

# Rhodes says sorry!

## Acknowledges past shameful actions at inauguration of Stephen Bantu Biko Building

**17 September 2008**

An outstanding graduate has observed that at Rhodes University we need “a critical appreciation of where we come from, (and) a dialogical and analytic engagement with where we are now”.

These are wise words, befitting a graduate of a University that seeks to be an institution ‘Where Leaders Learn’, and guided by the motto ‘Truth, Virtue and Strength’.

Rhodes enjoys a deserved international reputation for outstanding learning-teaching, research and community engagement, and the quality of the student experience provided by dedicated academics, administrators and support staff. For good reason, there is institutional loyalty and pride among students, staff and alumni alike.

Institutional loyalty, especially in the case of a university, does not mean being uncritical and denying historical truths. The inauguration of the Stephen Bantu Biko Building is, therefore, a good occasion for “a critical appreciation of where we” as Rhodes University “come from”.

Credit is due to the pioneers who 104 years ago created Rhodes; to those who, under difficult and financially trying conditions, steered its subsequent development; to those who oversaw its maturation from a University College under the auspices of the University of South Africa to a fully-fledged University in 1951, and to the subsequent generations that energetically toiled to produce the Rhodes University of today’s enviable reputation.

Constitutional democracy in 1994 ushered in new imperatives, obligations and responsibilities, as well as new challenges and

opportunities for our universities. They necessitated our universities to reflect openly and critically on our past so that we could better serve our people in accordance with what it means to be a university.

While we take pride in our university, these are aspects of our past which are inexcusable and shameful and in which we can take no pride.

Before 1959, nothing in law precluded Rhodes from admitting black students or employing black academics and administrators. Instead, Rhodes practised racial segregation on its own volition.

In 1933, practice became official policy, when the University Council *resolved* to bar black students from admission to Rhodes University. A resolution of Senate in 1947 paved the way for the admission of black post-graduate students in exceptional circumstances but black undergraduates were to be still excluded.

Preparing to become a fully-fledged University, in 1949 Rhodes voiced its opposition to any legal prohibition on the admission black students. In practice, however, Rhodes did not admit black undergraduate students, and between 1947 and 1959 only three black postgraduate students were permitted to enrol out of some 15 applicants.

This meant that prior to the introduction of apartheid in higher education in 1959, Rhodes was *not* an 'open university', in the sense that the universities of Cape Town, Witwatersrand and Natal were to varying extents.

In 1953 the apartheid government introduced 'bantu education', provoking widespread opposition from black communities, many religious groups and mission schools. Bantu education was to have a devastating impact on generations of black students.

Yet, inexcusably, on the occasion of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1954, Rhodes University awarded an honorary doctorate to the Minister of Education, JH Viljoen, an eager proponent of bantu education and university apartheid. No law required Rhodes to confer this award. It was freely made.

In 1962 an honorary doctorate was also conferred on the State President C.R. Swart. As Minister of Justice after 1948 he had been responsible for the harsh repression of opposition political organisations and activists. The award was made soon after the killing and wounding of protesters against pass laws at Sharpeville in 1960; the declaration of a state of emergency; the imprisonment of thousands of anti-apartheid activists; the fleeing into exile of hundreds of other activists and the banning of the ANC and PAC.

At a moment when democratic opposition was being brutally crushed, Rhodes inexcusably bestowed its highest honour on a champion of apartheid and white supremacy. The university's Chancellor, Sir Basil Schonland, resigned over this award, albeit without publicly revealing his reasons for doing so at the time.

Pertinent to the inauguration of the Stephen Bantu Biko Building, in 1967 the annual congress of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) was held at Rhodes. NUSAS represented students from white and black universities. One of the delegates at this congress was Biko. A few days before this congress, Rhodes University resolved not to permit black delegates to stay on campus in residence; nor would they be allowed to attend social functions on campus.

Biko walked out of the congress and went to visit a close friend Barney Pitso, who was then a student at Fort Hare. In 1968 they established the South African Students' Organisation. This was the founding of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa. The Rhodes authorities in enforcing racial segregation triggered the emergence of the BC movement. At the same time they displayed, not for the first time, a disturbing tendency to acquiesce all too easily in the apartheid system.

The infamous Mafeje affair of 1968 at UCT had its equivalent at Rhodes. In that year, the Rhodes University Council refused to appoint the Rev. Basil Moore to a lectureship in the theology department, after the Senate had recommended his appointment on two occasions. The refusal was politically motivated - Moore had been the first president of the anti-apartheid University Christian Movement.

Some students and staff organised a sit-in to protest the decision of Council but the University got the Sheriff of the Supreme Court to serve a court order on them to vacate the building. Thirteen students were rusticated and a Politics lecturer, David Tucker, was dismissed from his post.

In 1972, when black service staff established a Black Workers Union to challenge wages that were below the poverty datum line the University refused to recognise it.

Then there were insensitive references in official publications of the University to older black people by only their first names and the omission of titles and surnames.

Over the years there have also been claims on the part of student leaders at Rhodes of collusion between University officials and the apartheid-era security police.

This is at the same time a reminder that some Rhodes students and staff did courageously engage in protest against apartheid. For this, some endured banning, detention and imprisonment. We can also note that during apartheid Rhodes was among the first universities to open its residences to all students.

It has been said that "the tradition of dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living". Yet, if we "the living" recognise the shameful practices of "dead generations", unequivocally repudiate them, and dedicate ourselves to ensuring that they never occur again, then they do not need to weigh upon us "like a nightmare".

And so, today, as Rhodes University, we openly and publicly *acknowledge* shameful and regrettable institutional actions on our part during the apartheid period.

We also unreservedly *apologise* to all those who were wronged, harmed and hurt by our past failings and shameful actions.

We do this not as acts of vengeful condemnation or self-flagellation, but to bring uncomfortable truths into the open, wipe the slate clean, and draw a line on a particular past.

We do so as an act of “the struggle of memory against forgetting”, as an expression of our “engagement with where we are now” and of our determination to continue shaping a new future.

The critique of past injustices frees us to conceive how we may avoid repeating such tragedies. It demonstrates our desire to promote reconciliation and healing within ourselves and our society, to embrace new values and ways of being and acting, and to reinvent, remake and renew our University.

In doing so, we do not negate the many splendid achievements of Rhodes University. Instead, we draw inspiration and take guidance from our motto, ‘Truth, Virtue and Strength’.

We dedicate ourselves to resolutely pursue the *Truth* that derives from knowledge, understanding, critique and reason.

We commit ourselves to steadfastly continue on the path of practising and cultivating the *Virtues* of human dignity, equality, non-sexism and non-racialism, critical citizenship and all the human rights and freedoms that our Constitution proclaims.

We pledge to possess the *Strength* of courage and boldness to protect, promote and assert the core values and purposes of a university, including advancing the public good, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability.

We pledge also to institute other activities to signal our unequivocal determination to settle with our past and continue with our remaking and renewal as a small but outstanding African university.

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