

VC's welcome at the Rhodes University
House Committees and Sub-Wardens workshop

2 February 2011

Molweni, good morning, goeie more and a warm welcome back to Rhodes University. I hope you had a nice vacation and are looking forward to the new year at Rhodes.

To begin with, I wish to register my appreciation to the Office of the Dean of Students for organising this House Committees and Sub-Wardens workshop.

It makes clear that as a University we like to leave little to chance when it comes to ensuring a positive and rewarding experience for all our students.

It also highlights our commitment to support you – our much valued partners in ensuring that our students have a wonderful experience - to address and negotiate your challenges and responsibilities as members of House committees and as sub-wardens.

One of the special and distinctive features of Rhodes University is our outstanding residence system and this is in part because we – and you are part of this - make a tremendous effort to ensure that the experience of our students of our residences is an integral part of their overall positive experience of Rhodes.

To facilitate your duties, I want to sketch for you the overall institutional context of your activities and responsibilities as house committees and sub-wardens.

First, and foremost, it is important for you, and for those who you will lead and support, to understand what are the aspirations and commitments of Rhodes University.

Rhodes exists for 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. Hence, we undertake many kinds of research at Rhodes.

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 wish you to have “a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times,” 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; here, 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 students embark on a voyage centred on both knowledge, but also self-discovery.

The time spent 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. And so we must support each other to both learn, and to learn to become.

Our goal is for you to graduate as not just diligent and capable professionals, but also thoughtful, sensitive and critical intellectuals and citizens – people who think about ethical issues, and questions of social justice, democracy, human rights and the common good.

It is for good reason that the Rhodes University motto is Strength, Virtue, Truth, and our slogan is ‘Where Leaders Learn’. This expresses the kind of people Rhodes seeks to produce – knowledgeable and visionary, as well as ethical and compassionate.

Learning and education, and the intellectual and personal development of our students, must not be confined to only the lecture and tutorial rooms and laboratories.

We must also creatively use other spaces – such as the residences and sport and cultural clubs and activities - to realize the talents and potential of our students.

As House Committees and sub-wardens you must ask and find answers for the following:

- How can we creatively and imaginatively use the residences in ways that makes them an integral part of the overall education and development of students at Rhodes?
- How can we make our residences environments that can help the University produce the kinds of students we seek to develop and graduate?
- How can we develop the attributes of our motto Vis Virtus Veritas - Strength Virtue Truth - through the residences?
- We have the wonderful slogan: 'Where Leaders Learn'. What *are* the qualities and attributes of leadership and leaders? How can we develop them in students through our residences?

As you are aware, there are many opportunities at Rhodes for developing and exercising leadership - the Student Representative Council, clubs and societies,

community engagement, House Committees, and sub-warden, tutor and mentor posts. All of these also provide great opportunities for students to develop intellectually, socially and personally.

Students in our residences and in digs must be encouraged to make use of these opportunities and you yourselves should lead the way through your own participation in sport, cultural and other activities.

If it is important for you to appreciate the wider social purposes and goals that frame your roles and activities, it is also important for you to have some understanding of our student body.

- This year we plan for our student body to be 7 390 students – which makes us the smallest university in South Africa by far
- 3 467 students - almost 1 in 2, most undergraduates and almost all of our first-year students - will live in 50 University residences and be attached to one of our 12 dining halls
- As you know, there is also a 13th hall, the Oppidan dining hall in the Bantu Stephen Biko building, for Oppidan students
- 47 residences are for undergraduates and 3 are for postgraduates
- The students at Rhodes and in our residences come from a rich variety of social, cultural, religious, educational, linguistic and national backgrounds and lived experiences.

- 59% of our students are women and 41% are men
- 57% are black and 43% are white
- 80% are South Africans and 20% or 1 in 5 are from about 50 countries around the world
- 26% or 1 in 4 are postgraduate students
- Our students will be enrolled in one of six different faculties and many different academic programmes, each with its own knowledge interests, academic requirements and expectations and demands
- Our students come from private, the previous model C schools and other public schools
- Some students come from modest working class backgrounds, others from middle class backgrounds and yet others from extremely wealthy backgrounds
- Our students come from urban areas and rural areas; from big cities, small towns and little villages
- Our students have different national and cultural traditions, and these may shape how they interact with others, express themselves, communicate and dress
- Our students may be monolingual or multilingual; they have many different languages as their first or home languages – we should not assume that everyone at Rhodes has English as their first or home language
- Our students may be apolitical or have different political sympathies and views, may vote for different political parties, and may have different opinions about the state of our world and South Africa or other countries
- Our students may have different religious commitments or no religious commitments

- Our students may be heterosexual, bisexual, gay or lesbian
- Our students may consume alcohol or they may be teetotalers for various reasons
- Our students may be carnivores, or vegetarian or vegan
- Our students may have different preferences with respect to sports, television programmes, music, leisure activities and how they like to chill.

Why have I emphasised at some length the rich diversity that exists at Rhodes and that will exist in the residences?

For the simple reason that you must be mindful of the rich diversity that exists among the students in our residences as you plan your activities as House Committees and undertake your responsibilities as House Committee members and sub-wardens.

You have to not only recognise this diversity, but you also have to unequivocally respect this diversity, and embrace, or learn to embrace, this rich diversity as exciting and a fountain of great vitality and strength.

You have to tap into this rich diversity and harness it as a means for the personal, social and intellectual development of students.

Finally, we look to your support to help instil in students a few messages.

You will acknowledge that unacceptable conduct, prejudice and intolerance continue to linger in our society and at Rhodes.

So one message is to make it *absolutely clear* to students that at Rhodes University there are no first class and second class students and people; and that at this institution there will be *no* accommodation of racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic or any other kind of chauvinistic behaviour.

Students must understand that at Rhodes everyone is treated equally and equitably, and that one's 'race', sex, gender, nationality, previous school, religion, first language, the suburb one comes from, the make and model of one's car, the size of one's pocket money and the status and wealth of one's parents confer on *no* special rights or privileges on anyone.

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.

A second message is one that is specifically for men.

It is that despicable, violent and inhumane conduct against women has absolutely no place at Rhodes University and the University will not under any circumstances tolerate such conduct.

If men engage in such conduct, they must be in no doubt that they will be prosecuted and could go the way of a perpetrator from last year. He has been

excluded from Rhodes University for ten years and in effect is not permitted to study at any university.

Note that in this case the friends of the perpetrator who gave untruthful evidence were also prosecuted and sanctioned.

Rape and violence against women is a morbid and shameful feature of our society. Too many perpetrators of these sordid deeds walk free because of the difficulties that women face in securing justice.

There is also a message for women: Don't permit anyone to subject you to any painful and humiliating abuse or let anyone treat you with impunity. Have the courage to report such conduct, with the confidence that we will act and support you.

A third message is related to alcohol – specifically the irresponsible excessive consumption and abuse of alcohol by some students.

Every year, irresponsible behaviour results in much grief for individuals, their families, and the University. Heavily intoxicated students sometimes feature in unpleasant social and sexual incidents.

As you know, the Dean of Students works diligently with local club and pub owners to encourage responsible drinking and will continue to do so. Numerous activities have also been instituted as alcohol-free events.

You need to be clear and your fellow students and residence mates need to be

told that despite what some individuals like to claim, abusive drinking is *not* what it means to be a Rhodent. Help support your residence mates to avoid the abuse of alcohol and possibly becoming victims of unsavoury incidents.

In closing: as House Committee members and as sub-wardens, you are our vital partners in ensuring that Rhodes is the kind of university we aspire it to be: an outstanding university that provides students with a wonderful educational and social experience in which all feel comfortable and supported and all feel it to be their home – a Home for All!

You have been elected or selected because you have particular attributes and qualities. On behalf of the University congratulations on your election or selection, and I sincerely thank you for partnering with us as sub-wardens and House Committee members.

We are confident that you will undertake your responsibilities guided by the Rhodes motto and with sensitivity, courage and distinction. We look forward to you serving as wonderful role-models and also using your positions to enhance your own intellectual, social and personal development.

My best wishes to you also on your academic studies during 2011.