

**Welcome Address of the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes  
University, Dr. Saleem Badat, to First-Year Students**

**The Monument**

**17.00, 3 February 2013**

## Introduction

Molweni, good evening, dumelang, manheru, goeie naand, hujambo, sanibonani, and a very warm welcome to you, our new students, and to alumni, parents and guardians, to Rhodes University.

At last, you are here. If you have been excitedly counting the days to your arrival at Rhodes, we have been eagerly waiting to welcome you and looking forward to your infectious energy, high spirits, chatter and laughter.

For many of you, this is your first sight of Rhodes University and Grahamstown and, in some cases, of even the Eastern Cape and South Africa.

I hope you are excited and impressed by what they see around you – welcoming, friendly and supportive staff; lovely buildings; impressive facilities; comfortable residences; picturesque gardens and lawns, and a quaint town. My apologies for today's weather but some things are beyond our control!

It has been a long journey for you to finally arrive at this small but outstanding 108-year old university. You have worked hard and long hours and have excelled in your final school exams. Some of you have had to overcome difficult personal problems and economic and social hardships.

Yours is a tremendous achievement, given a schooling system that tragically fails to realize the potential of most of our youth. We applaud you and admire you. You are among the most intellectually talented women and men of our society, and we have great hopes for you.

Of course, your success is not yours alone. It is also the result of the contributions and support of your teachers, families and guardians. I wish to recognize the sacrifices that your families and guardians will continue to make to enable you to obtain a Rhodes education and degree. I know you are grateful for their support. So tell them one more time: 'thank you mum,' 'thank you dad,' 'thank you guardians!'

I have already said that I admire you for your achievements. I also admire 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 an excellent choice, one which 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 in your intellectual and personal development. Having completed your schooling, you are embarking on a new voyage.

And yet, as you join Rhodes, I doubt that you have much understanding of what a university really is and especially what this University that you have chosen stands for.

Some of you maybe imagine that Rhodes is a lovely holiday resort and spa, where you spend your days sipping cappuccinos and chilled wine, indulge in small talk, spend hours on Facebook and surfing the internet, share and watch movies, listen to music on YouTube and play computer games.

So permit me to briefly share with you the meaning of a university, what the purposes of a university are and the reasons why Rhodes University exists.

### **The Purposes of a University**

Our first purpose, as Rhodes University, is to produce knowledge, so that we can better understand our natural world and our society and also enrich our scientific and cultural heritage.

Through the research that we undertake we test the knowledge that we have inherited from 'earlier generations,' we distinguish between what is mumbo jumbo and what is real knowledge, we produce new knowledge, and we share our findings with others.

On the one hand, we undertake research into the mysteries and hidden secrets of life - like how the world was formed, black holes in space and the geology of Antarctica.

On the other hand, we grapple with urgent and immediate problems – unemployment, poverty, HIV-AIDS, drug resistant TB and poor schooling and seek solutions to these.

We investigate issues and undertake enquiries that do not seem 'immediately relevant to others,' but which could have 'great future benefit' for humankind. At the same time, we also do research where our discoveries can be quickly applied for the benefit of humankind.

Above all, at a university we ask questions. We don't immediately worry about the right answer or the solution. No, we worry, first, about asking the right question or the better question.

Einstein has said: 'If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.'

Well maybe not always in five minutes.

But still, great leaps in knowledge and science, great discoveries and innovations, and bringing about positive and meaningful changes in education, health and all walks of life, require us to ask the right questions.

Our responsibility, and your responsibility, is to equip you to ask the right questions as the vital stepping stone to knowledge, learning and education.

The second purpose of a university is to *disseminate knowledge* and to *develop critical and creative minds*. Our goals are for you to learn to think imaginatively, 'effectively and critically,' to 'achieve depth in some field of knowledge,' and to come to appreciate how we 'gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves'. You must be able to critique ideas, views and opinions and formulate alternatives, and be able to communicate cogently, orally and in writing.

Our final purpose as a university is to undertake community engagement, whether this is as part of your academic courses or your voluntary participation in community development projects organized by our Community Engagement Office.

Our country and continent faces many challenges: economic growth and development; creating jobs and eliminating unemployment, poverty and inequalities; combating greed and corruption; providing effective education, health and other social services; dealing with the terrible abuse of women and the threat of HIV/AIDS and other diseases; deepening and consolidating democracy, and defending and advancing human rights and social justice.

The knowledge that we produce is vitally important for properly understanding our changing world, for living in harmony with nature, and for insight into the real nature of our problems and challenges.

By being at Rhodes University, you commit yourselves to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, as vital means to combatting myths, ignorance and prejudice, and to self-betterment and the betterment of humankind.

This is why we refer to Rhodes as indawo yolwazi - a place of knowledge.

### **A new life journey**

In coming to Rhodes University you begin a new life journey - a voyage that is centred on higher learning. At the same time, this is also a voyage of self-discovery.

The time you will spend at Rhodes will be one of the freest and most exciting times in your life. It is an opportunity to discover who you are.

It is said that ‘you are who you are’. That’s not entirely true. You are also who you learn to become. Great leaders, brilliant scientists and scholars, outstanding sportspersons, fantastic musicians and the like learnt to become what they are – usually through commitment, hard work and determination. We at Rhodes University are here to support you to learn, and to learn to become.

The great Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, has written that ‘Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire’. We strongly embrace this idea. Our task is to kindle in you the desire to question, to wonder and to discover, and to pursue knowledge as a way of also freeing yourself from wonder.

But our goal is for you to not only acquire knowledge, expertise and skills, but for you to also become a sensitive and ethical intellectual and citizen – a good and caring person who thinks about others; a courageous person who asks questions about and pursues truth, social justice, democracy, and the common good, a cultured person who appreciates literature and the arts.

It is for good reason that the Rhodes University motto is Strength, Virtue, Truth, and our slogan is ‘Where Leaders Learn’. This expresses our commitment to produce leaders who are not only knowledgeable professionals but also ethical, compassionate and decent humans.

The Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore puts it beautifully: 'We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy.'

## **Rhodes University**

Ladies and gentlemen: you have the honour of studying at a very special and distinctive university, one that deservedly commands an enviable academic reputation.

Rhodes is the smallest university in South Africa. This year we hope to have 7 645 students.

The 1 600 of you that have been admitted to Rhodes this year have been chosen from over 7 000 students who applied to come to Rhodes. You are, therefore, the very fortunate 1 in 4.4 students who have been selected to join Rhodes.

The Rhodes community you are joining is made up of students, academics and support staff who come from diverse national, social, cultural, linguistic, religious and educational backgrounds, and from different lived experiences.

59% of our overall student body is made up of women.

29%, or over 1 in 4, of our students are postgraduates. They are outstanding students, which means that you will have excellent tutors and also role-models to inspire you to continue with postgraduate study.



23%, or over 1 in 5, of our 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.

3 467 students, including almost 65% of our undergraduate students and most of you, our new students, will live in our 50 residences and be associated with 12 dining halls, in which we will serve you a wide choice of meals and more than 10 000 meals daily.

At Rhodes, we value diversity as a fountain of intellectual and social vitality. We are excited when we have students from schools and towns and countries from which we have not previously had students.

We take great pride in our academic reputation and are internationally known for our research and scholarship and for producing high quality graduates.

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

We enjoy the distinction of having 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 of academic staff with doctoral degrees. We also have among the best research output per academic staff member in South Africa. This means that you will be learning among academics that are national and international leaders in their fields.

South Africa's new research ship, Agulhas II, built in Finland at a cost of R 1.3 billion is currently on its first research trip in Antarctica. The research leader is Prof Ian Meiklejohn, the head of our Geography department, and with him are Rhodes postgraduate students. You can follow the Agulhas II on the internet and perhaps one day some of you will travel on the Agulhas II to Antarctica.

Every year our students win prestigious international scholarships to overseas universities and we also provide you opportunities to attend overseas universities on international exchanges.

In many years, although we make up only 0.8% of South Africa's university students, we win 15% of the prestigious Mandela Rhodes scholarships.

Through the achievements and successes of our graduates, Rhodes impacts on South Africa and different parts of the world. In three to four years time, we look forward to you walking across this stage at one of our beautiful graduation ceremonies, to receive your degree and to join the ever-growing and world-wide community of Old Rhodians.

Ladies and gentlemen: during the coming week's Orientation programme you will be given much valuable information and advice. This evening I wish to convey just four messages to which I want you to pay very close attention.

First, you are the ‘born frees’ - a generation that has been spared the brutality and painful horrors of apartheid. You are the future: we look to you to help build a united, thriving, just and humane South Africa.

Yet, you will agree, that racism, sexism, base prejudice, intolerance and various kinds of unacceptable conduct continue in our society.

I wish to make absolutely clear that at Rhodes University there are no first class and second class students and people; and that at this University there is no accommodation, no tolerance of racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic or any other kind of chauvinistic behaviour.

Your so-called ‘race,’ sex, gender, nationality, religion, first language, previous school, the suburb you come from, the make and model of your car, the size of your monthly allowance, and the political position, status and wealth of your parents confer on you no special rights or privileges.

At Rhodes, everyone is treated equally and equitably.

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, technicians, secretaries, wardens, cooks, cleaners and garden staff – everyone deserves respect and must be accorded dignity.

Rhodes University belongs to all and is a home for all! We must work together with sensitivity, honesty and courage to be a model for our society; we must be what we want our beloved country to become.

Permit me, here, to specifically address you the men who join us. To you I want to make it clear that at Rhodes there is no tolerance of any despicable, offensive and violent conduct against women.

We will not accommodate such conduct under any circumstances. If you abuse any woman, you will be prosecuted. We recently excluded a student for ten years, and he cannot study at any other university.

To you who are women I want to say: Do not allow anyone to subject you to any humiliating and painful abuse. Please report such conduct, in the confidence that we will act.

My second message is that as a young adult with great independence and freedom you must now rely on your own wisdom and inner strength to guide you in navigating life and its pitfalls. As a university community, we are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, and it is young adults who are most affected HIV/AIDS.

Please ensure that you are well-informed about HIV/AIDS and that your behaviour does not expose you to, and indeed protects you from, the risk of contracting HIV.

Don't rush into or be pressured into being sexually active; don't have unprotected sex, be faithful, and avoid multiple and concurrent sexual partners. Remember that drunkenness and use of drugs compromise your faculties to behave safely and responsibly.

My third message has to do with our local newspaper's comment that '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.'

This is somewhat of a generalisation, but it does raise the issue of the excessive consumption and abuse of alcohol by some students.

Two evenings ago the sun was still shining when three students exited the Rat and Parrot drunk and proceeded to behave badly. Instead of apologising for their bad behaviour when confronted by a townsperson, they laughed at her and denied there was any problem. The Rhodes Campus Protection Unit had to be called and people cheered when these students were led away.

The vast majority of Rhodes students are peaceful, gentle and sensible men and women. It pains me to say this but there is, unfortunately, always a small minority whose conduct is appalling and disgraceful. It is these students who will try and persuade you that excessive, indeed abusive, drinking is what it means to be a Rhodent.

It is inevitably these students who feature in unpleasant social and sexual incidents, and who cause great grief to others, their families and themselves. They are the ones that we, invariably, exclude for academic non-performance or we have to prosecute and suspend or expel.

There is nothing attractive or cool about these people. Have courage, be firm and tell them to get lost. Don't mess your future by associating with them and becoming one of them!

My final message is that reading for a Rhodes University degree is demanding. You must take your academic studies very seriously. If you don't perform and meet our academic requirements, you will get a warning after the June exams and you will then be excluded at the end of this year, no matter how much you plead and cry in my office.

Dear students: heed these messages and you will be fine. If it sounds like there will be not time or space to socialise, to play, to chill and have fun, have no fear. There will be many opportunities to have good and great times.

Strike the right balance between your academic responsibilities, and sport and cultural activities and the many temptations of social life, be sensible, and you will be fine.

Since registering you will have observed some things about your new home. If big glitzy shopping malls, hectic rush hour city traffic, smog, McDonalds and Starbucks are your kinds of things, it's time to let go.

Instead, learn to enjoy quaint Grahamstown's clean fresh air, laid-back atmosphere, friendly people and brilliant star-speckled night skies.

And how many places are there in the world where at no cost you can enjoy the magical experience of winter, autumn, spring and summer all in a single day.

Also know this: we may be amused and applaud your diligence when you rush to class in your pyjamas. But you will never be forgiven, or forgotten, if you claim you were late for class because of the traffic - that would be the most lame and unimaginative excuse imaginable, a sin worthy of expulsion!

Mums, dads, families and guardians: even though it will be painful to let go of your loved ones, it will soon be time to say farewell to them.

You need have no worries: know that they are at an outstanding university, that we will do our best to see to their needs and problems, that they will have a wonderful academic and social experience, and will develop intellectually and personally.

When you see your daughters, sons and guardians at Easter and during other vacations you will hopefully witness perceptible growth on their part. And hopefully this will not just be what we call 'first-year spread,' which is a result of the nutritious food served in our residences.

Have a pleasant evening and travel home safely.

To you our new students my final words are this: at Rhodes University you will not see any signs that say 'Client Services Centre' or 'Customer Services', because you are not our customers and clients.

No, you are our partners, we are partners. You have chosen us but, equally, we have chosen you. Today, we begin a partnership of mutual commitment to learning and knowledge, to growing in wisdom, and to using knowledge and wisdom to make the world a better place for all.

Our partnership also includes you having a voice through your Students Representative Council in how we govern this University, and ensuring that Rhodes University continues to be one of the best universities in Africa.

If you see me or any of the people on the stage, don't be shy to introduce yourself and to chat, and to tell us how we can improve things. We welcome advice.

I wish you a great, great year of learning, discovery, new experiences and fun.

Siyabonga, asanteni, ndiyabulela, thank you.