

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

The Monument

17.00, 5 February 2012

Introduction

Molweni, good evening, manheru, hujambo, goeie naand, dumelang, sanibonani, and a very warm welcome to you, our new students, and to 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 spirit, 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 the 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 matric exams. Some of you have had to also overcome difficult personal problems and great economic and social hardships.

This is a tremendous achievement, given a schooling system that tragically fails to realize the potential of most our youth. We applaud you and have great admiration and hope for you, who count among the most intellectually talented women and men of our society.

Of course, your success is also a testimony to the contributions and support of your teachers, families and guardians. I also recognize the sacrifices that your families and guardians will make to enable you to obtain a Rhodes education and degree. I know you want to shout out how grateful you are, so this is your opportunity: ‘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 is and especially of this University that you have chosen to attend. So permit me to briefly share with you the meaning and purposes of a university and the reasons why Rhodes University exists.

The Purposes of a University

Our first purpose is to produce knowledge, so that we can better understand our natural and social worlds and also 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. No, we worry, first, about the right or 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 great leaps in knowledge and science, great discoveries and innovations, and realizing positive, effective and meaningful changes in education, health and all walks of life, require us ask the proper questions. Our responsibility, and your responsibility, is to ensure that you are equipped to ask the right questions as the 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, yours and ours, must be for you to think imaginatively, ‘effectively and critically;’ to ‘achieve depth in some field of knowledge;’ to appreciate how we ‘gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves;’ to have ‘a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times;’ to critique ideas and views and construct alternatives, and to communicate cogently, orally and in writing.

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.

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; 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 knowledge that must inform all our actions and efforts to bring about change if we are to avoid disastrous actions based on myths, ignorance, prejudice 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. 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 a great 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. We at Rhodes University are here to support you to learn, and to learn to become.

William Butler Yeats, the great Irish poet, has written that 'Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire'. We strongly embrace this idea.

We want to kindle in you the desire to question, to discover and to wonder, and to pursue knowledge as a way of freeing yourself from wonder.

Our goal is that you acquire not only knowledge, expertise and skills, but you also become 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 knowledgeable as well as 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.’

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 just 7 575 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 some 7 000 students who applied to come to Rhodes. You are, therefore, the very fortunate 1 in 4.6 students who have been selected to attend Rhodes.

The Rhodes 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.

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

20%, or 1 in 5, of our students are international students, and so you will rub shoulders with people from over 45 countries around the world. This national, linguistic and cultural diversity 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 almost all 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.

At Rhodes, we value diversity as a well-spring of intellectual and social vitality. We are always excited when we have students from schools and towns from which we have not previously had students. This year we welcome the very first graduates of the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls. We are especially pleased that 21 of the 62 students from the Oprah Winfrey Academy, the largest number to attend a single university, have chosen to come to Rhodes.

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 have one of the highest proportions of academic staff with doctoral degrees.

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 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 national and international leaders in their fields.

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

But it is through the achievements and successes of our graduates, the ever-growing community of Old Rhodians, that Rhodes really impacts on South Africa and different parts of the world.

The annual Old Rhodian Awards celebrate the achievements of alumni that enhance the reputation of the University and serve as role models in society. This evening, to inspire you, we confer in your presence a new category of *Emerging* Old Rhodian Awards, which recognises alumni under the age of 40 who are becoming acknowledged leaders in society.

The first recipient is Mr Thandeka Ngcukaitobi, an attorney and advocate of the High Court who grew up in the rural Transkei and obtained a Masters in Constitutional and Administrative Law from Rhodes. This is an inspirational young man who is passionate about social justice, responsible citizenship, and holding those who wield power accountable. Unfortunately, Thandeka cannot be with us this evening.

The second recipient, Dr Garth Cambray, is with us.

Garth is a local boy, who enrolled at Rhodes in 1995 for a BSc degree, won the award for best third year project, and obtained his Honours in Microbiology with distinction. In 2004 he completed his PhD in Biotechnology, developing the world's most advanced technology to produce mead, using locally produced honey. He then demonstrated its commercial application by establishing the Makana Meadery along with his late supervisor, Dr Winston Leukes.

Although based in Grahamstown, the impact of Garth's work has been felt nationally and internationally. Garth has devoted himself to developing projects that are not only innovative but link a green agenda to socio-economic development and benefits for the community.

He has worked tirelessly on three core initiatives in the field of alternative energy: producing bioethanol and biodiesel; facilitating the establishment of the Waainek Wind Farm; and utilising wood from felled alien vegetation as the biomass feedstock for sustainable generation of electricity.

Garth's projects and products have won international, national and local awards. Considered an expert on beekeeping, his honey mead product has won international acclaim, while simultaneously creating sustainable rural livelihoods. In 2007 he was named *Herald* Citizen of the Year, and in 2008 he received a *Mail & Guardian* Greening the Future Award for Carbon Mitigation.

Garth continues to enhance the reputation of Rhodes University through his professional and personal achievements, and serve the University as a supervisor of postgraduate students and guest lecturer.

Dr Garth Cambray personifies the qualities of a Rhodes graduate through being a resourceful, talented and socially-minded role model, all of which makes him an ideal candidate to receive the inaugural Emerging Old Rhodian Award.

Ladies and gentlemen: during the coming 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. You are the future: it is to you that we look to help build a united, thriving, just and humane South Africa.

Yet, you will agree, unacceptable conduct, base 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 University there is no 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 monthly allowance, and the political affiliations, 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!

Permit me, here, to also specifically address you the men who join us.

There is also absolutely no place at Rhodes for despicable, offensive and violent conduct against women, and we will not under any circumstances tolerate such conduct.

If you do engage in such conduct, you will be prosecuted. Recently, we excluded a student for ten years, which means that he is also not permitted to study at any other university.

To you women I say: Do not allow anyone to subject you to any humiliating and painful abuse. Have the courage to report such conduct, with the confidence that we will act.

Second, as a young adult with great independence and freedom you must now rely on your own wisdom and inner strengths to guide you in navigating life and its pitfalls. As a university community, we are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS as any others in our society, and it is you young adults who are most affected HIV/AIDS.

Please ensure that you are well informed about HIV/AIDS so that you behave in a way that does not expose you to, and protects you from, the risk of contracting HIV. Don't rush into being sexually active; don't have unprotected sex, be faithful, avoid multiple and concurrent sexual partners, and appreciate that drunkenness or drug abuse compromise your faculties to behave safely and responsibly.

Third, 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 raise the issue of the excessive consumption and abuse of alcohol by some students.

Regrettably, there are individuals who suggest to you that drinking at levels that are excessive and indeed abusive drinking is what it means to be a Rhodent. Heavily intoxicated students sometimes feature in unpleasant social and sexual incidents, and their irresponsible behaviour causes much grief for themselves, others and their families.

Have courage, be firm and tell them to get lost – they are the ones that we, invariably, have to deal with through the disciplinary system. Please don't mess up your future by becoming one of them!

Fourth, our natural environment is hugely important to our quality of life and that of future generations. We must be deeply concerned about how we are damaging our natural environment.

Paul Hawken notes that spaceship Earth, 'this planet came with a set of operating instructions, but we seem to have misplaced them. Important rules like don't poison the water, soil, or air, and don't let the earth get overcrowded, and don't touch the thermostat have been broken.'

Today, we have to be acutely aware of the urgent need for *environmental sustainability*. There is no other way – not if we wish to leave our children, grandchildren and their children a world that they can inhabit without the threats of great calamities.

We are committed to becoming progressively greener, and you need to help us to reduce our carbon footprint and emissions. Energy and water supply in this town are under severe pressure. We consume 45% of the town's energy and water, and so you must do everything you can to conserve electricity and water. This is a beautiful campus, and you need to do your bit to ensure that it is clean and attractive at all times.

Finally: be warned 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 be warned in June and inevitably excluded at the end of the year.

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

It is a matter of striking the right balance between your academic responsibilities, sport and cultural activities, and the many temptations and distractions of social life. Be sensible, and get this balance right 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 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.

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 they will have a wonderful academic and social experience, and will 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,' which is a result of the nutritious food in our residences.

Have a pleasant evening and travel home safely.

To you our new students: you have chosen us but, equally, we have chosen you. Ours is a partnership of mutual commitment to learning and knowledge. I wish you a great, great year of wonder, learning, discovery and fun.

And remember, the balance! Get the balance right!