

VICE-CHANCELLOR’S WELCOME ADDRESS

TO 2016 GRADUATION CEREMONIES

Thursday 31 March 2016

10.00: Faculty of Humanities

Mr James Matthews, D Litt *(hc)*

17:00: Faculty of Science

Ms Jeunesse Park, LLD (*hc*)

Friday 01 April 2016

10:00: Faculties of Humanities and Education

 Dr Imtiaz Sooliman, LLD (*hc*)

14:30: Faculty of Commerce

18:30: Faculties of Pharmacy, Law and Commerce

Dr Beatrice Mtetwa, LLD (*hc*)

Saturday 02 April 2016

10.00: Faculty Humanities

Prof Edward Webster, LLD (*hc*)

OFFICE OF THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

PO Box 94 Grahamstown 6140 South Africa

Tel: (046) 603 8148 Fax: (046) 603 7561 e-mail: vc@ru.ac.za

# Strive for personal greatness!

* Our Chancellor, the Honourable Justice Lex Mpati,
* The Chairperson of the Rhodes University Council, Mr Vuyo Kahla, and other members of our Council,
* The Chairperson of the Rhodes University Convocation, Reverend Dr Simon Gqubule,
* Our honorary graduands,
* The University Public Orator, Distinguished Prof Paul Maylam,
* Deputy Vice-Chancellors,
* Deans,
* Registrar,
* Heads of Academic Departments and Administrative Divisions,
* Academic and support staff colleagues,
* President and other members of the Student Representative Council,
* Our new graduands,
* Families, guardians, siblings and friends of our graduands,
* Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a signal honour and great privilege for me to welcome you all to the 2016 Rhodes University graduation ceremonies. This is the most exciting event in our University calendar at which we acknowledge, honour and celebrate the academic achievements our new graduates.

I’d like to extend a special welcome to those families whose son or daughter is the first to earn a university degree. Having been one myself, I know too well what a proud and special moment this is for all of you.

On behalf of our Council and the entire Rhodes University community, I extend our heartiest congratulations to each one of you, our graduands. You and your family have every reason to be proud of your remarkable achievement. We are very proud of you!

It was only a few years ago that we gathered in this auditorium to welcome you as new members of our Rhodes family and as new members of our academic community. This morning we are gathered in this same auditorium to mark a significant milestone in your academic journey; to celebrate your hard work, your perseverance, your commitment, your tenacity, and indeed your fabulous achievement. We are here to celebrate you and to honour you as new graduates of this exceptional institution of higher learning.

I’m always amazed at the personal transformation, growth and development that our students experience at Rhodes. In the few years that you have been with us, you have been transformed from the people you were to the people you are now. A higher education is not just about gaining more knowledge. As you graduate today, you are not people who simply know more than you did three or four years ago. If we have done our jobs properly, you have been transformed into completely different people; people who look at the world with different eyes, who can begin to imagine a better world than the one we now inhabit and who have the ability to contribute to positive change. As one parent wrote recently “I must say, I gave Rhodes my baby and I got back a young beautiful woman who surely is going to make a mark in this world.”

Your years of study were, without a doubt, beset by challenges, setbacks, frustration and disappointments. There might have been times when you wondered if you would make it to this stage. The fact that you are here this morning is testament to your incredible resilience, resolve and fortitude to rise above all the hurdles that lay on your way. Your steadfast determination, dedication and commitment to succeed have carried you through.

I hope you will be the first to acknowledge that you could not have reached this significant level of personal growth and achievement were it not for the loving support, encouragement and constant reassurance of your family, friends and loved ones. I’d therefore like to convey our heartfelt gratitude to your parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends and loved ones who have stood at your side at times when you had lost all hope. They were there to cheer you on, to support you, to advise you, to encourage you and above all, to love you. Parents and caregivers, I need to let you know that we have been truly privileged that you have chosen to share the remarkable young people graduating today with us during their time of study at this University.

To our graduands, and if I may be so bold, let me, on your behalf, express profound gratitude and sincere appreciation to your lecturers, tutors, laboratory technicians, computer assistants, support and administrative staff for their guidance, mentoring, support and encouragement during the trying times of your studies. Your success is their reward!

I hope you will also acknowledge the important role played by our cleaners, cooks, gardeners, janitorial staff, wardening staff, student leaders, sport societies and clubs in creating a rich and supportive intellectual, social and physical environment for you to develop, grow and succeed in your academic endeavours.

Our University is very fortunate to have outstanding, loyal, dedicated and committed academic and support staff who take a deep and keen interest in the growth, development and academic success of each and every one of our students. As Vice-Chancellor, I could not ask for more!

In five of the six graduation ceremonies, we will also recognise, honour and celebrate outstanding honorary graduands whose special contributions to our nation and humankind are worthy of our recognition. Their personal journeys and sacrifices serve as an inspiration and a beacon of hope for a better tomorrow. These are women and men whose significant achievements and distinction in some field or activity of human endeavour set them apart from others, and are consonant with our own institutional mission, purposes and values. We are deeply grateful that they have honoured us with their acceptance of our offer of recognition and have graced us with their presence in our graduation ceremonies.

*Educated to lead…*

Twenty-two years into our democratic dispensation, our nation finds itself at a crossroads. We are facing an uncertain future. We are a nation that is lurching from crisis to crisis.The recent worrying and disturbing events in our country must force us to reflect critically on where we have been, where we are and where we might be heading as a nation.

There is a growing and palpable impatience, disillusionment and disenchantment with the social, economic and political state of our nation.

At various levels of our society, one does not have to look far to see leadership that is bereft of moral and ethical content; leadership whose relationship with the truth is very tenuous, at best; one does not have to look far to see growing and intolerable malfeasance; one does not have to look far to see a failing public school system; one does not have to look far to see pervasive and debilitating poverty and widening wealth disparity; one does not have to look far to see individuals who are placed in positions of responsibility who will do all in their power to undermine and discredit institutions that were created to strengthen, consolidate and defend our constitutional order.

The very foundational principles of our constitutional democracy are under fierce assault. It was this state of affairs in our nation that prompted the late Prof Kader Asmal in 2010 to warn:

**“**But something is now going worryingly wrong with our constitutional order and, in turn, with our democracy. For it simply does not matter how elegant our institutions of democracy are, if they are not cherished, invigorated and protected by all of us, politicians, jurists, academics, the media and the citizenry. It is not acceptable for public leaders to genuflect to constitutionalism while attacking it by stealth. Today I fear we are observing our constitutional order being chiselled away to the point where we risk losing sight of the founding principles and practices of our democracy. One can see it and hear it.[[1]](#footnote-1)”

Such is the state of our nation! We seem ineluctably destined to slide into an abyss.

We must respond, sooner rather than later, to Lenin’s famous question: What is to be done?

All these challenges, notwithstanding, we should never allow apathy, despair, cynicism or despondency to take hold in our society; we cannot afford to lose hope*, we* cannot afford not to imagine a better society and a better world.

If you had lost hope or had become cynical, the ground-breaking judgement handed down by our Constitutional Court Thursday morning will go a long way to restore our faith and confidence in our constitutional project. The court has emphatically and unambiguously reaffirmed the supremacy of our constitution and the rule of law. The court has reminded us that we all have a duty and responsibility to “uphold, defend and respect” our constitution. We can only say: Amen!

It is evident that we live in a society crying out for leadership; a society yearning for good leadership, caring leadership, compassionate leadership, bold and courageous leadership, moral and ethical leadership; a leadership which, in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, does not only inspire confidence in people but one that inspires people to have confidence in themselves; the kind of leadership which,

“is not a function of material wealth, high office or status, or bestowed by a degree or qualification, but one that must be earned through ethical conduct, impeccable integrity, visionary endeavour, selfless public service and commitment to people and responsibilities.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is to you, graduates of this distinct and distinctive institution of higher learning, that we look for leadership to tackle the challenges that face our society and the world. The choices that you make will determine and shape who you will become and the legacy that you will bequeath our society and humanity. Whatever choices you make, never elevate personal ambition or single-minded pursuit of material or financial gain above everything else. Whatever the future holds for you, always strive to be the best that you can possibly be. Always strive to live a life of consequence, guided by Mahatma Ghandi’s injunction that we should “live simply so others may simply live.”

My appeal to you is that as you scale the heights of success, you hold fast to those time-honoured values and virtues of personal integrity, honesty, humility and empathy.

My appeal to you is that you never cease to be a thoroughly decent human being who is concerned with the welfare and wellbeing of others and treats others with respect and dignity.

My appeal to you is that you inspire many in our society through your own example, word and action.

My appeal to you is that you become a voice of reason, truth, justice and hope.

My wish is that, through your individual and collective actions of care and concern for others, we might witness the emergence of a new society - a more just, a more humane, a more equitable, a more compassionate, a fairer and an inclusive society.

As truly educated men and women, you have learnt to learn. Important though this is, I hope you have also learnt to unlearn and relearn! Indeed, as Alvin Toffler suggests, the unfortunates of the 21st century will be those who ‘cannot learn, unlearn and relearn’. Never cease to learn, unlearn and relearn. Take any situation and experience as an opportunity to learn, to unlearn and to relearn; an opportunity for personal growth and development.

I hope you have learnt the value of knowledge, the value of ideas, the value of theory, the value of reason and evidence, and that you have learnt the value of keeping an open mind to different views and perspectives.

If you do that, then you will be on your way to achieving your personal greatness. The kind of greatness which, according to William Arthur Ward,

“is not found in possessions, power, position or prestige. But one which is discovered in goodness, humility, service and character.”

*Graduation statistics…..*

In the 6 graduation ceremonies of 2016, a total of 2250 students will receive their degrees and diplomas. Of these, 1 235 (or 55%) are undergraduate Bachelor’s degrees and 1015 (or 45%) are postgraduate degrees and diplomas. Of the 1 015 postgraduate students, 230 will be receiving their Master’s degrees.

This year we graduate 67 PhD degrees. We celebrate a new record of 19 PhD degrees for the Faculty of Humanities, up from the previous record of 17 achieved last year. Our warm congratulations to the Dean and staff of the Faculty of Humanities!

Of the 2250 graduates, 58% are women; and 19% are international students.

The Faculty of Science, which is the third largest Faculty in the University, has produced 34 PhDs; more than all the other five Faculties combined! Congratulations to the Dean and staff of the Faculty of Science.

*Our graduates…*

As you graduate this morning, you join a special community of thousands of our alumni across the length and breadth of our continent and beyond. Many of them are involved in diverse fields of human endeavour to create a better society and a better world. Animated by our motto ‘*Vis, Virtus, Veritas*’ - ‘Strength, Virtue, Truth’, inspired by our slogan “*Where leaders learn*” and guided by our values of integrity, respect, social justice, human dignity, human rights, personal excellence and rational inquiry, they are determined to bequeath future generations a better society and a better world than the one they inherited from the generation before theirs. We will expect no less from you!

I welcome you to this special community and I invite you to visit the alumni table in the foyer to receive your special graduation gift.

With a qualification from Rhodes University, you have been prepared to negotiate successfully and overcome any challenge that life has to offer. The quality education you have received has provided you with a solid foundation to launch a successful career. You have been educated at one of the finest universities in the world. Your future could not be brighter!

In the years to come, we will follow your growth and development as a professional with keen interest and we will applaud you for the honour and credit you bring to your *alma mater*.

When I was installed as the Vice-Chancellor of this fine institution, I made two important commitments:

First, that Rhodes University would be accessible to students from poor, rural and working class families so that they can benefit from the outstanding educational experiences it offers.

Second, that I would make it my personal mission to strive to ensure that no academically deserving but financially needy student is turned away from Rhodes University.

In this regard, my final appeal to you is that you help us live up to these important commitments by contributing generously to our Alumni Annual Fund and other fundraising efforts. Your support is vital if we are to continue to make the learning experiences we value so greatly here at Rhodes University more available to all.

In the final chapter of his book, *Long Walk to Freedom*, President Nelson Mandela writes:

“I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended.”

This morning we are taking a moment to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista of your fine accomplishments, to look back on the distance you have travelled. This is a wonderful opportunity for you to pause and look back on the journey you have completed and look forward into the promising future that lies ahead. You dare not linger, for your own long walk is not yet ended.

Today is your special day to cherish and remember. You have earned it! May you look back on this glorious day with great pride and warm memories and may it serve as an inspiration and a springboard towards better and exciting things in life for you.

*Special acknowledgement….*

Let me conclude by paying a special tribute to the wonderful women and men who have worked tirelessly to make our graduation ceremonies possible. They normally work behind the scenes to ensure that our graduation ceremonies run without a hitch. These are the people who have worked extra hard to ensure that the names of our graduands appeared on the graduation programme, in the right place, in the right order and for the right qualification.

They wanted to be sure that the moment of glory of each one of our graduands was a truly memorable experience.

They are too many to mention, but permit me to single out a few:

* The army of student volunteers who are serving as ushers;
* Ms Desiree Wicks;
* Ms Suzette Flanagan;
* Ms Charmaine Avery;
* Ms Lindy van Jaarsveldt;
* Mr Cromwell Dyala;
* Ms Natalie Ripley;
* The Faculty Deans;
* Master’s dissertation and doctoral thesis supervisors;
* The Rhodes University Chamber Choir and
* Our Registrar, Dr Steve Fourie. Dr Fourie has been in charge of this massive operation, year after year, for 20 years! Thanks, Steve.

When you see these people around, please give them a bear hug, a smile and say a quiet ‘thank you’. They are truly special!

Asante sana. Enkosi. Ke a leboga. Ngiyabonga. Ke a leboha. Ndo livhuwa. Ngiyathokoza. Obrigado. Inkomu. Merci beaucoup. Baie dankie. Thank you very much.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

1. Asmal, K, Address at the University of South Africa (UNISA) on the occasion of the conferment of the degree Doctor of Laws (*hc*), 12 April 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. S Badat. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)