

**Welcome address of the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes  
University, Dr Saleem Badat**

**RHODES UNIVERSITY ORIENTATION WEEK**

**4 February 2009**

The Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans and other colleagues, the President and members of the SRC, parents, guardians, ladies and gentlemen, and not least and above all, you our new students

Good evening, molweni, and a very warm welcome to Rhodes University.

Not too long ago the everyday dress for lecturers was academic gowns of the kind being worn this evening, male students were required to wear a tie, and female students had to wear long dresses. Mercifully, we are today more casual and relaxed about attire.

Still, I should warn that does not mean anything goes. Lecturers will probably draw a line with students who turn up in their pyjamas. But students being students, we can be certain some intrepid ones will try their luck.

Today, academic gowns are reserved for very special occasions. And this evening is indeed a very special occasion, on which we welcome you, our new students and your families to Rhodes University and the Rhodes community.

The Irish have a lovely greeting: *Céad míle fáilte* – a hundred thousand welcomes!

So as Vice Chancellor, and on behalf of the entire Rhodes community of academics, administrators, support staff and students, I say to you *Céad míle fáilte* – a hundred thousand welcomes to Rhodes University, and to iRhini/Grahamstown!

First and foremost, I wish to express my great admiration for you, our new students.

To be here this evening you have worked hard and long hours and have excelled in your National Senior Certificate and other exams. This is a tremendous achievement, given a schooling system that still dismally and tragically fails to realize the talents and potential of all our children and youth.

Your success is also a testimony to the contributions of your teachers, parents and families and I wish to acknowledge their sacrifices in enabling you to be here today. I must also acknowledge the sacrifices that your parents and families will continue to lovingly make to enable you to obtain a Rhodes

education and to graduate from Rhodes.

I also wish to express my admiration for you for another reason: and that is your great wisdom in choosing Rhodes as the university at which to pursue your higher education. You have made a wise choice, one which I am confident that you and your family will confirm during the years that you spend with us.

Joining Rhodes is the beginning of an exciting new phase in your life and your intellectual and personal development. You join Rhodes as among the most intellectually talented women and men of our society. Having completed your schooling you are embarking on a new voyage. This is, on the one hand, a voyage of developing greater knowledge, understanding, awareness, and expertise and skills. But it is also a voyage of self-discovery.

Your time at Rhodes is an opportunity to discover who you are. It is said that 'you are who you are'. That's not quite true. More accurately, you are who you learn to become. We at Rhodes University are here to support you to learn, and to learn to become.

Two 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 a sign on a board. The sign read: "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire".

The quote is, of course, from William Butler Yeats, the great Irish poet, writer, dramatist and the 1923 winner of the Nobel Prize for literature.

The idea of education as the igniting of the intellect and the cultivation of a desire for learning is one that we at Rhodes strongly embrace.

The fire that higher education must light cannot, we believe, however, be satisfied with merely imparting technical and vocational skills or simply preparing students for the labour-market and the economy.

To reduce higher education these functions is to denude higher education of its considerably wider social value and functions.

In our view, education has an intrinsic significance as an engagement and partnership between dedicated teachers and students around humanity's intellectual, cultural and scientific inheritances, and around our historical and contemporary understandings, views and beliefs regarding our natural and social worlds.

Higher education is also intimately connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, the cultivation of humanity, the assertion and pursuit of social and human rights and active democratic participation (Nussbaum, 2006).

To draw on Yeats again it is “empty souls (that) tend toward extreme opinions”. ‘Empty souls’ are produced when our higher education is stripped of values and the quest for knowledge and understanding, and reduced to the inculcation of narrow skills and the pursuit of material wealth alone.

Rhodes is the smallest university in South Africa, and this year we will be some 6 400 students. We have no envy of our large sister universities because our smallness, we believe, makes us a very special place. The over 1 600 of you that are today being welcomed to Rhodes have been selected from over 8 800 students who applied to come to Rhodes. Of these 8 800, 6 200 were local students and 2 600 were international students. You are, therefore, among the very fortunate 1 in 5 students that have been selected to attend Rhodes.

You are joining a University community whose students and staff come from diverse social, cultural, linguistic, educational and national backgrounds, and also different lived experiences.

57% of our students are women. The young men among you may think this is wonderful and makes you very fortunate. But it is you young women who are the especially fortunate since your predominance contributes to assuring greater opportunities for intellectual and personal development and success.

24% of our students or almost 1 in 4 are postgraduates. Our postgraduates are outstanding students, which means you will

have excellent tutors and also role-models who can inspire you to proceed to postgraduate study.

Almost 23% of the students are international students from over 50 countries around the world. The concomitant national, linguistic and cultural diversity makes us an exciting and cosmopolitan place and enriches our institutional culture and lives. This year, alongside Zimbabwean, Namibian, Zambian, Ugandan, Kenyan, Mauritian, Ghanaian, Cameroonian, Nigerian, Canadian, English, French, Turkish, Chinese and Indian students, as well student from many other countries we also welcome new students from Sudan.

Ladies and gentlemen, our lives depend on partnerships, relationships which ideally are mutually respectful and beneficial and contribute to the development of all the partners. Birth is not possible without a partnership. Nor is physical and intellectual development from infancy to childhood, and to youth and to adulthood, possible without partnerships that are caring, affirming, educative and empowering.

I highlight the matter of partnership because at Rhodes University, learning and education is a partnership between students and academics, administrators and support staff. We are scornful of the notion of a university education that sees

students as customers and clients. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of a higher education.

Instead, in joining Rhodes, you and we enter into a partnership: a relationship of mutual commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of our society and our world.

As academics, administrators and support-staff, we are committed to ensuring that there is the necessary physical environment and facilities, institutional culture, organisational structures, high quality academic programmes, and effective support to enable learning on the part of you the students. We take great pride in our academic reputation and are well-known for our academic excellence and producing high quality graduates.

Rhodes has the most favourable academic staff to student ratio among South African universities, which means that you are guaranteed easy access to academics and close supervision.

We also enjoy the distinction of having among 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.

We have one of the highest proportions among South African universities of academic staff with doctoral degrees.

We also have the best research output per academic staff member of any university in South Africa, which means that you will be learning among and with academics that are leaders in their fields and disciplines.

In this regard permit me to joyously mention that the 2009 UNESCO/L'Oreal Award for the most outstanding woman scientist in Africa and the Arab States will be awarded to Prof. Tebello Nyokong of the Chemistry department at Rhodes. This is only the fourth time that a local scientist the very first time that a life scientist has won this award. Prof. Nyokong hold a prestigious Chair in Medicinal Chemistry, is engaged in path-breaking cancer and HIV-AIDS research, is magnet for postgraduate students from around the world and last year alone published some 40 scientific publications. Those in Chemistry can look forward to rubbing shoulders with a wonderful person and role-model.

Two years in succession and in six out of eight years, the most prestigious scholarship that can be awarded to a South African woman, the Flanagan scholarship which allows a



postgraduate to study anywhere in the world, has gone to a Rhodes student.

Every year at least one or more of our students wins a Rhodes scholarship to study at Oxford University and overall among South African universities 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. For 2009, 4 out of the 28 Mandela Rhodes scholarships were awarded to Rhodes University students. This is the largest number awarded to a single university and it fills us with great pride that all 4 have chosen to continue their postgraduate studies at Rhodes. Not at all shabby that a University that has only 0.8% of South Africa's university students has won 14% of the Mandela Rhodes scholarships.

We are however, not 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 the production and dissemination of 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 diverse arenas of society.

Those of you who begin this year will be the beneficiaries of an exciting new initiative that has been the object of two years of planning and has been taking shape the past five months. Being constructed adjacent to our current library is a spectacular new four-storey library.

Due for completion at the end of this year, the new library will possess every facility that is essential for cutting-edge academic and research endeavours. At the same time we will also extensively refurbish the current library. This is a R90 million investment on our part, the biggest single investment in the history of Rhodes University and in the town of Grahamstown.

To date we have raised R65 million. I have requested the Registrar to pass a hat around - a very large hat I may add. I am confident that with your generosity we will raise the remaining R25 million by the end of this evening.

During the course of the year our students will also be the beneficiaries of a significant investment we have made in massively expanding our internet bandwidth and speed. Together with our sister universities, we have invested \$20 million in purchasing a share in the new underwater sea cable

that will run from Milan in Italy to the coast of Kwa-Zulu Natal. This will provide us 40 times our current internet bandwidth and 3 times our current internet speed with great benefits again for academic and research work.

Almost 50% of all Rhodes' students and the vast majority of you, our new students, will live in the University's 46 residences and be associated with its 10 halls, in which up to 9 000 meals will be served daily. Guardians, mums and dads, and grans and grandads need have no fear of your loved ones being adequately fed. On the contrary, when you see them again in the April holidays you may well comment with amusement on their healthy stature – or what we diplomatically call 'first-year spread'.

The residences are an important part of the student culture at Rhodes, and through a well-established system of wardens, sub-wardens and house committees the residences play an important role in supporting your development and success.

Permit me to sincerely apologise that we are unable to accommodate every first year student in our residences as well others who have sought accommodation in our residences. This is a matter of great concern to us and we are working hard to overcome this situation. The availability of finance is the principal issue. As much as it may beggar belief,

to build a single room and accommodate a single student currently costs R 241 000.

Last year two new residences at a cost of R 32 million were opened to house an additional 146 students. With the support of special state funding a further two new residences housing 208 more students will open this year. Next year we hope with continued special state support to build two more new residences. We are deeply committed to ensuring that at least every first year student can be accommodated in our residences, and you can rest assured that we will continue to energetically explore ways of increasing the availability of residential accommodation.

Rhodes strives to produce graduates who are professionals that can think imaginatively; gather and analyse information with rigour; critique and construct alternatives, and communicate effectively orally and in writing.

However, 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 non-racialism and non-sexism. Our teaching, research, and community engagement therefore seek to be alive to the social and economic challenges of our local, national, African and international contexts.

As you begin your education you may want to remember that we 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 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. Instead of an ethos of community, public and social good, 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 well expresses our commitment to produce outstanding people and leaders, not in the sense of people who are materially rich, but in terms of the great contribution we hope they will make to develop our society. We embrace the view of the Swiss cognitive psychologist, Jean Piaget, who argues that: “The principal goal of education is to create men [and women] who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done”.

As our students, we expect from you a commitment and willingness to learn, to actively participate in learning, and to making full use of the various opportunities we provide for your personal, social and intellectual growth and development. We cannot force you to learn. We can only support you. Your development is, ultimately, your own undertaking, achievement and accomplishment.

At Rhodes opportunities for learning and for acquiring expertise and leadership skills extend beyond your academic programme. The partnership between students, academics and other staff extends to the governance of the university. Through the Students Representative Council and other representative bodies, students participate in the Council, Senate and other decision- and policy-making committees of the University. These structures enable you the students to shape the nature and direction of Rhodes, and also provide you with invaluable opportunities to develop leadership skills.

Our Community Engagement Office runs an active student volunteer and outreach programme through which hundreds of students are involved in community projects. Through these you can develop valuable awareness, expertise and skills and contribute to social development.

The House Committees, posts such as sub-wardens, tutors, mentors, and our extensive range of clubs, societies and sports

all provide additional wonderful opportunities for you to develop, and acquire leadership skills.

I wish to now raise seven issues to which you must pay close attention.

1. The first is to make absolutely clear that at Rhodes University there are no first class and second class students and people. Everyone is treated equally and equitably. Your 'race', sex, gender, nationality, previous school, religion, first language, suburb you come from, make and model of car, the size of your bank balance or the status and wealth of your parents confer on you *no* special rights or privileges.

Conduct, relationships and responsibilities at Rhodes 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. Everyone at Rhodes - other students, academics, house and hall wardens, technicians, secretaries, messengers and ground staff - deserves respect and dignity. Rhodes belongs to all and is a home for all!

2. Second, the most recent editorial of our local newspaper, Grocott's Mail, is titled 'The students are here'. The editor writes: "Many Grahamstown residents have a love/hate relationship with the students. They love the students

because they spend a lot of money in the shops and make a massive contribution to the economy of this town. On the other hand, they make a lot of noise, take up parking places on High Street and drink too much”.

While the editor generalises somewhat, he does pertinently raise the issue of the irresponsible excessive consumption and abuse of alcohol among a small number of students. This irresponsible behaviour results in much grief for the individuals concerned, their families, and to the University. Heavily intoxicated women have ended up as victims of unpleasant social and sexual incidents, as have a few men. The University has been working diligently with local club and pub owners to encourage responsible drinking and will continue to do so. Numerous activities have been instituted as alcohol-free events.

There may be individuals who try to initiate you into a culture of abusive drinking on the grounds that this is what it means to be part of the in-crowd at Rhodes. Be firm, be bold, and say no to them. They are not hip or cool – they are socially irresponsible and must be told so in no uncertain terms.

3. In so far as noise is concerned, this raises the issue of our relationship with our town. Please remember that many of us are temporary residents of the town. The onus is on us,



as members of the Rhodes University community, to cultivate good relationships and to build mutually respectful relations with Grahamstown's permanent residents. This means avoiding being disruptive and excessively noisy, especially late at night.

4. Fourth, all initiation practices of any kind, undertaken by any individual or club or society at Rhodes are illegal and have been for some time. Don't be persuaded to join any act of initiation nor allow anyone to perpetrate any kind of initiation on you.
5. In as much as you may be tired of being told about it, the fifth issue is HIV/AIDS. One likes to think that those who come to Rhodes – young women and men like you - would be really aware of key aspects related to HIV/AIDS. The reality is that there is a bewildering level of ignorance among some of you. Please, if you are going to be sexually active become aware of important issues related to HIV/AIDS, and make use of the testing and counselling services that are provided by Rhodes. There is no place for embarrassment on this issue.
6. Sixth, the transition from school and family home to university and having to take care of one's self can be challenging. If you experience any problems you do not have to have to struggle in silence and isolation. If you

have any social and emotional difficulties, numerous offices and people are available to support you and help you cope – the residence wardens and sub-wardens, the Counselling Centre with its trained staff and Office of the Dean of Students. Do not be shy or afraid to ask for help – you will find there will always be people very willing to help you.

7. Finally, compared to most cities and towns, Grahamstown is a relatively safe and secure environment. The University is part of Community Policing, we pay great attention to safety and security on campus, have an effective Campus Protection Unit and try our best to provide a safe environment. Notwithstanding this, safety and security on campus and in the residences is also *your* responsibility and we urge you to cooperate with us in this regard.

Since registering over the past two days you will have hopefully observed some things about your new environment. If big glitzy shopping malls, hectic rush hour city traffic, and McDonalds have been your kind of things, it's time to let go.

Learn, instead, to enjoy little Grahamstown's clean fresh air, friendly people, laid-back atmosphere, and relative safety and security. And, hey, where else can you have the magical experience of summer, spring, autumn and winter all in one single day.

By now you should have also worked out that you're never going to be able claim that you were late for class because of the traffic - that would be the most lame and unimaginative excuse imaginable.

In closing:

- At Rhodes, we take academic work seriously and reading for a Rhodes University degree is an exacting challenge. I urge you to take seriously the considerable demands that your academic programme will make on your mind and time. It is vital that you strike a good balance between your academic studies and the many temptations and distractions of social life.

Students who do not meet our academic requirements are inevitably excluded. It is my sincere hope that the Deans and I will not have to read your appeal against exclusion as a result of your failure to give due attention to your academic studies.

- Our responsibility as Rhodes University is to provide you with a stimulating and enabling environment that cultivates your intellect, and supports you to graduate as a professional, a critical intellectual and citizen, and hopefully also a caring and compassionate person and leader.

- Your responsibility is to grasp the opportunities that Rhodes provides and to develop your potential, talents and promise to the full – to leave Rhodes as men and women who are knowledgeable, skilled, competent, and decent humans who lead and stand out in all walks of life.
- Together we begin today a partnership dedicated to learning, and the quest for knowledge and understanding, so that we can lead productive and rewarding lives and make a difference in our society.

Having been selected from 8 800 applicants to attend Rhodes, you have the opportunity to learn and develop, and graduate as a leader. Seize this opportunity. The future is exciting, and you have a huge and pivotal contribution to make to our common future.

I wish you a pleasant evening and an exciting Orientation Week, which has been carefully designed to induct you into Rhodes University.

Mums, dads and families, even though it may be painful to let go of your loved ones, it is time to say farewell to them. They are at an outstanding University and we will endeavour to the best of our ability to ensure that they have a wonderful experience and that they grow intellectually, socially and

personally. I invite you to join us at our various dining halls for drinks and snacks and I wish you all safe trips home.

Thank you.