Welcome address to New Students and Parents 2017

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Vice-Chancellor, Rhodes University

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Deputy Vice-Chancellors

Deans

Registrar

Heads of Department

Our academic and support staff colleagues

President and other members of the Student Representative Council

Parents and guardians,

And more important, our new students.

Good afternoon, Absheni, dumelang, molweni, kgotsong, goeie-namiddag, sanibonani, Habari ya mchana, Ndi masiari, lotšhani, thobela, Namaste, Assalamualaikum, boa tarde, shalom.

On behalf of our academic, support and professional staff I extend a hearty welcome to you, our new students, and to your parents and other family members who have accompanied you to Rhodes University.

I am aware that for some of you this is your first time in Grahamstown, in the Eastern Cape Province, and for others to South Africa and the African continent. To all of you, I bid a very welcome.

Welcome back to those parents and our alumni who are bringing to us their second, third or fourth daughter or son. We value and treasure the loyalty and confidence you have in our University.

Let me, at the outset, offer our warm congratulations to you, our new students, on gaining admission for studies at Rhodes University. You have been selected from thousands of applicants who were competing for the 1 643 places we have at Rhodes for new students. Congratulations also on performing well enough in your school-leaving qualification to gain admission at Rhodes. We have very high admission requirements at this university. 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 of our country. So, you have all earned the right to be here and you belong here!

I hope that the registration process went smoothly and that you did not have to wait too long in long queues. I also hope that you were welcomed with warmth and enthusiasm by our house committees into your residence. Our residence system is second to none. You have joined a special family!

*Our university, our history and our legacy…*

You have chosen to study at a very 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-thirteenth year of existence!

* Among the old and well-established universities in South Africa, we are, by far, the smallest university.

This year we hope to reach a student enrolment figure of about 8 300.

Unlike at other universities, each one of our students is young person with a name and a face; not just a number.

* We have a well-entrenched culture, tradition and experience of developing and nurturing exceptional intellectual talent of our students.
* We are proud of, and strive to maintain, ourreputation as an outstanding university that provides high quality formative education for our students.
* Let me share with you some important statistics:
* Almost 60% of our students are women,
* About 30% are postgraduate students,
* Over 20% of our students are international students who come from more than 60 countries in the rest of the African continent and other parts of the world. The national, linguistic and cultural diversity we have here makes us an exciting and a cosmopolitan place. As an institution of higher learning, we benefit immensely from the rich intellectual and cultural diversity brought by students, academic and support staff from other parts of the world. It is this diversity that creates a vibrant intellectual, social and cultural environment which is key to achieving academic excellence. Without their contribution our intellectual project would be so much the poorer.
* Almost 3 700 of our students live in 51 residences on campus and eat in 12 dining halls, where we serve over 11 000 meals a day.
* 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.

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, to enhance and grow. It is a legacy that has been made possible by every person associated with this fine university – our cleaners, cooks, gardeners, wardens, lab technicians, house committees, SRC, academic and support staff. They all work very hard to create a safe, secure and supportive environment that is conducive to personal growth, development and academic success of each of our students.

It has also been made possible by the truly gifted and committed young people, that we attract to Rhodes University.

It has been made possible by the quality academic system, infrastructure and facilities that are available to support our academic project.

It has been made possible by the excellent student residence system that we have here at Rhodes.

You have chosen very well indeed! Learning at Rhodes University is a shared responsibility between the student and the academic staff. 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. You are joining a community of dedicated academic, support and professional staff who are committed to providing you with the best possible educational experience. 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 push the limits of human imagination and creativity and push back the frontiers of knowledge and deepen human understanding and wisdom.

In the process, we are able to contribute to the stock of our accumulated knowledge and enhance our understanding of our social and natural worlds.

* Our second purpose is to teach in ways that 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 students’ 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.

* Our third core purpose is to discharge our 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 humankind.

These three core purposes constitute our *academic or intellectual project*. We therefore proudly proclaim that we are a ***university***, a place of knowledge – *siyindawo yolwazi*. We generate and share 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.’

*To our new students….*

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

You join us at a particularly challenging time in the history of our public higher education system. Late in 2015 we witnessed heightened levels of student activism last seen in the eighties. At the core of the student protests was the concern with the high cost of university study in our country. The question that we must confront is: How can we make quality higher education accessible and affordable for the many academically deserving students who are in financial need?

There are many academically capable young people in our country who come from poor, rural and working class backgrounds who cannot afford to access the outstanding educational experience we offer at Rhodes. I've no doubt that your own family had to save over a long period of time or had to get a bank loan in order for you to be here this afternoon. I have come across parents who had to encash their provident or pension fund to make it possible for their children to access higher education. Some of you come from single parent families, and that single parent struggled to secure funds for you to be here. The challenge of affordability of higher education is experienced by many in our society. So, the struggle to make higher education affordable and accessible is a noble and a worthwhile one. What cannot be justified or defended, though, is the use of violence, intimidation, destruction or burning of university property to advance this objective. Anarchy and violence will destroy our country; anarchy and violence will destroy our public higher education system; anarchy and violence will destroy our University. We cannot and should not normalise anarchy, violence and destruction in our society. If we continue on the path of anarchy, violence and destruction, our public higher education system will collapse. Should this happen, Heaven forbid, it is the poor and working class youth of our country who will have to contend with higher education of dubious quality.

We need to work together to find affordable and sustainable mechanisms of addressing the challenge we face without compromising the future of the current generation of students, or destroying property and thereby deny future generations an opportunity to receive quality higher education.

Your enrolling at Rhodes University marks a significant milestone in your life’s journey and the beginning of a lifetime association with this fine institution. University life is a time of learning and self-discovery. The next three to four years that you will spend with us will be the most memorable and special time in your life. It will be the freest and most exciting time you have ever had. It will be an opportunity for you to discover who you really are and what your passion and aspirations are. 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. Transition from school to university can be very daunting. We are here to support you at this critical stage of your development. 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 full responsibility for your future and all that you do. From now on, you will have to make decisions and choices about your future.

Your education, personal growth and development will be so much the poorer and stunted if you surrounded yourself with only those who share your beliefs, perspectives and worldview and have had an upbringing similar to yours. I therefore strongly challenge and encourage you to associate and interact with other young people who come from a different background – be it 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, and learn from, other young people from diverse backgrounds and different lived experiences and those who come from many different nationalities and those who might see things differently will significantly enrich your educational experience. You will develop a greater understanding and an appreciation of the complexity and richness of the human experience.

*Transformative experience…*

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

A university is a democratic space in which all contending views and perspectives must find free expression; it is a space for the contestation of ideas. University education is not just about mastering facts and absorbing information. 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 human understanding. We want you to develop the ability and capacity to analyse, to reason *with evidence*, to reflect and to argue cogently 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 also want you to learn to communicate with clarity and cogency both orally and in writing.

We value and respect 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!

*Important messages…*

We are a human rights-based society. No one has a right to trample upon the rights of others. No one person’s rights are more important than another’s. Our rights end where and when we start to encroach into or infringe upon the rights of others. Let us therefore respect and observe the rights of others so they too can respect and observe ours.

In this regard, there are seven important messages to which I would like you to pay greater attention.

* First, every person at Rhodes deserves to 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, there is no place at Rhodes University for behaviour motivated by racism, sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia or any other form of bigotry, prejudice, discriminatory or chauvinistic behaviour. In particular, sexual and gender-based violence will never be tolerated at Rhodes.
* Third, Rhodes University will not tolerate any form of initiation. Treating another person in a demeaning, degrading or dehumanising manner has no place at Rhodes University.
* Fourth, excessive and/or irresponsible consumption of alcohol and experimentation with drugs will not be tolerated at Rhodes.
* 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 does not expose you to 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. While we continuously review and improve safety measures on campus, 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 awareness regarding crime. 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 very demanding. You will all have a 24-hour day. The difference between success and failure will lie in how you use each minute of your 24 hours in a day. 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. Never lose sight of what you are here for.

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

Should you experience difficulties though, be assured that our academic and professional 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; we are all here to help you succeed. You can always call on our competent and capable professional staff to help you with a variety of personal challenges. Harming yourself in any way or condemning yourself to a futile life of substance abuse or even worse, taking your life is never an answer! Do not suffer in silence. Please seek help.

To each one of you, welcome to a new and exciting experience! Your experience at Rhodes is likely to shape the rest of your life. Your years at Rhodes will, without a doubt, be some of the best years of your life. By the time you graduate in three or four years’ time you will be a different person! We wish you much success for 2017 and beyond.

*To the parents and guardians…*

Some of you are probably experiencing a range of complex and conflicting feelings. On the one hand, you are excited that your loved one is finally at university and out of your house (at least for now) and, on the other, you may be experincing the pain and apprehension of letting go; the empty nest feeling; the separation anxiety.

For some of you, this day marks the end of one stage and the beginning of a new one in your relationship with your son or daughter.

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 you child is at an outstanding university; that we will do our best to see to his/her needs and problems; that he/she will have a wonderful academic and social experience, and will develop and grow intellectually and personally. Thank you for entrusting us with the education of your daughter or son.

Please embrace this special time in your child’s life. He/she 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/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 her or him.

*Conclusion….*

In conclusion, we wish to acknowledge with thanks and deep appreciation

* our Registrar, Dr Fourie, and his team for managing the application and registration processes with utmost professionalism;
* our 2017 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;
* the Oppidan Committee for looking after our students who will be living off campus;
* 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.