

# **Rhodes University Human Rights awareness campaign forum**

Dr Saleem Badat  
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## **Opening Statement**

One of our key challenges was well put by Shepard Mati, an outstanding young intellectual and Rhodes graduate, during the centenary of Rhodes in 2004: building Rhodes as an institution 'committed to a critical appreciation of where we come from, a dialogical and analytic engagement with where we are now, and placing before all of us a compelling vision of a future based on solidarity and caring' (2005: 208).

Our motto proclaims that we seek to be a University 'where leaders learn', but I am doubtful that we know what this means or have even really begun to grapple with what this means.

It is my great concern whether we are giving sufficient attention to advancing equality, human rights in general and social cohesion in the light of our apartheid legacy – and here I don't mean advancing these in the wider society but within Rhodes. While the VC must provide leadership this cannot be accomplished by me alone – it is the task of all of us.

To do this we need 'a critical appreciation of where we (as an institution, as staff, as students) come from, (and) a dialogical and analytic engagement with where we are now', and a critical yet empathetic rights-based institutional culture that is willing to confront issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and other forms of bigotry and intolerance without being in denial that these exist or can ever exist at Rhodes.

Raising of these issues may cause discomfort for many, but discomfort is a necessary condition of learning, understanding and becoming highly educated, and is to be preferred to sweeping important and challenging issues under the carpet

and having the regret later that they should have been addressed proactively and boldly earlier.

## **Response to survivor's testimonies**

We have been urged to treat one of the testimonies 'with the respect and reverence it deserves'. I believe that we must treat all the testimonies in this way, and acknowledge the hurt, anger, bitterness and feeling of being let down by, as one student put it, 'my place of hope'.

A number of things are clearly necessary, which include:

1. As part of upholding constitutional values and rights and building a culture of the assertion of human rights we must ensure that in terms of policy and practice there is no accommodation of bigotry and intolerance.

We must be especially vigilant that our culture and traditions do not imprison our thinking, induce blind spots, and generate practices that are alienating, discomfoting and exclusionary.

Michael said that unfortunately 'people see difference as a disability'. Instead, we must purposefully create and institutionalize an open, vibrant, democratic and inclusive intellectual and institutional culture that embraces difference and diversity, and sees these as strengths and powerful wellsprings for personal, intellectual and institutional development. We must respect, affirm and embrace the rich diversity of the people that today constitute and must increasingly constitute Rhodes University.

2. As part of our role of educating and producing highly educated people who are also leaders, we must challenge ourselves and students in a way that stimulates us to think critically about illiberal views and traditions and liberates our minds. We need to think much more about Martha Nussbaum's notion of an education that is intimately

connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, and to the 'cultivation of humanity'.

'Three capacities, above all, are essential to the cultivation of humanity' (Nussbaum, 2006:5). 'First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions – for living... the "examined life"....Training this capacity requires developing the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgement' (ibid, 2006:5).

The 'cultivation of humanity', according to Nussbaum, also requires students to see themselves 'as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern' – which necessitates knowledge and understanding of different cultures and 'of differences of gender, race, and sexuality' (Nussbaum, 2006:6). It is clear from tonight's testimonies that some of our students and even staff are lacking in this regard.

It is, however, more than 'factual knowledge' that is required. Also necessary is 'the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have' (ibid, 2006:6-7). We are challenged to develop this ability, because it appears to be sorely lacking in some of our students and staff.

The hurt, anger, bitterness and painful experiences that have been courageously expressed this evening are not intended to depress or demoralise us. Instead, they must shame us and challenge us to fulfil our constitutional obligations and ensure that conduct at Rhodes is in accordance with the values of our constitution and the rights that it affirms and seeks to advance.

Jacob noted that there is a popular notion that the issue of racism was settled in 1994. This is a dangerous myth, as is the self-comforting myth that we are 'a rainbow nation', which confuses aspiration with reality. It is hardly possible

that centuries of systemic institutionalised racism (or sexism and other kinds of intolerance) can be eradicated in short fourteen years of democracy.

It is crucial that we not confuse a commitment to non-racialism with the idea that this entails a colour-blindness which suggests that race is no longer or not an issue. The paradox is that a serious commitment to non-racialism must accept the reality of race and the disabilities and disadvantages that continue to be associated with race. Jacob also challenges us that we must be very careful of shying away from human rights violations in order to 'avoid confrontation and keep the peace'.

I wish to end by sharing the recent reflections of two Rhodes students on their participation in a theatre production that should both inspire and challenge us. A white female Rhodes student writes

The process itself was a journey of enlightenment for the cast. Not only were we exposed to both the overt and subtle racism and prejudice that still exists on campus, but also that which exists in our own ingrained prejudice, moral values and social judgements. Many of us felt more empowered, self-aware, and self-reflective afterwards.

I live in hope that this campus will no longer merely indulge surface tolerance, but actively engage in change - of attitude, ideologies and value judgements.

A white male Rhodes student writes:

From working intimately and honestly with the people in the cast both black and white, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual - I realised that prejudice is inbuilt; that we are a generation that exists within the wake of Apartheid South Africa and the views and ideologies thereof have effected the way we perceive the world. I also realised that most prejudice views are born out of fear: that people fear the unknown, the unfamiliar

and therefore hold negative and discriminatory views of the other. The only way to counter fear is through understanding; the only way to reach understanding is to communicate.

This piece has also made me realise that most of the people of my generation, myself included, are unaware of or apathetic toward the effects that Apartheid has had on us; that we are merely told to tolerate but no one has told us how. We need to keep questioning ourselves and each other and not be afraid to speak our minds.

Indeed, we should 'not be afraid to speak our minds', in the way that our students have courageously done so this evening. We should hear their painful and challenging messages and they must spur us to action.

In the *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Arundathi Roy writes

the only dream worth having ...is to dream that you will live while you're alive and only die when you're dead.

This means

..to love. To be loved. To never forget our own insignificance To never get used to the unspeakable violence and vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget.