

ADDRESS TO PARENTS EVENING

Johannesburg, 16 November 2006

Good evening.

Thank you for your attendance.

It is a privilege to be able to address you this evening on this special event for parents of prospective Rhodes University students.

1. Let me begin by saying that you should not send your daughters and sons to Rhodes University if they wish to read for a degree in engineering, architecture, quantity surveying, medicine, dentistry, nursing, veterinary science and hospitality science.

This may startle you, but I am simply being honest. We don't have a reputation in any of these fields – only because we don't offer any of these degrees. If we did, then it would be quite another matter.

2. Let me say that if you also wish for your daughters and sons to be at a large university, then again Rhodes University is not for you.

We are a very small university – in fact the smallest university in South Africa.

3. Finally, if you wish for your daughters and sons to be in a large city with the joys of big shopping malls, the adrenaline of hectic rush hour traffic, and lots of Nandos, McDonalds and the like, again Rhodes University is not for you.

We are in small town Grahamstown, where our excitement is four seasons in a single day, the joy of clean fresh air, and the claim of being held up in the traffic would be a rather lame and unimaginative excuse for being late for work.

4. I am relatively new to Rhodes University, having been in the office of Vice Chancellor for only 169 days. However, being new means I have come to Rhodes with an open mind, eager to discover at first hand the life and spirit of the institution that is to be my home for the next ten years.

During the past 169 days I have visited almost every academic department, research institute, student dining hall, student residence, and support and administrative section of the university, have met with almost all the academics, researchers, and administrators, and have spoken to hundreds of students, in groups and individually.

5. I believe that I am therefore well-placed to provide you as parents with an honest account of Rhodes University.
6. Let's begin with the overall institutional environment.
 - We are the smallest university in South Africa – just under 6 000 students. This provides many academic and other advantages to our students.

- 58% of our students are women – not just good for the men, but also great for women, who have real opportunities for intellectual and social development and success.
- Almost 25% of our students are international students – the highest proportion of any South African university. This makes us cosmopolitan and enriches our institutional culture.
- 1 in 5 of our students is a postgraduate. Our postgraduates are outstanding students, which means undergraduates have excellent tutors and also role-models who can inspire them to proceed to postgraduate study
- Finally, almost 1 in 2 of our students lives in our 39 residences and have their meals in one of our 9 dining halls.

This residence culture in which students are housed in residences that are no more than about 70 students, and where there are caring wardens is a distinctive feature of Rhodes and an important factor in our academic success.

7. Turning to the academic environment, which must be the principal concern of any parent:

- With reference to any academic benchmark, Rhodes is a university that is characterised by excellence in teaching and learning and research, and is renowned for producing high quality graduates.

We have the best undergraduate pass and graduation rates in South Africa, outstanding postgraduate pass and graduation rates, and also the best research output per academic staff member.

- Second, we have the lowest academic staff to student ratio in the country – an average of 1 academic per 15 students.

This means that our students are guaranteed close contact with and access to our academic staff, and are able to have close supervision for their projects and research, even at undergraduate level.

- Third, we have loyal and committed academics and administrators who understand that their purpose is to create a stimulating and enabling environment in which our students can develop and realise their potential as intellectuals and professionals through excellent academic programmes, research and community engagement.
- Fourth, Rhodes is one of the very few universities that strive to enable students to graduate with interesting combinations of majors that are of special interest to them. English and physics, philosophy and botany, linguistics and computer science, chemistry and law – and why not! A high quality undergraduate degree, which is what you get at Rhodes, will open a surprising number of doors to you.
- Fifth, we produce more Rhodes scholars to Oxford than any South African university, and our top students regularly win scholarships to overseas universities.

- Finally, it is for good reason that our slogan is ‘Where Leaders Learn’. This well expresses our commitment to produce leaders and great people, not necessarily in the sense of accumulating wealth, but in terms of the contribution they make to our society.

It is, however, public knowledge that in my recent inauguration address I stated that I am not satisfied with Rhodes being simply excellent; that I wish Rhodes to become a great University, and to become even more creative and imaginative in the academic arena so that we produce high quality graduates who are indeed ‘leaders’ – men and women who are knowledgeable, skilled, competent, critical citizens, and compassionate and decent humans who lead and stand out in all walks of life.

8. Moving on to the extra-academic environment

- Our students have numerous opportunities to develop leadership skills through participation in a wide range of clubs and societies, including the SRC, whose members enjoy the opportunity of participating in all the key decision-making committees of the University
- We have an active Community Engagement office that provides our students the opportunity to become involved in over a hundred community projects in Grahamstown.

Indeed, we have the highest proportion of student volunteers of any university – our students are not only academically good but many are also socially committed which is a source of inspiration to me

- We are also continually expanding our international linkages so that our students can benefit from academic exchanges with overseas universities.

9. Finally, with respect to our physical environment

- If you are familiar with Rhodes, you will know that we have a truly lovely environment with beautiful old buildings, well-maintained facilities and pleasant walkways and lawns
- We put great emphasis on ensuring the safety and security of our students, through our own dedicated Campus Protection Unit, safe routes and the like
- And, of course, Grahamstown is a quaint little town with particular charms and relatively safer and secure than many other places.

10. In closing

- We are a small, special, and distinctive university, and are determined to remain so
- We take excellence and quality very seriously and will not compromise on these
- We are committed to ensuring that our students have every opportunity to realise their talents and potential

- We guarantee your daughter and son a high quality higher education in a stimulating, caring and pleasant environment
- And, we are committed to being a university that is a place ‘where leader learn’!

My last words are that at Rhodes, your daughter and son is not a customer or client of the University. We are not a supermarket, take-away joint, bank or insurance company. Anyone who sees a student as a customer or client fundamentally misunderstands the meaning and nature of a university education.

To us your daughters and sons are our partners in learning and in the quest for knowledge and understanding of the mysteries and complexities of our natural and social worlds, so that as highly educated people we can be productive, enlightened and critical citizens with the abilities to make a difference in our society.

If that is how you see the purpose of a university and higher education, then Rhodes is the university for your daughter and son.