

Vice-Chancellor's welcoming address 2010

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The Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans and other colleagues, the President and members of the SRC, parents, guardians, ladies and gentlemen and, not least and above all, you our new students

Molweni, good evening, dumaleng, goeie naand, sawubonani!

The Irish have a lovely greeting to welcome special people. So as Vice Chancellor, and on behalf of the entire Rhodes community of academics, administrators, support staff and students, I say to you Céad míle fáilte (kaid meel-aa fall-cha) - a hundred thousand welcomes to Rhodes University, and to iRhini/Grahamstown!

First and foremost, I wish to express my great admiration for you, our new students.

To be here this evening you have worked hard and long hours and have excelled in your National Senior Certificate and other exams. This is a tremendous achievement, given a schooling system that still dismally and tragically fails 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 recognize their sacrifices in enabling you to be here this evening.

I must also acknowledge the sacrifices that your guardians and families will continue to lovingly make to enable you to obtain a Rhodes education and to graduate from Rhodes.

I wish to also express my admiration for 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 a wise choice, one which you and your family will confirm during the years that you spend with us.

Graduating from secondary school is an important milestone in your lives. In Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho culture, such a graduation - Ukuthweswa isidanga, ho apara purapura, umyezane - takes on an especially profound significance.

Ukuthweswa isidanga sees you as an individual who has overcome hurdles and has made history. It recognises that you are now on the threshold of making more history.

In accepting the blanket that is wrapped around you, you indicate your willingness to assume a new identity and mantle and to take on new and greater responsibilities. With the feast that follows, you enter into a new covenant with your community.

Drawing on the rich meaning of ukuthweswa isidanga, this evening is a good occasion to address the issue of covenant, expectations and responsibilities as you begin your studies at Rhodes University.

Joining Rhodes is the beginning of an exciting new phase in your life and in your intellectual and personal development. You join Rhodes as among the most intellectually talented women and men of our society. Having completed your schooling you are embarking on a new voyage.

For many of you, your arrival over the weekend will have been your first sight of Rhodes University and iRhini/Grahamstown and, for some of you, even the Eastern Cape and South

Africa.

You are hopefully excited and also impressed by what you see around you – our welcoming and friendly staff, lovely old buildings, impressive facilities, comfortable residences, picturesque gardens and lawns and quaint town.

And yet, while you are perhaps beginning to get a feel of Rhodes and must know that you will spend a wonderful 3 or longer years with us, it is unlikely that you have much understanding of what a university is and the full meaning of this university that you have chosen to attend.

Rhodes University, which means, you and I and academics and support staff, exists to serve three purposes.

The first is to produce knowledge, so that we can advance understanding of our natural and social worlds and enrich our accumulated scientific and cultural heritage.

This means that we “test the inherited knowledge of earlier generations”, we dismantle the mumbo jumbo that masquerades for knowledge, we “reinvigorate” knowledge and we share our findings with others.

We undertake research into the most arcane and abstract issues and the “most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge”. At the same time we also strive to apply our discoveries for the benefit of humankind.

We “operate on both the short and the long horizon”. On the one hand, we grapple with urgent and “contemporary problems” and seek solutions to these.

On the other hand, we “forage” into issues and undertake enquiries “that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit” (Boulton and Lucas, 2008:3).

Above all, we ask questions. We don’t immediately worry about the right answer or solution. Instead, we worry first about the right question or the better question.

It is as 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 5 minutes. But what is true is that it is the right questions, the proper questions that lead to the great leaps in knowledge and science, to the great discoveries and innovations.

As a university our second purpose is to disseminate knowledge and to cultivate minds. Our goal is to ensure that you can think imaginatively, “effectively and critically”; that you “achieve depth in some field of knowledge”; that you can critique and construct alternatives, that you can communicate cogently, orally and in writing, and that you have a “critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves”.

At the same time, we also seek that you should have “a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times”; should be “able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it”, and that you should have “some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems” (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000:84).

Our final purpose as a university is to undertake community engagement. On the one hand this involves your voluntary participation in community projects undertaken through our Community Engagement office.

On the other hand, it involves service-learning, in which through your academic courses you take part “in activities where both the community” and you benefit, “and where the goals are

to provide a service to the community and, equally, to enhance (your) learning through rendering this service” (CHE, 2006:15).

In coming to Rhodes University the journey that you are embarking on, then, is a voyage centred on the pursuit, making and sharing of knowledge. This is why we refer to Rhodes as indawo yolwazi - a place of knowledge.

This journey is at the same time 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 true. You are who you learn to become. We at Rhodes University are here to support you to learn, and to learn to become.

A few years ago, walking along one of those wide Manhattan, New York, avenues to attend a meeting with one of our donors, my eyes fell upon some words on a board. The words read: “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire”.

The words are, of course, those of William Butler Yeats, the great Irish poet and winner in 1923 of the Nobel Prize for literature.

The idea of education as the igniting of the intellect and of the desire to question, to learn, and to discover is one that we at Rhodes strongly embrace.

The fire that higher education must light cannot, however, be satisfied with imparting only technical and vocational skills or simply preparing students for the labour-market and the economy.

To reduce higher education to producing just competent accountants, pharmacists, scientists,

lawyers and educators is to devalue higher education and to strip it of its considerably wider social value and functions.

Higher education is also intimately connected to the idea of democratic and critical citizenship, the assertion and pursuit of social and human rights and the cultivation of humanity (Nussbaum, 2006).

We seek our graduates to be not just capable professionals, but also thoughtful, sensitive and critical intellectuals and citizens – people who think about ethical issues, and questions of justice, equity, human rights, and the common good.

Our teaching, research, and community engagement therefore seek to be alive to the social, economic and moral challenges of our local, national, African and international contexts.

As you begin your higher education you must 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 and the privileges and disadvantage associated with these are still all too evident – not least in this town.

Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of our fellow citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival on less than R 10 a day.

Patriarchy and sexism stifle the realization of the talent 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.

Instead of an ethos of public good and selfless service, unbridled individualism, crass materialism, and a vulgar mentality of “greed is cool” and “grab what you can” run rampant in our society.

It is for good reason that the Rhodes University slogan is „Where Leaders Learn?. This expresses our commitment to produce outstanding people and leaders, who are not only

knowledgeable, wise and visionary, but also ethical and compassionate. As the Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore has put it: “We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy” (cited by Nussbaum, 2006:7).

By now some of you may be panicking. You may be saying to yourselves „what have I let myself in for?? I thought I was coming to a shopping mall kind of place – like Cavendish, Gateway, Sandton or Menlyn - to have a good time, to chill and to rest?.

Have no fear there will be ample time to have a good time, to chill and to rest. But you will agree that one chill's and rest's when one is nice and tired after a hard and honest day's work. One can't chill and rest if one is not tired – that doesn't make sense.

So chill and rest you will be able to, to your heart's content – after a hard and honest day's labour of lectures, tutorials, lab practicals, reading and writing, submission of assignments and the like.

And as for Rhodes being a shopping mall – unfortunately not. At a shopping mall, if you have the money, you can buy whatever you want. At Rhodes University, with all the money in the world, you won't be able to buy English 1 or Chemistry 2 or any course, let alone a degree. You will have to earn them through dedicated and hard intellectual labour.

Rhodes is the smallest university in South Africa, and this year we will be just over 7 000 students. We have no envy of our large sister universities because it is our smallness, we believe, that makes us a very special place.

The 1 400 of you that are today being welcomed to Rhodes have been selected from over 5 900 students who applied to come to Rhodes. Of these 4 600 were local students and 1 300 were international students. You are, therefore, among the very fortunate 1 in 4 students that have been selected to attend Rhodes.

You are joining a University community whose students and staff come from diverse social, cultural, linguistic, religious, educational and national backgrounds, and also different lived experiences.

900 out of 1 400 of you are women and overall 59% of our students are women. The young men among you may think this makes you very fortunate. But it is you young women who are especially fortunate, since your predominance ensures greater opportunities for intellectual and personal development and success.

27% of our students or 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.

1 in 5 of our students are international students from some 50 countries around the world.

The concomitant national, linguistic and cultural diversity makes us an exciting and cosmopolitan place and enriches our institutional culture and lives.

You will rub shoulders with Zimbabwean, Namibian, Zambian, Ugandan, Kenyan, Mauritian, Ghanaian,

Cameroonian, Canadian, American, British, Irish, French, Dutch, German, Turkish, Chinese and Indian students, and many others.

At Rhodes University, learning and education is a partnership between students and academics, administrators and support staff. We are scornful of the notion of a university education that sees students as customers and clients. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of a higher education.

Instead, in joining Rhodes, you and we enter into a partnership: a relationship of mutual commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of our changing 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.

Among South African universities 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 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.

We are one of the very few universities, if not the only one, that allows our students an incredibly wide choice of combinations of courses and majors.

It is not unheard of that students major in English and Physics, Music and Computer Science, and Chemistry and Accounting. It is also not unknown that some of our students when they proceed to Honours face the dilemma of deciding whether to do Honours in English or Physics.

While some may think these are „weird? combinations, we think it is fantastic that our students can combine such courses. Increasingly, great discoveries and innovations are at the boundaries of disciplines and fields.

Three years in succession and in seven out of nine years, the prestigious Flanagan scholarship that is awarded to a South African woman, and which allows her to undertake postgraduate study anywhere in the world, has gone to a Rhodes student.

Every year at least one or more of our students wins a Rhodes scholarship to study at Oxford University and, overall, among South African universities we have one of the best track records for the winning of Rhodes scholarships.

We have also begun to exercise our dominance over the prestigious new Mandela Rhodes

scholarships awarded for postgraduate study at South African universities.

Last year, 4 out of the 28 Mandela Rhodes scholarships were awarded to Rhodes University students. This was the largest number awarded to a single university and it filled us with great pride that all 4 chose to continue their postgraduate studies at Rhodes.

It is not at all shabby that a University that had only 0.8% of South Africa's university students could win 14% of the Mandela Rhodes scholarships. This year again we have 3 of our own Mandela Rhodes scholars with us.

All of these features that I have just described make up a very special and distinctive university.

We are however, not complacent. We seek to jealously guard our standing and reputation as one of South Africa's and Africa's outstanding universities. To this effect we are constantly thinking and acting to ensure that we remain an outstanding university, respected for its commitment to knowledge, to academic freedom, the pursuit of truth and the flowering of the

intellect, and to the production of graduates equipped to exercise leadership in our society. Those of you who begin this year are the beneficiaries of our spectacular new four-storey library, which opened its doors today. The new library possesses every facility essential for cutting-edge academic and research endeavours.

At the same time over the next 6 months we will extensively refurbish the current library. This is a R85 million investment on our part, the biggest single project in the history of Rhodes University and Grahamstown.

I invite guardians and parents to visit the new library before you depart – you will be among the very first visitors to the library.

To date we have raised almost R70 million. I have requested the Registrar to pass a hat around - a very large hat I may add. I am confident that with your generosity we will raise the remaining R15 million by the end of this evening.

Later in the year, we will open a new building for environmental education, an area in which we are an international centre of excellence.

During this year our students will also be the beneficiaries of a significant investment we have made in massively expanding our internet bandwidth and speed.

Together with our sister universities, we have invested \$20 million in purchasing a share in the new underwater sea cable that runs from Milan in Italy to the coast of Kwa-Zulu Natal. This will provide us 40 times our current internet bandwidth and 3 times our current internet speed with great benefits again for academic and research work.

Almost 61% of our undergraduate students and the vast majority of you, our new students, will live in the University's 48 residences and be associated with its 11 halls, in which almost 10 000 meals will be served daily.

Guardians, mums and dads, and grans and grandads need have no fear of your loved ones being adequately fed. On the contrary, when you see them again in the April holidays you may well be bemused by their healthy stature – what we diplomatically call „first-year spread“.

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.

Permit me to sincerely apologise that we are unable to accommodate every first year student in our residences. This is a matter of great concern to us and we are working hard to overcome this situation. The availability of finance is the principal issue. It may beggar belief, but to build a single room currently costs R 180 000.

In 2008 two new residences at a cost of R 32 million were opened to house an additional 146 students. With the support of state funding a further two new residences housing 208 more students opened last year. Currently, excavations are taking place for three new residences which will come on stream next year. We hope to build a further four over the following two years.

We are deeply committed to ensuring that at least every first year student can be accommodated in our residences, and you can rest assured that we will continue to energetically explore ways of increasing the availability of residential accommodation.

I wish to conclude by raising eight issues to which I urge you to pay very close attention.

1. First, you are among the first post-1990 Mandela generations. You have by and large been spared the painful horrors of apartheid and it is to you that we look to help forge a humane and just society.

Yet we will acknowledge that we have still a long road to travel before we can claim that we are a truly equitable and humane society. Unacceptable conduct, prejudice and intolerance

continue to linger in our society.

It is in this context that I wish to make absolutely clear that at Rhodes University there are no first class and second class students and people; and that, furthermore, there will be no accommodation of racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic or any other chauvinist behaviour. Everyone is treated equally and equitably.

Your „race?, sex, gender, nationality, previous school, religion, first language, suburb you come from, make and model of car, the size of your bank balance or the status and wealth of your parents confer on you no special rights or privileges.

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, cleaners and garden staff - deserves respect and dignity.

Rhodes belongs to all and is a home for all!

2.Second, in our local newspaper, Grocott's Mail, the editor has written in an article titled „The students are here? 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” (February 2009).

While the editor generalises somewhat, he does pertinently raise the issue of the irresponsible excessive consumption and abuse of alcohol by a small number of students.

This irresponsible behaviour results in much grief for the individuals concerned, their families, and the University. Heavily intoxicated women have ended up as victims of unpleasant social and sexual incidents, as have a few men.

The University has been working diligently with local club and pub owners to encourage responsible drinking and will continue to do so. Numerous activities have been instituted as alcohol-free events.

There may be individuals who try to initiate you into a culture of abusive drinking on the grounds that this is what it means to be part of the in-crowd at Rhodes.

Be firm, be bold, and say no to them. They are not cool – they are irresponsible and you must have the courage to say this to them in no uncertain terms.

3.In so far as noise is concerned, this raises the issue of our relationship with our town. Please remember that most of us 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.

4.Fourth, we have inherited this earth in safekeeping for future generations. We cannot continue to recklessly degrade our environment and consume fossil fuels and energy and water at the rate that we are. We are also in the throes of a serious drought in this area.

It is vital that you play your role in helping to conserve energy and water through responsible and judicious use and, more generally, that you help to keep our lovely campus neat and clean.

5.Fifth, all initiation practices of any kind, undertaken by any individual, group, club or society at Rhodes are prohibited and illegal. Don't be persuaded to join any act of initiation

nor allow anyone to perpetrate any kind of initiation on you.

6. In as much as you may be tired of being told about it, the sixth issue is HIV/AIDS. One likes to think that young women and men like you are really clued up on HIV/AIDS.

The reality is that there is a bewildering level of either ignorance or dangerous behaviour among some of you.

If you are going to be sexually active please 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.

7. Seventh, the transition from school and family home to university and having to take care of one's self can be challenging. If you experience any problems you do not have to have to struggle in silence and isolation.

If you have any social and emotional difficulties, numerous offices and people are available to support you and help you cope – the residence wardens and sub-wardens, the Counselling Centre with its trained staff and Office of the Dean of Students. Do not be shy or afraid to ask for help – you will find there will always be people very willing to help you.

8. Finally, compared to most cities and towns, Grahamstown is a relatively safe and secure environment. The University is part of the Community Policing Forum, we pay great attention to safety and security on campus, and have an effective Campus Protection Unit. Notwithstanding this, safety and security on campus and in the residences is also your responsibility and we urge you to cooperate with us in this regard.

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, smog and McDonalds have been your kind of things, it's 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, how many places are there in the world where you can enjoy the magical and free experience of summer, spring, autumn and winter all in a single 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 the traffic - that would be the most lame and unimaginative excuse imaginable.

In closing:

At Rhodes, we take academic work seriously and reading for a Rhodes University degree is an exacting challenge. 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 who do not meet our academic requirements are inevitably excluded. It is my sincere hope that the Deans, Registrar, the DVC 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, a critical intellectual and citizen, and hopefully also an ethical 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, rewarding and good lives and make a difference in our society.

Having been selected from 5 900 applicants to attend Rhodes, you have the opportunity to learn and develop, and graduate as a leader. Seize this opportunity. With the World Cup this is going to be an exciting year; overall, our future is exciting, and you have a huge contribution to make to our common future.

I wish you a pleasant evening and an exciting Orientation Week, which has been carefully designed for you.

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

You can rest confident they are at an outstanding university and we will endeavour to ensure that they have a wonderful experience and that they grow intellectually, socially and personally.

This year for the first time, courtesy of the SRC, there is a jazz evening on the Drostdy lawn in front of the Administration building. We invite you to join us on the lawns for a relaxed and entertaining evening.

The venue is of some significance. The Drostdy lawn is the venue for the Saturday afternoon garden party when students graduate from Rhodes.

And so you as the incoming class of 2010 will have your first open air event on the lawn and it is on this same lawn that we will say goodbye to you if you leave us when you graduate in 3 or 4 years time.

Enjoy a pleasant evening and thank you.