

**Higher Education for a Higher Purpose:**

**Rising to the Challenge**

Sizwe Mabizela

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**OFFICE OF THE VICE-CHANCELLOR**

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Rising to the Challenge

Mr Chancellor, the Honourable Justice Lex Mpati;

Chairperson of Council, Mr Vuyo Kahla;

Eastern Cape Judge President, Mr Justice Themba Sangoni;

Premier of the Eastern Cape Province, Honourable Phumulo Masualle;

Your Worship, Executive Mayor of Makana Municipality, Councillor Zamuxolo Peter;

Members of Council;

Members of our Board of Governors;

President of Convocation, Rev Dr Simon Gqubule;

Vice-Chancellors and representatives of other universities;

Deputy Vice-Chancellors;

Deans;

Members of Senate;

Academic, Administrative and Support Staff;

Leadership of our unions: NEHAWU and NTEU;

President and other members of the Student Representative Council;

Students;

Honoured guests;

Ladies and gentlemen;

Comrades and friends.

Good evening, molweni, kgotsong, goeie-naand, dumelang, sanibonani.

I would like to begin by thanking every single person in the audience this evening for joining us on this very special occasion. The inauguration of a Vice-Chancellor is a very special milestone in the life and history of a university. It is also a very special milestone in my own life.

I am deeply honoured and privileged that so many Vice-Chancellors and representatives of Vice-Chancellors of our sister higher education institutions across our country have travelled to Grahamstown to share this event with us.

I have been very fortunate to be surrounded by wonderful, caring and loving people in my life. Members of my immediate and extended family, my in-laws and my many friends are here this evening to celebrate with Rhodes University and with one of their own. A special note to my wife, Dr Phethiwe Matutu and our girls, Zama and Zinzi - I am proud of each of you and grateful for the love and support that you give me all the time.

There are two people who are with us only in spirit: my late father and my late elder brother, Siza. Knowing my father, he would have hired a number of buses and invited the whole of our village to travel with him to Grahamstown for this celebration!

My brother and I completed Form Five (Standard 10) in the same year. We had both been accepted at university. Realising that our parents would not afford to support both of us at university, he opted to go to a teacher training college in order to make it possible for me to attend university. He then studied part-time until he completed his PhD. Sadly, his PhD degree was awarded posthumously after he had died tragically in a car accident. He was the Registrar at the Welkom campus of Vista University.

I also am deeply indebted to my wonderful friend and brother who has been part of my life since our teen years, the Vice-Chancellor of the Central University of Technology, Prof Thandwa Mthembu. He has been with me through thick and thin and has never left my side. We also spent time together in a police cell in Alice in the turbulent early eighties.

***Lest we forget…***

I would like to dedicate this inaugural address to the memory of three remarkable South Africans who were born and raised in this part of our country. Their love for this country, their deep passion for, and unwavering commitment to, social justice, human rights, equality and human dignity knew no bounds. They laid down their lives so we could enjoy the freedoms and democracy we now have. These outstanding giants of our liberation struggle are Mr Bantu Stephen Biko[[1]](#footnote-1), Mr Mlungisi Griffiths Mxenge[[2]](#footnote-2) and Mrs Victoria Nonyamezelo Mxenge[[3]](#footnote-3).

I am enormously grateful that Mama Ntsiki Biko, Mr Bantu Biko’s wife, and Mr Nkosinathi Biko, their eldest son, are here this evening to celebrate this auspicious occasion with me as special guests of Rhodes University.

I am also greatly honoured to welcome as special guests and recognise Mr Mbasa Mxenge, the son of Mr and Mrs Mxenge, and his wife, Lusanda. When I told Mbasa that the date of my installation was 27 February 2015, he quickly pointed out that that day is Tata Mxenge’s birthday. He was born on this day eighty years ago!

On 12 August 1985 I had the great fortune of attending the funeral of Mama Victoria Mxenge. It was a moving experience. Thousands of people defied the state of emergency and the road-blocks that had been set up around King Williamstown. The atmosphere was highly charged with emotion; there was palpable anger, defiance and resolve in every direction.

I am enormously grateful to both the Biko and the Mxenge families for honouring us with their presence this evening. The selfless dedication, deep commitment, courage, bravery and resolve of your loved ones to advance the cause of freedom, justice and human rights inspire us all. We owe it to them and thousands of others who perished in the prosecution of our liberation struggle that we use education to bring about a more just, a more humane, a more caring, a fairer and a more equitable society.

At this point, however, it is worth pausing to reflect on where we stand today, since these great figures from our history stood their ground for social justice and, in giving their lives for this cause, helped to change the path that our history has taken.

On the one hand, we must acknowledge and celebrate that South Africa is a different country today and many significant advances have been made, often beyond our expectations.

On the other hand, we still have a long way to go, and the imperatives that lie ahead of us are starkly visible, here in our own immediate context.

The struggle that we fought into the early 1990s was sharply defined then as a South African, and an African, issue. However, the challenges that we face now on our doorstep increasingly take on global dimensions and significance. The seemingly intractable – and frankly completely intolerable – persistence of poverty in our own country is also a reflection of deep inequalities that are now an acknowledged global pattern. Despite the fact that equality is one of the founding values of our Constitutional democracy, we are the most unequal society on earth. Similarly, we are confronted by a number of stark indicators that point to, among others, the vulnerability of societies in the shape of volatile social upheavals and extremist movements; to the fragility of the global economy and the inadequacy of its financial systems, and to the instability of the planetary climate and its ecology.

Across a whole range of fronts, then, we are forced to concede that the paths we have followed in the past are no longer sustainable paths for the future. It simply cannot be business as usual.

However, we cannot afford to be paralysed or intimidated by the global dimensions of these problems. They are simply our problems replicated elsewhere. We can, and must, tackle these issues as they present themselves in our society. South Africa has something of a reputation for innovation, and the solutions we find to the problems confronting us here will be of considerable interest globally, because these are their problems too.

In short, during my tenure as Vice-Chancellor of this University, I want Rhodes to be increasingly distinguished as an institution that tackles local problems in ways that command attention and respect more widely, indeed globally. I want Rhodes to be an institution that erects powerful signposts for how the pathways of the future must differ from those of the past. The capacity to model a different and better future lies clearly in our hands today, here in South Africa, here in the Eastern Cape, here in Grahamstown. But it requires of us that we reflect on how we ourselves within the University conduct our work, how we can build on our excellent strengths already established in this direction, and how we can seek other opportunities for renewal and innovation.

I believe that Rhodes is an institution animated in large part by a progressive and innovative spirit, and that there is an appetite for a future characterised by a culture of *“Business Unusual”*. In this address, I want to indicate some of the means by which the leadership of this University will advance this spirit and deepen its realisation.

***Gratitude…***

Words cannot adequately express just how deeply humbled and inordinately privileged I am in being given the opportunity to serve this great University as its 6th Principal and Vice-Chancellor. It was with a profound sense of honour and humility that I accepted the Council’s invitation to serve in this role. There is no place I would rather be than right here at Rhodes University.

An enormous debt is owed to my five predecessors, Drs Thomas Alty, James Hyslop, Derek Henderson, David Woods, and Saleem Badat, whose exceptional leadership and stewardship helped build and sustain this fine institution. I am particularly beholden to my immediate predecessor, Dr Saleem Badat, for his steady, thoughtful and visionary leadership over the past eight years. I was enormously privileged to serve this great institution alongside him as one of his Deputy Vice-Chancellors. He was a great friend and a reliable mentor for me.

***The number 6 is beautiful…***

As the 6th Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, I cannot resist the temptation to comment on the beauty of the number 6. In Mathematics, numbers like 6 are very special. Observe that 6 = 1+2+3, and 1, 2, and 3 are divisors (or factors) of 6 that are less than 6. Such positive integers which can be written as a sum of their positive divisors smaller than them are called ***perfect numbers***. The number 6 is the smallest perfect number. The next perfect number is 28, since 28 = 1+2+4+7+14. Perfect numbers are very rare. In fact, there are only 48 perfect numbers known to date. All known perfect numbers are even, i.e., they are divisible by 2, and are of the form 2*p*−1× (2*p* – 1), where *p* is a prime number. It is not known if there are perfect numbers that are odd. It was reported in November last year that there are no odd perfect numbers less than 101 500. So much for perfect numbers!

***A deep desire and commitment to serve ….***

These are challenging times for higher education in this country and beyond. Some of these challenges include: The declining level in real terms of State funding of higher education; time-consuming bureaucratic compliance and onerous reporting requirements; ever-growing demand for access to higher education; inadequate funding for financially needy students; high drop-out rates and low graduation rates; fierce competition for talented academic, support and administrative staff; poor public schooling which delivers inadequately prepared students to higher education; ageing staff; dubious world rankings and global league tables; commodification of knowledge. And the list continues.

Given all these challenges, why, you might wonder, would anyone in their right frame of mind accept an offer of Vice-Chancellorship? While I cannot give a response on behalf of those who have recently accepted the offer, I can give you my reason. It is contained in a letter I sent to our Chair of Council when an offer was made to me. I indicated to him that my acceptance of the position of Vice-Chancellor at Rhodes University was not motivated by any quest for personal glory, financial or material gain, but by a deep desire and commitment to serve Rhodes University, to serve our great nation and to serve humanity. I accepted because I am motivated and driven by a desire to make a difference!

***Our university, our history and our legacy…***

Rhodes University is a remarkable institution 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. Unlike at other universities, each one of our students is a 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 proudof, and strive to maintain, ourreputation as an outstanding university that provides high quality formative education for its students. We are fortunate to have a core group of top researchers and inspiring teachers at our University.
* 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. Our students are 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 (i.e., 1.8%). Of the 60 candidates who were shortlisted for interviews, 7 (i.e., 11.6%) were from Rhodes; and of the 40 who were awarded the Mandela-Rhodes Scholarship, 6 were from Rhodes (15%). An incredible achievement for the smallest University in the country!

We have the highest number of Mandela-Rhodes scholars of any South African university.

This is the kind of success and achievement which has defined Rhodes University for generations. I am keenly aware of the significance of this legacy and what it demands of me as I seek to lead this University into a new and what I am sure will be a profoundly exciting future. I draw strength, courage and inspiration from the past and am intensely aware that one of my duties is to lead in a way which will enhance the standing of our university as a truly exceptional institution of higher learning and academic excellence. We must strive to uphold and grow this legacy and I assure you of my deep commitment to my own role in promoting the continued success of this remarkable place of learning.

***Our academic project…***

On an important occasion like this, it is important that we remind ourselves of the purpose of an institution such as Rhodes University.

Our university exists to serve three core purposes, each of them deeply traditional in nature, but also each required to be acutely attuned to the changing inflections of the era:

* 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. As such, our curricula and pedagogy should be designed with a view to fostering students’ inclusion in the journey of discovery.
* 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 *societal responsibility* through engagement with the pressing questions of the day, whether these are urgent local needs in our own community, or wider issues confronting societies globally. 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, 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, and a more deeply nuanced view of the wider patterns in which we are located.

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, embraces intellectual inquiry and debate, and places a high value on creativity and innovation. These three core purposes are not distinct from or in competition with each other but are mutually supportive; each 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 a disappointing and dangerous disdain for knowledge and intellectual integrity. However, to do otherwise would reduce us to something other than a university. And so our Institutional Development Plan boldly and proudly proclaims that we are a ***university***, a place of knowledge – *siyindawo yolwazi*, a community of scholars engaged in the generation, dissemination and application of knowledge in the service of humanity.

***Our values ….***

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 equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms,’ and the creation of a non-racist and non-sexist society. 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 enjoined to ‘respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights in the Bill of Rights.’

We are indeed fortunate to have one of the most progressive Constitutions in the world, but its value lies only in the extent to which it is given practical effect in the lives of all of our people, and the extent to which it is defended against relentless encroachment. A large proportion of our population lives without the protections promised by our Constitution. Universities have a very special place in providing a platform to interrogate our success in giving effect to this Constitution, and in prompting the innovation required to fulfil the societal vision that it expresses. A significant challenge for all of us is to embrace, internalise and live out the values of our Constitution.

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.

***Our future…***

Change provides us with an opportunity to reflect and to take stock of where we have been, where we are, and to prepare for what lies ahead.I am inestimably fortunate in that I have been at Rhodes University for 10 years and have been part of its senior leadership for the past six years. I have been integrally involved in shaping and driving the trajectory that we are currently pursuing and can confidently state that we have built a solid foundation from which we can continue to re-imagine and reshape our institution.

As one might expect, with change in leadership, there will always be continuities, discontinuities and adjustments. However, my promise is that I will use my leadership to further our shared objective of strengthening our University’s position as a distinct and distinctive institution providing outstanding education to young people of our country and beyond, generating and disseminating knowledge of high quality which advances human understanding and wisdom; knowledge that helps us build and sustain a better society and a better world.

Having been part of Rhodes University for as long as I have and having been part of its senior leadership, I am under no illusion regarding the challenges that lie ahead. We must address these imaginatively and creatively if we are to remain a pre-eminent and innovative academic centre of knowledge creation, knowledge dissemination and knowledge application.

As always, challenges present new opportunities to do things differently. And so I have been very clear in my conversations with the University community that we cannot and will not continue with business as usual. We must do things differently.

How do we enhance the already pre-eminent standing of our university as an outstanding institution of higher learning and academic excellence whilst embracing the challenges I have noted?

First, ***we must enhance the quality of education and overall experience of our students***.

Students are the main reason we exist as an institution of higher learning. We must build on our reputation for excellence in teaching and learning and prepare our students for a productive and fulfilling life, a life of selfless service to society and humankind.

Our in- and out-of-classroom activities should seek to develop leadership opportunities so that our students develop the necessary skills, appropriate values and attitudes that will make them worthy citizens of our global village.

In line with our slogan “*Where leaders learn*”, we must, through our teaching and learning, community engagement and extra-curricular activities, produce leaders who are knowledgeable, skilled and competent; leaders who are critical and democratic citizens; ethical leaders who are committed to the values of human understanding, social justice, human development and service to society; leaders who are unwavering in their support of human rights and environmental justice; leaders who can heed Mahatma Gandhi’s advice that we live simply so others may simply live; leaders 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 confident conviction to change our society and the world for the better; leaders who, in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, do not only inspire confidence in people but inspire people to have confidence in themselves; leaders who will not succumb to the venality that has become so much part of our everyday life.

Indeed, we must inspire and guide these young leaders to be more than what they ever imagined possible.

Second, ***we must make Rhodes University accessible to academically talented students from diverse racial, social, cultural, economic and class backgrounds*** ***and provide them with the support they need to succeed***.

Rhodes University is committed to ensuring that students from poor, rural and working class backgrounds benefit from the outstanding educational experiences it offers. We believe that diversity in the composition of the student body not only enriches the academic, social and cultural environment in significant ways but also enhances students’ own life experiences while they are here. Our students’ interaction with others from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds contributes towards their holistic educational experience and prepares them for the global society in which we live.

Funding for students from poor, rural and working class households is a major barrier to their ability to access quality higher education at Rhodes University. These students rely on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to fund their tuition and residence fees. The demand for student financial aid far exceeds the available resources.

A significant segment of students not catered for through the student financial aid scheme is that of young people whose parents or guardians are civil servants – nurses, teachers, police officers – whose family income is just above the NSFAS threshold, but not large enough to be able to afford university education.

As Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, I will make it my personal mission to strive to ensure that no academically talented, but financially needy, student is turned away from Rhodes University. I call on our staff, students, alumni, donors and the private sector to make a contribution in this endeavour.

When I became a Deputy Vice-Chancellor, I made a salary sacrifice to contribute to a bursary fund intended to help academically talented but financially needy students. In my capacity as Vice-Chancellor, I am able to increase this salary sacrifice in order to advance our strategic objective to make higher education accessible to those who come from poor families. I call on others to contribute in whatever ways they are able to make the learning experiences we value so greatly here at Rhodes University more available to all.

Third, ***we must attract, nurture and retain academic, administrative and support staff of high calibre***.

Our greatest strength, as an institution, is the quality of our staff – both academic and support. The rich legacy of academic excellence to which I made reference earlier has been made possible by the outstanding staff who have an unwavering commitment to, and passion for, excellence in all that they do. It is their loyalty, dedication, commitment and hard work that have enabled us to build and sustain this University as a place of knowledge.

It is important that we continue to make Rhodes University an institution of choice for the best and the brightest academic, administrative and support staff.

In order to achieve this, we must, among other things,

* Create and maintain an enabling institutional culture that values people and is an intellectually rewarding space in which to work;
* Improve our staff remuneration in order to be competitive;
* Assist staff in finding affordable accommodation in and around Grahamstown;
* Create opportunities for professional development and advancement of staff;
* Create clear pathways for career advancement for support and administrative staff.

Fourth, ***we must create and maintain an inclusive, welcoming, affirming and positive institutional environment.***

We must, in the first instance, embrace diversity and celebrate difference. However, as an institution of higher learning we must go further than that and use the power of civil and reasoned argument, logic and debate to engage differences with a view to narrowing them, breaking new ground and enhancing and deepening shared understanding.

As Vice-Chancellor, I pledge to encourage and support freedom of expression and opinion and model practices and values that are consistent with the spirit and prescripts of our Constitution. We must, and will, respond with firmness and decisiveness to behaviours and attitudes that are divisive, hurtful and demeaning to others and which, sadly, still characterise much of our wider society. Many of those engaged in these behaviours and attitudes may be unconscious of the effects of what they do because of the way they have been socialised into thinking their acts and thoughts are ‘normal’. Through awareness-raising activities, we must challenge every single student and every single staff member to reflect on the way they interact with others in order to identify the hidden thoughts and attitudes underpinning the way they go about their daily lives. In 1994, our country emerged from a great struggle against racism, hatred and inequality. Many lost their lives in that struggle, as I indicated at the beginning of this speech. As a nation, we cannot afford to go backwards and, as a place of knowledge and an institution of higher learning, Rhodes University has to take a stand against any attempts to do so, however conscious or unconscious they may be.

Fifth, ***we must advance the transformation imperative of our University.***

We have made significant progress in the transformation of the demographic and social composition of the student body. The ‘race’, class, gender, ethnic, national, linguistic, cultural and religious composition of our student population has changed and will continue to change given our imperatives of social equity and social justice. However, similar levels of transformation have not been witnessed in our staff complement. In particular, it has been difficult to attract and retain Black academic staff. Additionally, the paucity of Black and women academics in the higher ranks of the academy is a matter of great concern. We acknowledge our predicament and pledge ourselves to intensified efforts to transform our staff complement. We must harness all efforts to create highly-attractive and welcoming environments and scholarly positions filled with academic richness, scope and promise and to follow this with purposeful investment in Black and women academics so that they are attracted to academic careers, that they are able to exceed their expectations, that they are able to rise through the academic ranks, and that they are able to assist in charting the future through their leadership. Such purposeful investment is exemplified in the 10-year old Accelerated Staff Development Programme funded by the Mellon Foundation and by the Kresge Foundation. A number of our Black and women colleagues of academic influence and position bear witness to the programme and its impact. May their numbers, role and fine contribution to this University grow prodigiously, if not exponentially. A university characterised by *‘Business Unusual’* requires this.

Indeed, we welcome the initiative of the Department of Higher Education & Training to develop and train a new generation of academics for our higher education system. It is a matter of immense pride for us, as Rhodes University, that that initiative had its genesis in our own Accelerated Staff Development Programme.

Another significant area of transformation is the curriculum. As mentioned earlier, the social and demographic composition of our student body has changed significantly over the past number of years. The question which arises is: to what extent have we engaged our curricula and pedagogic approaches to respond to this diversity and to draw on the richness that it presents? Are we still privileging and valuing knowledge from some parts of the world to the exclusion of that which comes from other parts of the world? Broadening the content to embrace knowledge from different parts of the world is just one part of curriculum transformation. Another important part is the pedagogic philosophy and approach adopted to accommodate and leverage on the diversity of our student population. As academics, do we see that the students who sit in front of us in the lecture and seminar rooms of our campus are different to those who sat beside us when we were students? Have we adapted our pedagogical approaches to ensure that every one of those students is included as an equal in the learning that goes on in our classrooms? Does our approach to diversity of participation, and to diversity of knowledge, assist our graduates to provide leadership for a more sustainable and resilient society? These are the kinds of questions we need to be asking as we move forward into a more equitable future.

As part of our engagement with the issue of curriculum transformation, we will host a conference on 17 and 18 April 2015 under the theme “*(Re)Making the South African University: Curriculum Development and the Problem of Place.”*

Sixth, ***we must maintain and grow******the intellectual outputs and scholarly reputation of our university.***

We are proud of our position in the top three universities producing the highest number of research outputs per academic staff member. We must jealously protect our intellectual space by ensuring that there is little or no encroachment into the research space of our academics.

One of the challenges we face is that of concentration risk: the bulk of our research outputs comes from a relatively small group of highly productive researchers. We need to invest time and resources to significantly broaden our research base.

Our *Sandisa Imbewu* Initiative and Mellon Focus Areas have helped us build critical mass behind certain focus areas.

In the next ten years, we will, among other things,

* Significantly increase the percentage of academics with doctoral level qualifications to at least 70%;
* Raise the total research output for the institution by encouraging and supporting all academic staff members to produce at least one accredited output per year;
* Maintain the postgraduate proportion of the student body to 30% whilst, at the same time, ensuring the diversity of the postgraduate population;
* Grow the number of research focus areas, with significant critical mass behind them, for which the university is known as a place of scholarly excellence across all faculties of the university.

Seventh, ***we must provide the best academic infrastructure, equipment and facilities to support our academic project****.*

We recently commissioned the CSIR to carry out a professional assessment of the condition of our campus infrastructure. Their estimation is that we need some R1.3 billion to bring our infrastructure to a fit-for-purpose condition over the next five years to address the accumulated maintenance backlog – this over and above the implementation of a life-cycle maintenance plan. We must attend to this maintenance backlog. Our Facilities Services Section is working on a plan, as well as mechanisms to address this significant challenge. Given the sheer scope and quantum of the backlog, we will rely on Government Infrastructure Funding for some measure of assistance.

On that score, I wish to place on record our deep appreciation to our national Department of Higher Education & Training for the significant investment made by the state in infrastructure in higher education over the past 9 years. We were able to build a number of residences, dining halls, lecture theatres and we were able to extend and refurbish our library as a result of this additional money coming into the University. However, we still need to set aside significant funds to replace some of our ageing research and teaching infrastructure.

As we look to infrastructure, we must consider the changing patterns in student learning. Our new library offers exciting and different learning spaces conducive to group work, as well as individual study and to the use of electronic texts, as well as conventional books. We must continue to explore what is possible and what is needed and not simply rely on what we have always been used to.

Eighth, ***we must ensure financial sustainability and long-term viability of our University***.

The first step towards ensuring financial sustainability and long-term viability of our University is to exercise prudent stewardship over the resources that have been entrusted to our care. We must ensure effective, efficient and optimal use of all university resources. Furthermore,

* We must continue to develop viable financial strategies and plans for the University.
* We must aim for a more sustainable balance between revenues and expenditure, between staffing costs and operational costs, and to do so in ways that enable us to position Rhodes University as an increasingly compelling career destination for academics, support and administrative staff of high calibre.
* We have succeeded in ensuring that our residence system is financially self-sustaining. We will work to underpin the continuity of this, in the face of the pressures operating on this front.
* We must enhance mechanisms for ensuring that we collect all that is due to the University.
* We must grow our research income.
* We must explore and establish innovative and creative ways to expand our third stream income by making this University even more attractive to donors.
* We must continue to build a strong relationship with our alumni and encourage them to contribute to the fundraising efforts of our University.
* Recognising that we are a small university with limited resources, we must grow strong and effective partnerships in the financing aspects of the University and in the provision of services, which are as important to us in discharging our knowledge mandate as having strong intellectual collaborative partnerships.
* We must hasten the modernisation of our systems, procedures, protocols and processes in order to inform policy formulation and efficient, effective and timely decision-making in support for the University’s intellectual project. Ideally all essential information – accurate and up-to-date – should be readily available at the click of a button so that we can respond with nimbleness when opportunities come our way.

Ninth, ***we must make our contribution in building a vibrant and sustainable Grahamstown community***.

Grahamstown is a microcosm of the sharp and stark realities of apartheid legacy where grinding and debilitating poverty and deprivation exist alongside relative affluence. Our future and our success as Rhodes University are inextricably bound up with the future and success of the greater Grahamstown community. We are deeply and intimately connected with our local community. It is therefore vitally important that we become actively involved in finding sustainable solutions to the challenges that face us in this space we jointly occupy. We must send a clear and unequivocal message that our University is not just ***in*** Grahamstown but is also ***of*** and ***for*** Grahamstown. We have a particular responsibility to contribute to the creation of a well-functioning, economically sustainable and prosperous Grahamstown. We draw courage and inspiration from the lyrics of the old chorus “Brighten the corner where you are”:

*Do not wait until some deed of greatness you may do  
Do not wait to shed your light afar  
To the many duties ever near you now be true  
Brighten the corner where you are*

We have an extraordinary opportunity to craft fresh and innovative approaches to seemingly persistent societal problems. As I have noted earlier, our success in doing so will attract the interest and respect of observers much more widely. In this way, we can provide signals for how our future can be configured differently from our past.

We must and we will brighten the corner where we are!

In particular, there are three areas that will underpin our engagement with the greater Grahamstown community: Municipality, education and wireless connectivity.

*Our Municipality….*

We rely on our local municipality for the provision of basic services such as water, electricity and sanitation. Failure by the Municipality to provide us with these basic services will have serious and far-reaching ramifications for our university and its intellectual project. Right now our Municipality is under administration because of poor management and poor leadership. It is in our own best interest that we work with our Municipality to develop the necessary capacity and capability for it to fulfil its constitutional mandate to the benefit of ***all*** residents of Grahamstown.

We must understand this project in the context of the central importance of municipal delivery in changing the lived conditions of the poorest communities in our country. Demonstrating a working model for a turn-around in this sector could have far-reaching spin-offs for poor people more widely.

We must brighten the corner where we are!

*Education….*

Of equal importance is our second area of focus in Grahamstown, which is education. It is a matter of public record that the Eastern Cape Province is the worst performing province when it comes to public education. Since 2007, except for two years in 2009 and 2010, the Eastern Cape has come last of all provinces in matric pass rates. Every single year its matric pass rates have been way below the national pass rates.

In Grahamstown, we have a collection of some of the best schools in the country interspersed with some of the most dysfunctional schools imaginable serving the majority of our young people. As an institution of higher learning, indeed, as a greater community that cares, we cannot sit and watch when young people amongst us are condemned to a life without hope; a life of despair because of the failure to provide them with the education they need and deserve. We need to work with our Education District Office, Subject Advisors, Principals and Educators to find ways of improving the quality of teaching and learning. I look forward to meeting all important role-players in the education sector to discuss how we might work together to make Grahamstown a true centre of academic excellence – from Early Childhood education to University, and a model for consideration more widely. We are delighted that officials of our District Office and Principals from our local schools have honoured us with their presence this evening. I take this as a most meaningful and sincere commitment to work together.

We must brighten the corner where we are!

*Wireless connectivity…*

The third leg of our strategy – following delivery of essential services, and the provision of life-changing education – is to connect our community to the wider world of knowledge flows embodied in the Internet, and all the opportunities that become available through connectivity. We would like to work with our local municipality and other role-players to make Grahamstown a wireless city! This initiative will underpin our efforts to improve the quality of education, to spur economic development and to improve service delivery in this community.

We will soon conduct a detailed feasibility study on funding such an initiative to ensure its long-term viability and financial sustainability. Our I & TS Division has already started to create Wi-Fi networks in some strategic sites in the township.

We must brighten the corner where we are!

Tenth, ***we must cooperate and collaborate with the other three institutions of higher learning in the region to address pressing development challenges facing our province***.

The four universities in the Eastern Cape, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, University of Fort Hare, Walter Sisulu University and Rhodes University, have identified a number of initiatives aimed at addressing pressing challenges facing our province. These include: Improving the quality of Basic Education; working together on developing programmes aimed at strengthening our capacity and capability to research Water; sharing of facilities and equipment. Earlier this year, we met with the CEO of the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) to explore possible mechanisms and avenues of collaboration to improve the quality of public education in this province. The challenges with regard to basic education are truly enormous, but the synergy which would result from opening ourselves up to working with other Eastern Cape universities offers an opportunity for us to contribute to real change for the better.

Each of the universities in the province brings different strengths to this cooperation and partnership because of their histories, their location and their institutional types.

***Remain true and faithful to our mission and purpose…***

These are times for us to think and act creatively, imaginatively and boldly. We cannot be complacent in a highly competitive higher education environment. We cannot continue with business as usual. While we cannot do everything at one go; we must prioritise and not shy away from taking hard decisions.

If we remain true and faithful to our intellectual project, as we must, we will be able to produce leaders who will become agents of social change and societal transformation and we will be able to generate and disseminate knowledge that can change our society and the world for the better.

If we remain true and faithful to our intellectual project, as we must, we will be able to advance the realisation of our Constitutional promise to establish "a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights" and one that is able to “free the potential of every person”.

If we remain true and faithful to our intellectual project, as we must, we will be able to fashion out of a society brutalised and kept apart by centuries of colonialism and decades of apartheid a new and virtuous society animated by values of our Constitution; a more humane, a more just, a more caring, a more equitable and a fairer society; a society free of hunger, want and ignorance; a society in which illiteracy, hopelessness and despair cease to define everyday existence of the majority of its people; a society in which exploitation of the vulnerable, abuse of women and children, corruption, greed and mendacity are no more than a rare aberration; a society that upholds social justice, environmental justice, sustainable development, human dignity, and places human development and common social good above selfish and self-serving interests; a society in which every person is able to realise his or her full potential and is able to make a contribution to the betterment of humanity; a society in which we all appreciate and embrace oneness of humanity and realise that our own humanity can only reach its fullness if and when we affirm, advance and defend the humanity of others.

If we remain true and faithful to our intellectual project, as we must, we will be able to advance the higher purpose of higher education: to transform individual lives for the better, to transform societies for the better and to transform the world for the better.

Thank you very much. Enkosi. Ke a leboga. Ngiyabonga. Ke a leboha. Ndo livhuwa. Ngiyathokoza. Inkomu. Baie dankie.

1. Mr Bantu Steve Biko was arrested near Grahamstown on 18 August 1977. During torture at the security branch headquarters in the Sanlam Building (Port Elizabeth), he sustained massive brain haemorrhage. On 11 September 1977 he was transported naked and without medical escort, to Pretoria – a twelve-hour journey – in the back of a police Land Rover. He died on the floor of an empty cell in the Central Prison on 12 September 1977. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mr Griffiths Mxenge was a human rights lawyer. He was assassinated by the apartheid security force hit squads. He was found butchered with 45 stab wounds and his throat slit in the Umlazi cycle stadium on November 19, 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mrs Victoria Mxenge was a human rights lawyer who studied law and joined her husband’s practice as an attorney in 1981. She was assassinated by the apartheid security force hit squads on 1 August 1985. She was shot five times and hacked to death at the door of her house in Umlazi. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)