

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

**RHODES UNIVERSITY ORIENTATION WEEK**

**4 February 2008**

Ladies and gentlemen, the Acting Vice-Principal, Deans and other colleagues, the President and members of the SRC, parents, and especially you, our new students

Good evening, molweni, and a 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 have become more casual and relaxed about everyday 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.

So as Vice Chancellor, and on behalf of the whole Rhodes community of academics, administrators, support staff and students, a warm welcome to you to Rhodes University, and to iRhini/Grahamstown!

Let me begin my welcome address by expressing my admiration for you, our new students.

To be here this evening you have worked hard and long hours and have excelled in your matric exams. This is a tremendous achievement, given a schooling system that still struggles 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 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 yourself 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 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.

Rhodes is the smallest university in South Africa, with only some 6 300 students. Our new student intake this year is about 1 400 students, from an application list of over 5 000 students. You are, therefore, among the very fortunate 1 in 3 students that have been selected to attend Rhodes.

You are joining a community whose students come from diverse social, cultural, linguistic, educational and national backgrounds, and also different 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. 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 25% of the students are international students from over 50 countries around the world. This makes us an exciting and cosmopolitan place and enriches our institutional culture and lives.

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.

In joining Rhodes, you and we enter into 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 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.

Almost 50% of all Rhodes' students and the vast majority of you will live in the University's 44 residences and be associated with its 10 halls. 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.

To the extent that we are not able to accommodate every first year student and others in our residence, I sincerely apologise for this. This is a matter of great concern to us and we are working hard to overcome this situation. Finances are a major issue. It currently costs almost R 200 000 to build a single room. Two new residences housing 146 more students will open this year. This year we will build two more new residences at a cost R 32 million to house a further 208 students next year. You can rest assured that we will continue to energetically explore ways of accommodating all first-years in residences.

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 want our graduates to be not just capable professionals, but also conscious and sensitive intellectuals and critical citizens – people who think about ethical issues, and also 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. Alongside these, unbridled individualism, crass materialism, and a vulgar mentality of “greed is cool” and “get 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 leaders and outstanding people, not necessarily 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.

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 five 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, school, religion, first language, make and model of car, the size of your bank balance or the status and wealth of your parents confer on you no special privileges or rights.

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 is a home for all!

2. The second issue concerns the use, or rather the abuse, of alcohol. Each year there is among a small number of students the

irresponsible use or abuse of alcohol, which ends up causing much grief to 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. As much as we have an effective Campus Protection Unit and try to provide a safe environment, safety is also your responsibility.

All initiation practices are illegal and have been for some time. There may be individuals who try to initiate you into a drinking culture on the grounds that this is how you become 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.

3. The third issue is – yes you've guessed it, and I know you may be tired of being told about it but it is - HIV/AIDS. One would think that those who come to Rhodes – 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 – it is a matter literally of life and death.
4. The final issue is our relationship with our town. Please remember that many of 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.



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, its 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 will you experience summer, winter, spring and autumn all in one 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 traffic - that would be the most lame and unimaginative excuse imaginable.

In closing:

- Reading for a Rhodes University degree is an exacting challenge, and 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 that do not meet our academic requirements are inevitably excluded, and 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, as 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 thousands of applications 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 contribution to make to our future.

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

And parents, even though it may be painful to let go of your sons and daughters, it is time to say farewell. They are in good hands. I wish you all safe trips home.

Thank you.