feel comfortable and supported and all feel it to be their home – a Home for All!

You are sub-wardens and House Committee members because you have particular attributes and qualities. Undertake your responsibilities guided by the Rhodes motto and respect for human dignity. Serve with sensitivity, courage and distinction. Be wonderful role-models and use your status to enhance your own intellectual, social and personal development.

My best wishes to you on a fantastic year and also on your academic studies during 2013.