

**ADDRESS TO THE RHODES UNIVERSITY MUSLIM  
STUDENTS ASSOCIATION LEAVERS DINNER**

**Kwantu Game Reserve**

**20 October 2007**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Chairperson and officials of the MSA, your special guests, the Rhodes University 2007 leavers, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

Good evening, molweni. Thank you for the privilege of being with you this evening and to say a few words on this special occasion to acknowledge, recognise and celebrate the achievements of the Muslim students of Rhodes University that will take complete their studies and possibly their leave of the University at the end of this year. I say, 'possibly', because I am hoping that all of you will think seriously about continuing with further studies.

## **RECOGNITION**

First and foremost, I wish to congratulate you the students on your tremendous achievement.

To be able to complete your studies and take leave of Rhodes, you have, I am sure, worked hard and long hours, days, months and years. This is a fantastic achievement in the context of a higher education system that still struggles to realize the talents and potential of all our students. Your success is also a testimony to the contributions of your lecturers, tutors, laboratory technicians, wardens, cooks and cleaners and I wish to acknowledge their sacrifices in enabling you to be here and to graduate from Rhodes.

If there any women and mothers amongst our leavers, I want to especially acknowledge you. In some cases you may have had to overcome additional burdens and obstacles to achieve your dreams.

I want to also recognize your parents, guardians, and families. I have no doubt that in certain cases they have endured many hardships and made many sacrifices to enable you to receive a Rhodes education and to graduate.

This, however, is your evening, to remember, celebrate and cherish. You have earned it and I wish you a pleasant and joyful night.

However, as you prepare to complete your studies and to leave Rhodes University allow me a few comments about your responsibilities as Muslims, South Africans, and graduates of Rhodes University.

## **RESPONSIBILITIES OF RHODES GRADUATES**

As graduates you will have had the honour of studying at a very special and distinctive university, one that takes pride in the pursuit of knowledge and excellence, in enjoying the highest pass and graduation rates and the best research outputs of all South African universities, and in ensuring an intellectual, social and physical environment in which knowledge, human understanding the intellect can flower.

I hope that your period at Rhodes has been an exciting new phase in your life and your intellectual and personal development. You joined Rhodes as an intellectually talented woman and man, and that your time at Rhodes was voyage of learning and discovery - a voyage of developing awareness, understanding, and certain abilities, but also a voyage of self-discovery. It is said that 'you are who you are'. That's not quite true. More accurately, you are who you learn to become.

You have been part of a community whose students come from diverse social, cultural, educational and national backgrounds and lived experiences. 57% of our students are women, which is not just good for you men, but also very good for you women, as you are assured greater opportunities for intellectual and social development and success. 24% of our students or almost 1 in 4 are postgraduates. 25% of the students are international students from 57 countries around the world. This makes us a cosmopolitan place and enriches our institutional culture.

It is important to recognise that when you graduate from Rhodes you will become part of a very small section of the South African population, and one which enjoys many advantages and privileges in our society.

For one, with a Rhodes degree your prospects of securing employment are infinitely better than those of others. Second, you will earn substantially higher incomes than most fellow South Africans. Third, you will enjoy a higher standard of living, many more doors will be open to you, and many more of life's pleasures will be available to you than for your fellow citizens. These are just some of the benefits you will enjoy because of your Rhodes qualification. In this context, I wish to earnestly suggest that humility of the kind personified by all great leaders would be a great virtue.

No one here this evening will begrudge you your benefits or the successes you achieve in the years ahead. On the contrary, we will laud them and toast them. Indeed, we will especially celebrate if you don't forget your alma mater and as alumni you contribute generously to making it possible to enable needy students from financially impoverished backgrounds to also receive a Rhodes education. In my inaugural address on becoming Vice Chancellor I said that I was

committed to making Rhodes a great small university. We are, alas, also a relatively poor university, our needs are great, and the support of friends and alumni is vital to our ongoing institutional development.

With your success you are a living symbol of hurdles overcome. You have made history but are also on the threshold of making more history. You now take on a new identity and a new mantle. And with it you have to assume new and greater responsibilities, and enter into a new covenant with your immediate and the general South African community.

So this is a good time to ask whether a person's university education and qualification, paid for in large part by public funds, are solely for his or her private benefit or must it also contribute to the public good and have social benefits?

For good reason the Rhodes University slogan is 'where leaders learn', and our motto is 'Strength, Virtue, Truth'. In the light of these commitments, I would be extremely disappointed if any of you are of the view that your education and qualification are solely for your personal benefit. If any of you do indeed have this view, then as a university and as Rhodes we have sadly failed in our mission.

It is my goal to ensure that you leave Rhodes as truly highly educated persons – people who not only possess knowledge, and professional and technical expertise and skills, but who are also enlightened, ethical, critical, creative and compassionate citizens with a deep social commitment to using knowledge and expertise to remake our society, the African continent, and the South in general, which has experienced the ravages of colonialism and underdevelopment, in the interests of all our people.

Professor Kader Asmal, when he was Minister of Education, argued that the 'fundamental point is that [a university] education is and must be more than about skills and competencies'. [It is also] 'to ensure that the skills and competencies we develop are embedded within the broad set of ethical and moral values and principles that give meaning to human existence' (*Address by the Minister of Education, , MP to the Local Government and Higher Education in Johannesburg Summit on Strategic Partnerships Hilton Hotel, Sandton, 24 March 2003*).

Too much of what we see around us should fill us with shame and affronts our sensibilities. We continue to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions. The faultlines of race, class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of our fellow citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival. Patriarchy and sexism stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to the development of our society. Crime, rape and abuse of women are pervasive, morbid, ills that wreak havoc in our country. Alongside these, unbridled individualism, crass materialism, and a vulgar mentality of "greed is cool" and "get what you can" runs rampant in our society.

Yet for the sake of social justice and our humanity, we must refuse, as the Palestinian scholar Hammani puts it, 'to accept the logic of inequality and the repression that it involves', and continue to 'search for human agency, for the means through which inequality can be undone' (2006:32).

Or, as the Chairperson of our Human Rights Commission writes,

We need to be creative and bold...to challenge poverty and inequality, to reshape the way society is structured and does its business and, importantly, to ensure that the concept of the 'oneness of humanity'...comes to mean just that (2003:26).

I am a very proud South African and African. In my development and career I have been assisted by remarkable South Africans, black and white, men and women, intellectuals, scholars and workers, Muslim and non-Muslim and I have come to develop a passionate love for my birth-place, my country and the African continent.

I am committed to a Rhodes that seeks to 'respect, protect, promote and fulfil' the values of human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of non-sexism and non-racialism and the human rights and freedoms that the South African *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights* proclaim.

I am determined to ensure that at Rhodes there are no first class and second class students and people, that everyone is treated equally and equitably, and that a person's 'race', sex, gender, nationality, school, religion, make and model of car, the size of his/her parent's bank balance or the status and wealth of his/her parents will confer on them no special privileges or rights. That, in essence, Rhodes is a home for all, that it respects difference and diversity of all kinds!

Our *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights* must be the fundamental bedrock that informs your responsibilities, guides your conduct, and animates your social relationships with others and your own existence.

In the years to come, as a Rhodes graduate you must continuously ask yourself:

- How do I help to extend the benefits and success I enjoy to greater numbers of South Africans and Africans, and especially to those that have been historically disadvantaged and marginalised?
- How do I contribute to ridding our country and continent of inequality, poverty, hunger, AIDS and other diseases?
- How do I help to create a caring and humane society that promotes social equity; social justice, the building of a substantive democracy, the defence and advancement of a culture of human rights, and a vibrant civil society that is characterized by vigorous and critical public intellectual debate?
- How do I counter racism, sexism, xenophobia, religious and other kinds of intolerance and promote tolerance, the value of diversity, and the 'oneness of humanity'?
- How do I creatively and boldly make our young democracy, so full of promise and potential, work for all South Africans?
- How do I, in short, make a difference?

Your knowledge, expertise and skills make you powerful, precious, and vital people capable of making a difference. I urge each of you to think about how you can harness the capabilities that Rhodes has helped to cultivate for the advancement of knowledge, understanding, peace, economic and social development, and social justice in South Africa and on the African continent.

Rhodes University aspires to be a place 'where leaders learn'. It is therefore fitting to close with the words of two outstanding leaders. One is the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, who has written that 'We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy'. The other is the Jewish sage Hillel who says: 'If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?'



I hope that in the years to come you will continuously reflect on these wise words; that in the spirit of the Rhodes motto you will pursue the Truth that derives from knowledge, understanding and reason; that you will practice the Virtue of social commitment, compassion and tolerance; and that you will also possess the Strength of courage and boldness to remake our society so that all South Africans and Africans possess the political, social, economic and human rights that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives.

I wish you every success in your future careers and endeavours.