

Vice-Chancellor's welcoming address 2011

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Introduction

Molweni, good evening, jambo, goeie naand, ni hao!

A warm welcome to you, our new students, to Rhodes University.

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

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, 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.

First and foremost, I wish to express my great admiration for you, our new students, who are also among the most intellectually talented women and men of our society.

To be here this evening you have worked hard and long hours and have excelled in your matric exams. This is a tremendous achievement, given a schooling system that still 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 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 start to find your feet at Rhodes, it is unlikely that you have much understanding of what a university is and especially of this University that you have chosen to attend.

The Purposes of a University

So permit me to spend a few minutes on the meaning of a university and the three purposes

Rhodes University exists to serve.

The first purpose is to produce knowledge, so that we can advance understanding of our natural and social worlds and enrich our 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 mysteries and hidden secrets of life 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 delve into issues and undertake enquiries ‘that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit’ for humankind.

Above all, at a university we ask questions. We don’t immediately worry about the right answer or solution. Instead, we worry, first, about the right or 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 five minutes. But what is true is that it is the right questions, the proper questions that lead to great leaps in knowledge and science, to great discoveries and innovations.

As a university, our second purpose is to disseminate knowledge and to develop your 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 ideas and views and construct alternatives, and that you can communicate cogently, orally and in writing.

At the same time, we also seek that you should have ‘a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times’; that you appreciate how we ‘gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves’, and that you learn to should think ‘systematically about moral and ethical problems.’

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

As you are aware, our country and continent faces many challenges: economic growth and development; creating jobs and eliminating unemployment, poverty and inequalities; providing effective education, health and other social services; the rampant abuse of women; 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 greater harmony with nature, and for insight into the real nature of our problems and challenges.

It is also knowledge that must inform all our actions and efforts to bring about change if we are to avoid disastrous actions based on myths, ignorance, superstition and the like. By being at Rhodes University, you commit yourselves to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, as vital means to self-betterment and the betterment of humankind.
Rhodes University

In coming to Rhodes University you begin a new life journey - a voyage that is centred on higher learning and the making, sharing and spreading of knowledge, but which at the same time 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 a great opportunity to discover who you are.

It is said that 'you are who you are'. That's not entirely true. You are who you learn to become. We at Rhodes University are here to support you to learn, and to learn to become. It is as Mahatma Gandhi has said: 'We must become the change we want to see.'

William Butler Yeats, the great Irish poet, has written that 'Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire'. Rhodes University strongly embraces this idea. We want to kindle in you the desire to question, to discover and to wonder, even if we pursue knowledge as a way of also freeing ourselves from wonder.

Our goal is that when you leave us you will not only possess knowledge, expertise and skills, but you will also be someone who is a sensitive, cultured, caring and ethical intellectual and citizen – a person who thinks about questions of social justice, democracy, 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 our commitment to produce leaders who are both knowledgeable and 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.'

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 will be just 7 390 students. In part, it is our smallness that makes us a very special place.

The 1 500 of you that are joining Rhodes have been selected from over 6 000 students who applied to come to Rhodes. You are, therefore, the very fortunate 1 in 4 students who have been selected to attend Rhodes.

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

59% of you and our overall student body are women.

26%, or 1 in 4, of our students are postgraduates. Our postgraduates are outstanding students, which means you will have excellent tutors and also role-models who will hopefully inspire you to go on to postgraduate study.

20%, or 1 in 5, of our students are international students, which means that you will rub shoulders with people from over 40 countries around the world. This national, linguistic and cultural diversity makes us an exciting and cosmopolitan place and enriches our institutional culture and lives.

We take great pride in our academic reputation and are well-known for our scholarship and 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 also 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.

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.

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

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 27 Mandela Rhodes scholarships were awarded to Rhodes University students. This was the largest number awarded to a single university. We only have 0.8% of South Africa's university students, yet we won 15% of all Mandela Rhodes scholarships.

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.

We are constantly thinking and acting so that we remain an outstanding university, respected for its commitment to knowledge; to academic freedom; to 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 recently. The new library has every facility essential for learning and cutting-edge scholarship.

This is a R75 million investment on our part, the biggest project in the recent history of Rhodes University and Grahamstown. I invite guardians and parents to visit our fantastic new library before you depart.

This year, we also open three new residences – until we find more suitable names called Hilltop 1, 2 and 3. Later this year we will begin construction of a new building for the Education Faculty.

3 467 students, including almost 65% of our undergraduate students, and the vast majority of you, our new students, will live in our 50 residences and be associated with 12 dining halls, in which we will serve over 10 000 meals daily.

Ladies and gentlemen: during this week's Orientation programme you will be given many messages. This evening I wish to convey just five messages to which I urge you to pay very close attention.

First, you are a generation that has by and large been spared the brutality and painful horrors of apartheid. It is to you that we look to help build a united, just and humane South Africa. Yet you will agree that unacceptable conduct, prejudice and intolerance continue to linger 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 institution there will be no acceptance or accommodation of racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic or any other kind of chauvinistic behaviour.

At Rhodes, everyone is treated equally and equitably.

Your 'race', sex, gender, nationality, previous school, religion, first language, the suburb you come from, the make and model of your 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, wardens, technicians, secretaries, cleaners and garden staff - deserves respect and dignity.
Rhodes University belongs to all and is a home for all!

Second: Late last year I had an email from a parent: 'Dear Dr Badat, I read in today's newspaper that Rhodes has taken disciplinary action against someone who raped a fellow student.'

‘Congratulations on taking such a strong stand on this issue... Your stance pleases me as my own daughter will be a first year student at Rhodes next year’.

Permit me, for a moment, to address myself to you the men who join us.

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 you engage in such conduct, you must be in no doubt that you will be prosecuted and you will go the way of the 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.

I also have an appeal to the women who join us: Do not permit anyone to subject you to any humiliating and painful abuse or let anyone treat you with impunity. Have the courage to report such conduct, with the confidence that we will act.

Third, 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 or allow anyone to perpetrate any kind of initiation on you.

We will prosecute anyone guilty of engaging in any acts of initiation. The safety and dignity of students is paramount and not negotiable.

Fourth, it has been observed 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 does pertinently raise the issue of the excessive consumption and abuse of alcohol by some students.

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

Regrettably, there are always individuals who try to initiate you into a culture of abusive drinking on the grounds that this is what it means to be a Rhodent.

Have courage, be firm and reject their approaches – they are the ones that we, invariably, have to deal with through the disciplinary system. Please don’t become one of them!

Finally: You must appreciate that reading for a Rhodes University degree is demanding. Please, take your academic studies very seriously. If you do not perform and meet our academic requirements, you will be warned in June and then inevitably excluded at the end of this year.

Dear students: heed these messages and you will be fine. And if it sounds like there will be no space to chill and socialise and have fun, have no fear. There will be ample opportunities for chilling and having a good time.

It is a matter of striking a good balance between your academic responsibilities, sport and cultural activities, and the many temptations and distractions of social life. Get this balance right and, again, 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 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, brilliant star-speckled night skies and relative safety and security.

And how many places are there in the world where you can enjoy the magical experience of winter, autumn, spring and summer all in a single day.

By now you should have also worked out that while we may marvel at your diligence in rushing to class in your pyjamas, 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.

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 need have no worries: by now you should be confident they are at an outstanding university at which they will have a wonderful academic and social experience and develop intellectually and personally.

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

Have a pleasant evening and travel home safely.

To you our new students: I wish you a great, great year of wonder, learning, discovery and fun. And remember, the balance! Get the balance right!