

Rhodes University 2010 and beyond

Introduction

Our students have returned from the summer holidays and the campus is once again abuzz again with their energy, chatter and laughter. At the same time our returners are joined by some 1 600 new first years, excited and impressed by what they see around them – welcoming and friendly staff, lovely old buildings, impressive facilities, comfortable residences, picturesque gardens and lawns and a quaint town.

The 1 600 first years were selected from over 5 900 students who applied to attend Rhodes - 4 600 local students and 1 300 international students.

In total some 7 000 students will make up the Rhodes 2010 student body. 1 in 4 will be postgraduates. Our postgraduates are outstanding students, which means our undergraduates have excellent tutors and role-models that can inspire them to also undertake postgraduate studies.

1 in 5 of our students will be international students from some 50 countries around the world. The concomitant national, linguistic and cultural diversity makes Rhodes an exciting and cosmopolitan place and enriches our institutional culture and lives. Local students will rub shoulders with Zimbabwean, Namibian, Zambian, Ugandan, Kenyan, Mauritian, Ghanaian, Cameroonian, Canadian, American, British, Irish, French, Dutch, German, Turkish, Chinese and Indian students, and many others.

Our first years have spent an exciting and illuminating Orientation Week, which is a key mechanism of their induction into Rhodes University. While they start to get a feel of Rhodes and know that they will spend a wonderful 3 or longer years with us, to begin with they have little understanding of what a *university* is and the full meaning of *Rhodes University*, the institution that they have chosen to attend.

The Vice-Chancellor's welcome of new students and parents at the Monument seeks to clarify that Rhodes University exists to serve three fundamental 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”.

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.

It is as Einstein has said: "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

Well maybe not always in 5 minutes. But what is true is that it is the right questions, the proper questions that lead to the great leaps in knowledge and science, to the great discoveries and innovations.

As a university our second purpose is to *disseminate knowledge* and to cultivate minds. Our goal is to ensure that our students can think imaginatively, “effectively and critically”; that they “achieve depth in some field of knowledge”; that they can critique and construct alternatives, that they can communicate cogently, orally and in writing, and that they 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”.

Our final purpose as a university is to undertake *community engagement*. On the one hand this involves our students’ voluntary participation in community projects undertaken thorough our Community Engagement office.

On the other hand, it involves service-learning, in which through academic courses our students and academics take part “in activities where both the community” and *we* benefit, “and where the goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance our *learning* through rendering this service”.

In short, students come to Rhodes University to embark on a voyage centred on the pursuit, making and sharing of knowledge. This is why we refer to Rhodes as indawo yolwazi - a place of knowledge.

This journey is at the same time also a voyage of self-discovery. The time our students spend at Rhodes is an opportunity to discover who they are. It is said that ‘you are who you are’. That’s not true. You are who you *learn* to become. We at Rhodes University seek to support our students to learn, and to learn to become.

A few years ago, walking along one of those wide Manhattan, New York, avenues to attend a meeting with one of our donors, my eyes fell upon some words on a board. The words read: “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire”.

The words are, of course, those of William Butler Yeats, the great Irish poet and winner in 1923 of the Nobel Prize for literature.

The idea of education as the igniting of the intellect and of the desire to question, to learn, and to discover is one that we at Rhodes strongly embrace.

However, the fire that higher education must light cannot be satisfied with imparting only technical and vocational skills or simply preparing students for the labour-market and the economy.

To reduce higher education to producing just competent accountants, pharmacists, scientists, lawyers and educators is to devalue higher education and to strip it of its considerably wider social value and functions.

Higher education is also intimately connected to the idea of democratic and critical citizenship, the assertion and pursuit of social and human rights and the cultivation of humanity.

We seek our graduates to be not just capable professionals, but also thoughtful, sensitive and critical intellectuals and citizens – people who think about ethical issues, and questions of justice, equity, human rights, and the common good.

Our teaching, research, and community engagement therefore seek to be alive to the social, economic as well as moral challenges of our local, national, African and international contexts.

As students begin their higher education at Rhodes they are reminded that South Africa continue to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions.

The divisions of race, class, gender and geography and the privileges and disadvantage associated with these are still all too evident – not least in the town in which Rhodes is located.

Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of South Africans are mired in desperate daily routines of survival on less than R 10 a day.

Patriarchy and sexism stifle the realization of the talent 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. Instead of an ethos of public good and selfless service, unbridled individualism, crass materialism, and a vulgar mentality of “greed is cool” and “grab what you can” run rampant in our society.

It is for good reason that the Rhodes University slogan is ‘Where Leaders Learn’. This expresses our commitment to produce outstanding people and leaders, who are not only knowledgeable, wise and visionary, but also ethical and compassionate. As the Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore has put it: “We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy”.

Academic qualities

With 7 000 students in 2010, Rhodes continues the smallest university in South Africa. We have no envy of our large sister universities because it is our smallness, we believe, that makes us a very special place.

We take great pride in our academic reputation and are well-known for our academic excellence and producing high quality graduates.

Among South African universities, Rhodes has a very favourable academic staff to student ratio, which means that students are guaranteed easy access to academics and close supervision.

We enjoy the distinction of having the best undergraduate pass rates and graduation rates in South Africa, and outstanding postgraduate success rates. This is testimony to the quality of our academic provision, and to the commitment of Rhodes staff to student learning, development and success.

50% of our academics have doctoral degrees, the highest proportion among South African universities.

We also enjoy among the best research output per academic staff member of any university in South Africa, which means that our students learn among and with academics that are leaders in their fields and disciplines.

We are one of the very few universities that permit our students a wide choice of combinations of courses and majors.

It is not unheard of that students major in English and Physics, Music and Computer Science, and Chemistry and Accounting. It is also not unknown that some of our students when they proceed to Honours face the dilemma of deciding whether to do Honours in English or Physics.

While some may think these are 'weird' combinations, we think it is fantastic that our students can combine such courses. Increasingly, great discoveries and innovations are at the boundaries of disciplines and fields.

Academic achievements

Three years in succession and in seven out of the past nine years, the prestigious Flanagan scholarship that is awarded to a South African woman, and which allows her to undertake postgraduate study anywhere in the world, has gone to a Rhodes student.

Two of our students have won Rhodes scholarships to study at Oxford University in 2010 and we have one of the best track records for the winning of Rhodes scholarships.

We have also begun to exercise our dominance over the prestigious new Mandela Rhodes scholarships awarded for postgraduate study at South African universities.

Last year, 4 out of the 28 Mandela Rhodes scholarships were awarded to Rhodes University students, the largest number awarded to a single university. All 4 chose to continue their postgraduate studies at Rhodes. This year again we have 3 of our own Mandela Rhodes scholars with us.

In late 2009, Rhodes received a fourth prestigious Chair in Astronomy to complement its existing three South African Research Chairs in Medicinal Chemistry, Marine Science and Mathematics Education. The University will continue to pursue the establishment of further chairs and niche research groups in areas of academic excellence.

We continue to energetically pursue academic and scientific relationships with select universities in various parts of the world and especially in India and China in areas of mutual interest and benefit.

Developments

We are however, far from complacent. We seek to jealously guard our standing and reputation as one of South Africa's and Africa's outstanding universities. To this effect we are constantly thinking and acting to ensure that we remain an outstanding university, respected for its commitment to knowledge, to academic freedom, the pursuit of truth and the flowering of the intellect, and to the production of graduates equipped to exercise leadership in our society.

A tremendous challenge, as part of our effort to become more postgraduate and research-intensive is to mobilise the necessary funding to support outstanding postgraduate Honours, Masters and Doctoral students. Having committed in 2010 support to 100 postgraduates through donor-funded prestigious scholarships and to 50 postgraduates through the University's own funds, we continue to desperately seek financial support for a further 250 deserving postgraduates.

This year our students and academics and, indeed, the residents of Grahamstown, will be the beneficiaries of a spectacular new four-storey library, which recently opened its doors. The new library possesses every facility essential for cutting-edge academic and research endeavours.

At the same time over the next 6 months we will extensively refurbish the current library. The new and refurbished library is a R85 million investment, the biggest single project in the history of Rhodes University and Grahamstown.

Thus far we have raised almost R70 million, and are striving to raise the remaining R 15 million during this year.

Later in the year, we will open, with a grant of R 12 million from the Department of Environmental Affairs, a new building for environmental education, an area in which we are an international centre of excellence.

During 2007-2009, Rhodes won special state infrastructure funding of R 80 million. As a measure of confidence in our academic qualities, a further R 62 million for new academic infrastructure, scientific equipment and student residences has been committed by the state for 2010-2011. To access this new support, R 8 million will have to be raised by Rhodes.

Negotiations are occurring with a donor to fund the construction of a new School of Languages building that will also accommodate Rhodes' new Chinese Hanban-supported Confucius Institute.

In 2008 two self-funded new residences were opened to house an additional 146 students. With the support of R 30 million in state funding a further two new residences housing 208 students opened in 2009.

Today, 3 266 students - almost 61% of our undergraduate students and the vast majority of new students - live in the University's 48 residences and are associated with its 11 halls, in which almost 10 000 meals are served daily.

Currently, excavations are in progress for the construction of three new residences, which will open next year. With the creative leveraging of committed state funding, we hope to build a further four residences in 2011-2012.

Rhodes is deeply committed to ensuring that at least every first year student can be accommodated in our residences, and will continue to energetically explore ways of increasing the availability of residential accommodation.

We continue to give attention to the academic and related infrastructure needs of Rhodes University, to establishing priorities in this regard and to mobilising the necessary funds to support new buildings and facilities. In due course, our infrastructure and overall campus development plans will be consolidated in a Rhodes 20:20 Vision statement.

Finally, we are all too aware that there is a significant looming environmental challenge. The University must serve as an exemplar and catalyst for innovations to reduce carbon emissions and institute environmentally-friendly practices. Under discussion is the creation of a Green Fund and Green Challenge, through which all the constituencies and stakeholders of Rhodes can be mobilised behind the Green Fund and Green Challenge.