

VC's welcome at the Rhodes University house committees and sub-wardens workshop

4 February 2009

Molweni, good morning and a very warm welcome to you all to this workshop for house committees and sub-wardens.

My deep appreciation to the Dean and Deputy-Dean of Students and the entire Office of the Dean for organising this workshop. It is one manifestation of how as a University we strive to leave little to chance when it comes to ensuring a positive and rewarding experience for our students, and also strive to support students - in this case you - to address and negotiate challenges and responsibilities that may come your way.

1. One of the distinctive features of Rhodes University is our residence system and the tremendous effort we put into ensuring that the residence experience of students is part and parcel of our students' positive experience of Rhodes.
2. Let's begin by reminding ourselves of the context of your activities and responsibilities as house committees and sub-wardens.
 - This year we will be some 6 400 students. Almost 50% of our students will live in our 46 University residences and be attached to one of our 10 halls
 - In addition we have an Oppidani dining hall in the Bantu Stephen Biko building dedicated to Oppidani students
 - The vast majority of residences are for undergraduates but there are a few dedicated residences for postgraduates
 - The students in residences come from a variety of social, cultural, educational and national backgrounds and lived experiences – they are men and women; black and white; have a variety of languages as their first-languages; almost 1 in 4 are international students that come from some 50

countries; they come to Rhodes from private and public schools; they come from either modest working class, middle class or extremely wealthy families; they come from urban areas and rural areas, big cities small towns and little villages; they have different national and cultural traditions; they have different religious commitments or no religious commitments, and they may have different sexual orientations.

- In addition, they are distributed across 6 different faculties and many different academic programmes, have different political sympathies and views, and social and cultural interests.
3. Clearly, then, one fundamentally important context of your activities is the great diversity among the students that will be in our residences, which places on you special responsibilities.
 4. This diversity is both a challenge, but also a rich and exciting source of vitality and strength.
 5. Your challenges and responsibilities are two fold:
 - First, is to sensitively work to ensure that as students, academics, support staff and as a University we affirm, build respect for, and embrace the rich and exciting diversity of students that constitute our residences and Rhodes; and
 - Second, through innovative programmes, initiatives and activities to purposefully and imaginatively create and institutionalize a culture that embraces difference and diversity, and harness these as powerful wellsprings for your personal, social and intellectual development and that of our students.
 6. There is, however, a further context within which your activities and responsibilities as house committees and sub-wardens occur.

This is the aspirations and commitments of Rhodes University

with respect to the kind of university we seek to be.

7. First, as Rhodes we strive for academic excellence and to produce high quality graduates. We seek to produce graduates who are professionals that can think theoretically and imaginatively; gather and analyse information with rigour; critique and construct alternatives, and communicate effectively orally and in writing.

However, it is not just capable professionals that we wish to cultivate. We are also committed to producing thoughtful, sensitive and critical intellectuals and citizens who keep ethical questions in sharp focus, promote a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights that is conducive to critical discourse, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a just, non-racist and non-sexist social order. As a University we also see our task as the 'formation of a critical, creative and compassionate citizenry' (O'Connell).

In this regard, it is vitally important that we don't confine the education and intellectual and personal development of our students to only the lecture, and tutorial rooms and laboratories. Instead, we must also creatively use other spaces inside and outside the University that are available to us. One of these very important social spaces is the residences.

The questions, then, are:

- How can we creatively and imaginatively use the residences in ways that makes them an integral part of the overall education and development of students at Rhodes?
- How can the residences become environments that complement and support the University to produce the kinds of graduates we seek to develop?
- The Rhodes motto is Vis Virtus Veritas - Strength Virtue Truth. How can we develop these attributes through the residences?

- Rhodes has the wonderful slogan, 'Where Leaders Learn', which is so full of promise if we are imaginative. Once we have defined the qualities of leadership, how can we develop these qualities through the residences?

8. Second, as Rhodes we wish 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.

As sub-wardens and members of House Committees, the values of human dignity and human rights inform your responsibilities, guide your conduct, and animate your existence and your social relationships with other students.

9. Third, the attributes and leadership qualities that we wish our students to embrace cannot be developed through classroom learning and teaching alone. They are also cultivated through social, cultural and sporting activities.

In this regard, community engagement, the Student Representative Council, the House Committees, sub-warden, tutor and mentor posts, and our wide range of clubs and societies all provide wonderful opportunities for student intellectual, social and personal development. Your fellow students in the residences and in digs should be encouraged to make use of these opportunities and you indeed should be the catalysts that encourage participation.

10. It should be clear from my comments that we consider you, as sub-wardens and House Committee members, to be very important partners in ensuring that Rhodes is the kind of university we wish it to be, in helping us to give effect to the aspirations and commitments of Rhodes.

11. You have the potential to enhance the student experience and student development at Rhodes, and to serve as role-models. Concomitantly, you also have the wonderful opportunity to enhance your own intellectual and social and personal development.
12. You have been elected or selected because of your particular attributes and qualities. On behalf of the University I thank you for making yourself available to take on the responsibilities of sub-wardening and House Committee membership.
13. The Dean and Deputy-Dean of Students and the members of their Office and I very much look forward to our partnership with you, to your dedication, imagination and creativity in the service of a positive and wonderful student experience at Rhodes and in the service of student development.
14. At the same time we also look forward to your own blossoming and to your development as students, as citizens and intellectuals.
15. In closing, on behalf of the University community, thank you for volunteering to take on important responsibilities. We are confident that you will undertake them with sensitivity, courage and distinction. And our best wishes to you on a rewarding and fulfilling year.