

RHODES UNIVERSITY: *WHERE LEADERS LEARN*

Over 100 years old, Rhodes University has a well-established reputation for academic excellence. New Vice Chancellor, Dr Saleem Badat has made clear his commitment to Rhodes continuing to produce high quality graduates, who he says ‘must be equipped to contribute to make a significant contribution to economic and social development, and creating an equitable, just and democratic society’.

Previously chief executive of the advisory body to the Minister of Education, the Council on Higher Education, Badat takes pride that Rhodes enjoys among the best undergraduate graduation rates in South Africa and also outstanding postgraduate success rates. He says that since Rhodes also has the lowest academic staff to student ratio among South African universities students are assured of easy access to academics and close supervision.

Rhodes responsibilities, in Badat’s view, are ‘cultivating intellectually talented women and men’, and ‘supporting them to graduate as knowledgeable and skilled professionals, critical intellectuals, and caring and compassionate citizens’. He strongly shares the view of his colleague Prof. Brian O’ Connel, Vice Chancellor of the University of Western Cape, who argues that universities are ‘tasked with the arduous formation of a critical, creative and compassionate citizenry’, and that ‘nothing less will suffice’

Badat says that Rhodes is also ‘entrusted with producing knowledge that can foster understanding of our natural and social worlds, and that inform policies that are required to promote equity, justice and social development’. The seriousness with which he says Rhodes takes this responsibility is shown by the fact that ‘we have the best research output per academic staff member’.

Rhodes, according to Badat, ‘must be alive to the social, cultural and economic contexts in which research, learning and teaching, and community engagement take place and has to engage with the challenges of its local, national, and wider African contexts’. These challenges include ‘economic development; competing globally; job creation and the elimination of poverty; the effective provision of social services; and the threat of HIV/AIDS, and other diseases that ravage our land’. He adds they also ‘encompass social equity and redress; justice, building a substantive democracy, advancing a culture of human rights, and ensuring critical public intellectual debate’.

These challenges he says ‘require our universities to be dynamic, vibrant, and innovative incubators of knowledge production and knowledge dissemination, and of the formation of new generations of professionals, thinkers and actors’.

While students today are increasingly seen as customers and clients of universities, Badat is implacably opposed to this view of students. He says this 'is a dangerous misunderstanding of what higher education is about'. For him, higher education is 'a partnership between students and academics of mutual commitment to learning, research and community engagement, and the pursuit of knowledge', and Rhodes' responsibility is to 'create a stimulating and supportive environment' which 'enables students to develop their talents and promise to the full'.

The new VC is enamoured with the Rhodes slogan *Where Leaders Learn*. He believes, however, that 'with greater imagination the University can do far more and has to work hard to make it a substantive feature of a Rhodes education'. He would like to see Rhodes graduates personify the dictum of the Jewish sage Hillel: 'If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?', and says that South Africa and Africa cry out for leaders of this kind.

Badat says that Rhodes openly acknowledges that it has numerous challenges, which he and the institution are committed to tackling.

One is social equity at the levels of both academic and administrative staff and students. He says that some fear that increased black student enrolments, equity and redress will mean the erosion of the quality of provision, qualifications and graduates. He strongly disagrees, saying that 'enhancing social equity does not mean a diminution of quality and the compromise of standards. We can and must, without compromise, pursue social equity with quality, and quality with social equity'.

Another is to 'create and institutionalize a culture that embraces difference and diversity, and sees these as strengths and powerful wellsprings for personal, intellectual and institutional development'. He recognises that 'culture and traditions are important, but warns that they can ossify in unfortunate ways that imprison our thinking, induce blind spots, and generate practices that are alienating, discomfiting and exclusionary'. He argues for 'a more open, vibrant, democratic and inclusive intellectual and institutional culture', and says that 'we must respect, affirm and embrace the rich diversity of the people that today constitute and must increasingly constitute Rhodes University'.