

Welcome address to New Students and Parents 2015

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Deputy Vice-Chancellors

Deans

Registrar

Heads of Department

Our academic and support staff colleagues

President and other members of the SRC

Parents and guardians,

And more important, our new students.

Good evening, Absheni, dumelang, molweni, kgotsong, goeie-naand, sanibonani, ndaa, lotšhani, thobela, Assalamu' alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh, shalom.

You are finally here! We have been waiting expectantly and preparing for your arrival. A very warm welcome to you, our new students, and to the parents, guardians, alumni, uncles aunts and grandparents.

I am aware that for some of you this is your first time in Grahamstown, in the Eastern Cape Province, and for some to South Africa and the African continent.

I bid you very warm welcome.

Congratulations on gaining admission for studies at Rhodes University. You have been chosen out of more than 10 000 applicants who were competing for 1 584 places!

Congratulations also on performing well enough in your grade 12 or other school-leaving qualification. Your achievement is all the more special given that our

education system still fails so dismally to realise the full potential of the majority of young people in this country.

Our university, our history and our legacy...

You have chosen to study at a very special and distinctive university which deservedly enjoys an enviable reputation for academic excellence. Founded in 1904, Rhodes University is one of the oldest universities in this country. This year we will be celebrating our one-hundred-and-eleventh year of existence!

- We are, by far, the smallest university in South Africa, and this year we hope to reach an enrolment figure of 8041 students. Unlike at other universities, each one of our students is young person with a name and a face; not just a number or statistic;
- We have a well-entrenched culture, tradition and experience of developing and nurturing exceptional intellectual talent in our students.
- We are proud of and strive to maintain our reputation as an outstanding university that provides high quality formative education for its students.
- Let me share with you some important statistics:
 - About 59% of our students are women,
 - 30% are postgraduate students,
 - Over 20% of our students are international students who come from some 66 countries in the rest of Africa and other parts of the world. The national, linguistic and cultural diversity we have here makes us an exciting and a cosmopolitan place. It is also this diversity that creates a vibrant intellectual, social and cultural environment which is key to achieving academic excellence.
 - Over 3 600 of our students live in 51 residences on campus and eat in 12 dining halls, where we serve over 10 000 meals a day.
 - Over 1 500 staff work at Rhodes on 140 hectares of land and in 250 buildings.
- We enjoy the best undergraduate pass and graduation rates of any South African university.
- We have outstanding postgraduate success rates and enjoy one of the best research outputs per academic staff member of any South African university. As a student at Rhodes University, you will be taught by academics who are actively engaged in advancing the frontiers of knowledge.

- We have one of the highest proportions of academic staff with doctoral degrees.
- We represent less than 1% of the higher education enrolments, but our students win most of the prestigious scholarships. Just to illustrate this point, late last year, we submitted nine (9) names of our students for the prestigious Mandela-Rhodes Scholarship. These nine names were part of 500 applicants for the Mandela-Rhodes Scholarship from other parts of the country. So of the 500 applications they received, we nominated 9 (1.8%). Of the 60 candidates who were shortlisted for interviews, Rhodes had seven (7) (i.e., 11.6%); of the 40 who were awarded the Mandela-Rhodes Scholarship, 6 were from Rhodes (15%). We have the highest number of Mandela-Rhodes scholars of any South African university.

This is the legacy of success and achievement which has defined Rhodes University for generations. It is the legacy that we must continually strive to uphold, and in fact, enhance and grow.

You have chosen very well indeed! Our responsibility – yours and ours – is to enhance the already pre-eminent standing of our university as an outstanding institution of higher learning and academic excellence.

As you join this special community of Rhodes University, you need to know and understand what its purposes and core values are. We are a community of scholars engaged in the generation, dissemination and application of knowledge.

Our university exists to serve three core purposes:

- ❖ Our first purpose is to *produce and disseminate* knowledge through all kinds of research, creative endeavours and scholarship so that we can advance the frontiers of knowledge, human understanding and wisdom.
- ❖ Our second purpose is to teach in ways which allow and encourage our students to engage critically with *knowledge* and its production. Through our teaching, our students should not only develop a “critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves”, but should also be inducted into the intricacies of

knowledge-making. This suggests that our curricula and pedagogy should be designed with a view to fostering student inclusion in the journey of discovery. Through our teaching and learning we seek to produce graduates who are knowledgeable and skilled; graduates who are critical and democratic citizens and ethical leaders who are committed to the values of human understanding, social justice, human development and service to society; graduates who are committed to human rights and environmental justice; graduates who will not just see our society or the world as it is but can imagine a better society and a better world and act with courage and conviction to change our society and the world for the better.

- ❖ Universities do not exist in a vacuum - they exist within a particular social, economic, cultural, political and historical context and are an integral part of the community in which they exist. In this regard, Rhodes' third core purpose is to discharge its critical *social responsibility* through *community engagement*. Our Community Engagement endeavours range from formal credit-bearing service-learning courses to student volunteering in local projects. In these activities, we forge respectful, reciprocal, mutually-beneficial and knowledge-driven partnerships with our local (external) community.

It is through our Community Engagement activities that we endeavour to “take knowledge beyond the confines of the academy into a variety of social domains”. In this way, our knowledge is tested and enhanced and our scholarship enriched and the socio-economic condition of our local communities improved. In the process, we gain new and deeper insights into the pressing and complex challenges facing our local communities.

These three core purposes constitute our *academic or intellectual project*. This is what it means for us to be a university that takes **knowledge, scholarship and learning** very seriously and that works hard to create an institutional culture that embraces academic freedom and intellectual inquiry and debate, and values creativity, knowledge and scholarship.

These three core purposes should not be construed as distinct from each other nor as being mutually exclusive of and in competition with each other. These are mutually supportive and one feeds into and catalyses the other two.

To emphasize the centrality of ‘knowledge’ as the key defining feature for us as a university is a risky undertaking, particularly so in a society that shows

complete disdain for knowledge and intellectualism. However, to do otherwise would reduce us to anything but a university. And so our Institutional Development Plan proudly and boldly proclaims that we are a **university**, a place of knowledge – *siyindawo yolwazi*. We generate and disseminate knowledge to serve humanity.

As we pursue our intellectual project, we are guided by a set of core values which are formulated against the backdrop of our national Constitution of 1996 which sets out the character of the society that is envisaged, proclaiming the values of 'human dignity, the achievement of substantive equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms,' and 'non-racialism and non-sexism.' The *Bill of Rights* unambiguously proclaims that no institution or individual 'may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including "race", gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual identity, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.'

We are all enjoined to 'respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights in the Bill of Rights.'

The 1997 *White Paper* on higher education further expresses the core principles that universities are meant to embody. These are: equity and redress, democratisation, development, quality, effectiveness and efficiency, academic freedom, institutional autonomy (and) public accountability.

To our new students....

Let me, for a moment, address myself to our new students:

Your enrolling at Rhodes University marks the beginning of your lifetime association with this University. Your time at Rhodes will be one of the freest and most exciting in your life. It is an opportunity to discover who you are and what your passion is. Be sure to find your passion and pursue it with dedication and commitment.

This is a time of transition; a time of adjustment, and a time of change. J K Rowling of the *Harry Potter* fantasy series fame says that there is an expiry date on blaming your parents for steering you in the wrong direction. That date for you is today. You must

now take responsibility for your future and all that you do. University life is a time for learning and self-discovery.

Your education and personal growth and development will be so much the poorer and stunted if you surrounded yourself with only those who share your beliefs, ideas, perspectives, worldview and have had a similar lived experience as you. I therefore strongly encourage you to associate and interact with other young people who come from a different background – racial, cultural, social, class, linguistic, ethnic origin or geographic background; someone with views, ideas, beliefs and perspectives different from yours.

The opportunity you have to interact with other young people from diverse backgrounds and experiences will significantly enrich your educational experience. You will develop a greater understanding and appreciation of the complexity and richness of the human experience.

Transformative experience...

University education is, by its very nature, transformative. You can only experience immense personal transformation and enlightenment if you keep an open mind. You must keep an open mind and be willing to subject your views, beliefs, opinions, assumptions, and ideas to scrutiny, test and interrogation.

We want you to use the power of reasoned argument, logic and debate to explore differences with a view to narrowing them, breaking new ground and enhancing and deepening shared understanding.

We want you to develop the ability and capacity to analyse, to reason *with evidence*, to reflect and argue using knowledge.

We want you to develop the ability and skill to *question*; to challenge conventional wisdom, to contest the taken-for-granted 'facts'. It was Indira Gandhi who said that the power to question is the basis of all human progress. Indeed, asking the right question is the first and critical step to meaningful learning and scholarship.

We value and treasure your individuality. Conformity is antithetical to learning, personal growth and development. We appreciate different ways of thinking, different ways of seeing and different ways of being. We encourage and support dissent and contestation of ideas. Dare to be different!

We want you to learn to communicate with clarity and cogency both orally and in writing.

Important messages...

There are seven important messages to which I would like you to pay greater attention.

- First, every person at Rhodes must be treated with respect and dignity. It does not matter what social station a person occupies – whether one is a cleaner, a gardener, a lab technician, a cook, or a distinguished professor – they deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.
- Second, Rhodes University will not tolerate racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic or any other form of bigotry, prejudice or chauvinistic behaviour.
- Third, Rhodes University will not tolerate any form of initiation. Treating another person in a demeaning and dehumanising manner has no place at Rhodes University.
- Fourth, excessive and irresponsible consumption of alcohol and experimentation with drugs will not be tolerated at Rhodes. Such behavior will impair your ability to assess a situation and will make you vulnerable to crime including rape.
- Fifth, as a young adult with great independence and freedom you must now rely on your own wisdom and inner strength to guide you in navigating life and its pitfalls. As a university community, we are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, and it is young adults like you who are most affected HIV/AIDS. Please ensure that you are well-informed about HIV/AIDS and that your behaviour protects you from the risk of contracting HIV. Don't rush into or be pressured into being sexually active; don't have unprotected sex, be faithful, and avoid multiple and concurrent sexual partners.
- Sixth, crime is a sad reality in our society. Universities are not immune from the problems of crime. We ask you to be very vigilant wherever you are. Trust your

instinct and act appropriately. Our University Protection Services are there to provide protection to the students, staff and property. Each one of us should however develop a heightened sense of crime awareness. For example, allowing someone you do not know in your residence is placing everyone in that residence at risk.

- Seventh, 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 get a warning after the June exams and you will then be excluded on the basis of Rule G7 at the end of the year. Failing at Rhodes University is not an event that suddenly happens at the end of the semester or year. It happens over a period of weeks and months when you neglect your work. What happens at the end of the year is just a confirmation of what would have been happening over a long period of time. In short, never lose sight of what you are here for.

If you heed these messages you will be have a great time of growth, development and learning at Rhodes.

Should you experience difficulties though, be assured that our academic and support staff are there to support you; they are there to help you realise your dreams and aspirations; they are there to make your university experience a positive and rewarding one. You can always call on our competent and capable professional staff to help you with a variety of personal challenges. Taking your life is never an answer! Do not suffer in silence. Please seek help.

To the parents and guardians...

Some of you will probably experience a set of complex and conflicting emotions. On the one hand, you will be excited that your loved one is finally at university and, on the other, you will experience the pain of letting go. You may be wondering if your son or daughter will keep the values and principles that you tried so hard to instil in him or her. You may wonder if he or she is ready for this important step of self-discovery. Have no fear. Know that they are at an outstanding university, that we will do our best to see to their needs and problems, that they will have a wonderful academic and social experience, and will develop intellectually and personally.

Your loved one needs to develop and grow in order to discover who he or she is and what he or she can become. He/She needs to make his/her own decisions and choices. Do offer advice, support and love to him or her. However give him or her space, time and freedom to explore and solve his or her own problems. If some problems persist, get in touch with us so our professional services can assist.

The next three to four years will be an exciting time for your lovely daughter or son. This will be a time of phenomenal intellectual, and personal growth and development for him or her.

In conclusion, I wish to acknowledge with thanks a deep appreciation to

- ❖ our Registrar, Dr Fourie, and his team for managing the application and registration process with utmost professionalism;
- ❖ our 2015 Orientation Helpers who were on hand at all times to lend a hand;
- ❖ the House Committees, Senior Students, sub-wardens and Wardens of all our residences and halls for welcoming our new students and assisting them settle in in their residences;
- ❖ our SRC for all their work in ensuring that our new students feel welcome at Rhodes.

We wish all parents, guardians, aunts, uncles and grandparents a safe trip back home.

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