

**VC's welcome at the Rhodes University House  
Committees and Sub-wardens Workshop**

**27 January 2010**

Molweni, good morning and a warm welcome to you all to this workshop.

I wish to register my appreciation to the Dean and Deputy-Dean of Students and the Office of the Dean for organising this workshop. It is a further example of how as a University we leave little to chance when it comes to ensuring a positive and rewarding experience for our students, and supporting students - in this case you - to address and negotiate challenges and responsibilities that may come your way.

One of the distinctive features of Rhodes University is our outstanding residence system and our tremendous effort in ensuring that the residence experience of students is part and parcel of our

students' overall positive experience of Rhodes.

To begin with, let's remind ourselves of the institutional contexts of your activities and responsibilities as house committees and sub-wardens.

This first context is the aspirations and commitments of Rhodes University with regard to the kind of university we seek to be.

As Rhodes we strive for academic excellence and to produce high quality graduates. We seek to produce graduates who are professionals that can think theoretically and imaginatively; gather and analyse information with rigour; critique and construct alternatives, and communicate effectively orally and in writing.

However, it is not just capable professionals that we wish to cultivate. We are also committed to

producing thoughtful, sensitive and critical intellectuals and citizens who keep ethical questions in sharp focus, who promote a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights that is conducive to critical discourse, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a just, non-racist and non-sexist social order. As a University our task is also the 'formation of a critical, creative and compassionate citizenry' (O'Connell).

It is, therefore, vitally important that we don't confine education and the intellectual and personal development of our students to only the lecture, and tutorial rooms and laboratories. Instead, we must also creatively use other spaces inside and outside the University that are available to us. One of these very important social spaces is the residences.

The questions we need to address, then, are:

- 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 the residences become environments that complement and support the University to produce the kinds of graduates we seek to develop?
- The Rhodes motto is Vis Virtus Veritas - Strength Virtue Truth. How can we develop these attributes through the residences?
- Rhodes' slogan is 'Where Leaders Learn'. This is a wonderful slogan, which is full of promise. You need to define the qualities of leadership, and find imaginative ways of developing these qualities in and through the residences

The attributes and leadership qualities that we wish our students to possess cannot, however, be developed through classroom learning and teaching alone. Other arenas are also important spaces for their development.

In this regard, community engagement, the Student Representative Council, our wide range of clubs and societies, House Committees, and sub-warden, tutor and mentor posts, all also provide wonderful opportunities for student intellectual, social and personal development. You need to strongly encourage the students in the residences and in digs to make use of these opportunities and you yourselves should also be participating in these.

There is a second context within which your activities and responsibilities as house committees and sub-wardens occur.

- This year our student body will be just over 7 000

students.

- Almost 50% of our students will live in our 46 University residences and be attached to one of our 10 halls
- In addition we have an Oppidan dining hall in the Bantu Stephen Biko building dedicated to Oppidan students
- The vast majority of residences are for undergraduates but there are a few dedicated residences for postgraduates
- The students in our residences come from a variety of social, cultural, religious, educational and national backgrounds and lived experiences.
  - They are men and women; black and white; South African citizens and citizens of numerous other countries, and have many different

languages as their first-languages

- Almost 1 in 4 are international students that come from some 50 countries
- Our students come to Rhodes from private and public schools; they come from modest working class, middle class or extremely wealthy families.
- They come from urban areas and rural areas, big cities, small towns and little villages
- They have different national and cultural traditions, which may shape how they interact with others, express themselves, communicate and dress
- They may be apolitical or have different political sympathies and views, vote for different political parties, and have different opinions about the

state of our world and countries

- They have different religious commitments or no religious commitments
- They may be heterosexual, bisexual, gay or lesbian different
- They may consume alcohol or they may be teetotalers for various reasons, carnivores, or vegetarian or vegan
- They will have differing preferences with respect to sports, television programmes, music, leisure activities and how they like to chill
- In addition, they are enrolled in 6 different faculties and many different academic programmes, each with its own knowledge interests, academic requirements and expectations and the like



Clearly, then, one fundamental issue in relation to your responsibilities and with respect to the planning of your activities is the great diversity that exists among the students in our residences.

This diversity is rich and exciting and a fountain of great vitality and strength.

Your challenges and responsibilities, in my view, are three-fold:

- First, you have to unequivocally respect and embrace or learn to embrace the rich and exciting diversity of our students and appreciate it as a powerful wellspring for our personal, social and intellectual development
- Second, you have to work to ensure that other students, academics, support staff and the University also affirm, respect, and embrace the diversity of students that constitute our

residences and Rhodes; and

- Third, you have to make certain that whatever programmes and activities you design and hold you take cognisance of this diversity and accommodate all differing need and interests to the best of your abilities.

There is also a third context.

As Rhodes we wish to 'respect, protect, promote and fulfil' the values of human dignity and the achievement of equality, and to advance non-sexism and non-racialism and the human rights and freedoms that the South African *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights* proclaim.

Necessarily, then, as sub-wardens and members of House Committees, the values of human dignity and human rights must inform your responsibilities, guide your conduct, and animate

your existence and your social relationships with other students.

It should be clear that we consider you, as sub-wardens and House Committee members, to be very important partners in ensuring that Rhodes is the kind of university we wish it to be, and in helping us to give effect to the aspirations and commitments of Rhodes.

You have the opportunity to enhance the student experience and student development at Rhodes, and to serve as role-models. Concomitantly, you also have the wonderful opportunity to enhance your own intellectual and social and personal development.

You have been elected or selected because of your particular attributes and qualities. On behalf of the University I congratulate you and thank you for making yourselves available to take on the responsibilities of sub-wardening and House

Committee membership.

The Dean of Students Office and I very much look forward to our partnership with you, to your dedication and creativity in the service of a positive and wonderful student experience at Rhodes and in the service of student development.

At the same time we also look forward to you also blossoming and developing as students, as citizens and intellectuals.

In closing, thank you for volunteering to take on these important responsibilities. We are confident that you will undertake them with sensitivity, courage and distinction. And our best wishes to you on a rewarding and fulfilling year.