

# Rhodes University 2010 Graduation Ceremonies Address

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Date: 08 April 2010 14:00 - 08 April 2010 14:02

Location: Grahamstown

Organiser: [Rhodes University](#) (Phone +27 46 603 8111)

Event Type: Vice-Chancellor

## INTRODUCTION

The Chancellor, Prof. Jakes Gerwel

Members of the University Council

Our honorary graduate/s

New graduates, and families and guardians of graduates

Our guest speaker (Mr. Peter Harris)

The Public Orator, Prof. Paul Maylam

Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Registrars, Heads of Departments and academic and administrative colleagues

Members of the Students Representative Council

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

Molweni, dumelang, good evening/morning/afternoon, sawubona, goeie naand/more/dag

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this graduation ceremony, and to address you on this special occasion at which we acknowledge, recognise and celebrate the achievements of the new graduates of Rhodes University.

## RECOGNITION

First and foremost, I wish to congratulate you, our new graduates, on your tremendous achievement.

To be awarded a degree, diploma or certificate from Rhodes University entails dedicated endeavour. When you joined us you were told that at Rhodes learning and education is a partnership of mutual commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, to the development of expertise and skills, and to the embrace of appropriate values and attitudes.

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Your graduation this evening/afternoon/morning is testimony that you have fulfilled your side of the partnership. You have displayed the necessary commitment to learn, to acquire knowledge and to develop expertise. Your accomplishment, the fruits of years of toil, is a fantastic achievement, given that our higher education system still struggles to realize the talents and potential of all our students.

You will, I trust, however, acknowledge the contributions of your lecturers and tutors, of the laboratory and computer technicians and administrators, and of wardens, cooks, cleaners and gardeners. All these people have created a special intellectual, social and physical environment at Rhodes to support you and to enable you to succeed.

You will, hopefully, also recognize your parents, guardians, families and benefactors, all of whom have generously contributed to your receiving a Rhodes education and to your graduating this morning/afternoon/evening.

## RESPONSIBILITIES

Most of you who are graduating were born in the late 1980s, a period of great turbulence and

social conflict. This was, however, also a time of great optimism for it was clear that apartheid tyranny could no longer continue and had to give way to a new social order. We must take immense pride in the imagination, creativity, ingenuity and courage that we displayed as a people to rid ourselves of tyranny and to fashion our democracy.

You are a generation that has been, thankfully, largely spared the horrors, brutality and injustices of apartheid. You are the first generation with the opportunity of living in a society founded on a democratic Constitution that proclaims the commitment to human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of non-sexism and non-racialism and the human rights and freedoms that are contained in our Bill of Rights.

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Your inheritance was paid for by the selfless sacrifice and indomitable courage of countless people, personified by individuals such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Ruth First, Lillian Ngoyi, Braam Fischer, Liz Abrahams and many others.

The great German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht wrote of the 'struggle of the mountains' and the 'battle of the plains'. If a constitutional democracy is the mountains, it has been largely, though not irreversibly, won. It is now the infinitely more arduous and protracted 'battle of the plains', of creating an equitable, just, and humane society that must be won.

The 'battle of the plains' comprises the challenges of economic growth and development; job creation and the elimination of unemployment and poverty; the effective provision of education, health and other social services; and the threat of HIV/AIDS and other diseases that ravage our land.

It also encompass the imperatives of building a substantive democracy, the defence and advancement of a culture of human rights, and ensuring a vibrant civil society that is characterized by vigorous and critical public intellectual debate.

Freed from the pernicious orthodoxies of apartheid thinking, you are a generation that has the unequalled opportunity and freedom to re-imagine and shape our future, to forge new ways of conducting our affairs and new identities.

You 'have the historic possibility, rare in human affairs, to give birth to a new society, in a manner that responds both to (our constitutional ideals and) our national challenges.i

Over 3 days, 1 897 students will graduate at 5 graduation ceremonies. 1 142 graduates or 60% are women. 700 or 37% are postgraduate students. 356 or 19% are international students from 38 countries in the rest of Africa and from countries around the world.

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As graduates you have had the honour of studying at a very special and distinctive university, one that deservedly commands an enviable academic reputation. We take pride in the pursuit of knowledge and excellence, in enjoying the best pass and graduation rates of all South African universities, in being a cosmopolitan institution with students from some 50 countries, and in our striving to ensure that we are an environment in which knowledge, understanding and the intellect can flower.

As an institution of higher learning we have sought to induct you, to differing degrees and in different ways:

- Into producing knowledge, so that you can contribute to advancing understanding of our natural and social worlds and to enriching humanity's accumulated scientific and cultural heritage.
- Into testing 'the inherited knowledge of earlier generations', dismantling the mumbo jumbo that masquerades for knowledge and 'reinvigorating' knowledge.ii

We have sought to also induct you

- Into the importance of research on the most arcane and abstract issues and the ‘most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge’, as well as to strive to apply our discoveries for the benefit of humankind;iii
- Into reaching deep into the past, and leaping far ahead into the future, and into the need to ‘operate on both the short and the long horizon’ - on the one hand, to grapple with urgent and ‘contemporary problems’ and seek solutions to these; and on the other hand, to ‘forage’ into issues and undertake enquiries ‘that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit’.iv

Above all, we have hopefully instilled in you the importance of asking questions - to not immediately worry about the right answer or solution but to instead worry first about the right question or the better question.

This is because it is the right questions, the proper questions that lead to the great leaps in knowledge and science, to the great discoveries and innovations.

We have tried to develop your mind so that you: ‘can think effectively and critically’; have ‘achieved depth in some field of knowledge’, and have a ‘critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves’.v

We have encouraged you to become involved in community engagement because as one of our students, Cassidy Parker, has put it ‘volunteering ...taught me about myself and my relationship to people and the world around me in ways that no text book on philosophy or economics ever could’.

You should by now have ‘a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times’; ‘have the ability and the disposition to try to reach agreements on matters of fact, theory, and actions through rational discussions’;vi have ‘some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems’, and be able to ‘communicate with cogency’.vii

This is the meaning of higher learning: to make us wonder and ‘free us from “wonder”’; to capacitate us by affording us the gift of “freedom (to change our reality) founded on the knowledge of necessity,”viii and to reinvigorate culture but also stand ‘in a relationship of criticism to the culture’.ix

If knowledge is the electricity of the new economy and society, then higher education and universities are the new power sources for economic and social development.x

You hopefully leave Rhodes as a truly highly educated person – as someone who not only possesses knowledge and skills, but who is also enlightened, ethical, critical, creative and compassionate, and who is committed to using your expertise so that all people possess the rights that are fundamental to living full, decent, rich and rewarding lives.

As a Rhodes graduate you will become part of a very small section of the South African population, and one which will enjoy many advantages and privileges in society.

Yet you will appreciate that we are one of the most unequal societies on earth, and that millions of our fellow people still do not possess meaningful opportunities for leading economically and socially productive lives. In this context, humility of the kind personified by all great leaders would be a great virtue.

To understand the profound significance of your graduation we must draw on Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho culture – on the meaning associated with Ukuthweswa isidanga, ho apara

purapura, and umyezane.

With your graduation you are a living symbol of hurdles overcome. You have made history but are also on the threshold of making more history. As with the wrapping in a blanket in Xhosa culture, you now take on a new identity and a new mantle. And, of course, you have to now assume new and greater responsibilities and enter into a new covenant with your immediate and wider community.

For good reason the Rhodes University slogan is ‘where leaders learn’, and our motto is ‘Strength, Virtue, Truth’.

Armed with knowledge and expertise your adventure is to exercise, with humility and constant self-reflection, leadership wherever you find yourself – in the classrooms and schools of our lands; in hospital and clinic dispensaries; in legal practices, prosecution offices and courts; in research institutions and scientific laboratories; in universities and media, and in financial and public services.

As leaders you are well-aware that your knowledge and expertise must be put to work not only for your private benefit but also for the benefit of society at large.

Above all, you understand that leadership is not a function of material wealth, high office or status, or bestowed by a degree or qualification, but is one that must be earned through ethical conduct, impeccable integrity, visionary endeavour, selfless public service and commitment to people and responsibilities.

It is my hope that, as you join the community of Old Rhodians, the Rhodes values of ‘Vis, Virtus, Veritas’ - ‘Strength, Virtue, Truth’ - will guide your conduct and animate your existence:

- That you will, in the words of Prof. Tabensky of our Philosophy Department, ‘critically reflect on moral issues, and (not) become mere leaves blown by the moral winds of the day’, and that you will pursue the Truth that derives from knowledge, understanding and reason, and from intellectual debate and the open and respectful clash of ideas
- That you will embody the Virtues of imagination, creativity, perseverance, respect for human dignity, human rights, social justice and social compassion, and
- That you will possess the Strength of courage and boldness to speak out publicly, like some of our academics and students like Athambile Masola, Beth Vale and Xolani Nyali do, when those who wield power must be
- Reminded of their constitutional obligations and responsibilities
- Criticized for corruption, fraud, mismanagement and maladministration, and for failings in leadership and morality in this regard
- Rebuked for their pursuit of wealth and self-enrichment at the expense of real and meaningful opportunities for the masses of our people through job creation, decent education and health services, and must be
- Criticized for using ‘culture’ to perpetuate macho masculinities and the associated oppression of women and girls, and to rationalise anti-democratic practices.

## IN CLOSING

Once you receive your degree, diploma or certificate, you join and become part of the community of Old Rhodians. I welcome you this community and request that you visit the Alumni table near the entrance to the Monument to receive your special graduation gift. In the years ahead we look forward to celebrating your successes and achievements as Old Rhodians.

We will especially celebrate if as alumni you don't forget your alma mater and contribute generously to our Alumni Annual Fund and other raising efforts.

In as much as we seek to be an outstanding university and provide our students with a high quality higher education and a special experience we are, alas, a relatively poor university and the support of alumni and donors is vital for us to discharge our responsibilities and realize our aspirations.

Today/tonight, however, is your night/day, to remember, to celebrate and cherish. No doubt the parties will extend long into the night. You have earned it and I wish you a wonderful and joyful night/day of celebration of your achievement and your future promise.

I thank you.

i The Presidency (June, 2005).

ii Boulton, G. and Lucas, C. (2008) What are Universities For? Leuven: League of European Research Universities, September. Page 3

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iii Ibid.

iv Ibid.

v The Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000) Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise. Washington: The World Bank. Page 84

vi Chrucky, A (2003) "The Aim of Liberal Education," DiText, 1 September

vii Ibid.

viii The Presidency (June, 2005)

ix Higher Education South Africa (2007) The Challenge of Renewal and Engagement: Public Higher Education in South Africa

x Castells, M (1991). "The University System: Engine of Development in the New World Economy". Paper for the World Bank Seminar on Higher Education and Development