

**Welcome address of the vice-chancellor of Rhodes University,
Dr Saleem Badat**

RHODES UNIVERSITY ORIENTATION WEEK

5 February 2007

Ladies and gentlemen, the Vice-Principal, the Deans and other colleagues, the President and members of the SRC, parents, and especially our new students

Good evening, molweni, welcome.

Some parents will recall that a few decades ago, the everyday dress for lecturers was academic gowns of the kind you see being worn this evening, male students were required to wear a tie, and female students had to wear long dresses.

Mercifully, we have become more casual and relaxed about everyday attire. Still, that does not mean anything goes. Lecturers will probably draw a line with students who turn up at lectures in their pyjamas. But students being students, we can be certain some intrepid ones will try their luck.

Today, academic gowns are reserved for very special occasions. And this evening is indeed a very special occasion, by which we welcome you, our new students and your families to Rhodes University and the Rhodes community.

So as Vice Chancellor, and on behalf of the whole Rhodes community, a warm welcome to you to Rhodes University, and to iRhini/Grahamstown!

Before I proceed any further allow me to introduce to you some of the key people with whom you will interact from time to time.

[Introduce Dean of each faculty or their representative:

Introduce SRC President – Ms Fatema Morbi – and call on her to greet the students]

Let me begin my own welcome address by expressing my admiration for you, our new students.

To be here this evening you have worked hard and long hours and have excelled in your matric exams. This is a tremendous achievement in the context of a schooling system that still struggles to realize the talents and potential of all our children and youth. Your success is also a testimony to the contributions of your teachers, parents and families and I wish to acknowledge their sacrifices in enabling you to be here today. I must also acknowledge the sacrifices that your parents and families will continue to lovingly make to enable you to graduate from Rhodes.

I also wish to express my admiration for you for another reason: and that is your wisdom in choosing Rhodes as the university at which to pursue your higher education. You have made a wise choice, one which I am confident that you yourself will confirm during the years that you spend with us.

Joining Rhodes is the beginning of an exciting new phase in your life and your intellectual and personal development. You join Rhodes as the most intellectually talented women and men of our society. Having completed your schooling you are embarking on a new voyage of learning and discovery. This is on the one hand a voyage of developing awareness, understanding, and certain abilities. But it is also a voyage

of self-discovery. Your time at Rhodes is an opportunity to discover who you are. It is said that 'you are who you are'. That's not quite true. More accurately, you are who you learn to become. We at Rhodes University are here to support you to learn, and to learn to become.

Rhodes is the smallest university in South Africa, with only some 6 000 students. Our new student intake this year is only about 1 500 students, from an application list of over 5 000 students. You are, therefore, among the fortunate 1 in 3 students that have been selected to attend Rhodes.

You are joining a community whose students come from diverse social, cultural, educational and national backgrounds and lived experiences. 57% of our students are women, which is not just good for you men, but also very good for you women, as you are assured greater opportunities for intellectual and social development and success. 24% of our students or almost 1 in 4 are postgraduates. Our postgraduates are outstanding students, which means you will have excellent tutors and also role-models who can inspire you to proceed to postgraduate study. 25% of the students are international students from 57 countries around the world. This makes us a cosmopolitan place and enriches our institutional culture.

Ladies and gentlemen, our lives depend on partnerships, relationships which ideally are mutually respectful and beneficial and contribute to the development of all the partners. Birth is not possible without a partnership. Nor is physical and intellectual development from infancy to childhood, to youth and to adulthood, possible without partnerships that are caring, affirming, educative and empowering.

I highlight this issue of partnership because at Rhodes, learning and education is a partnership between students and academics,

administrators and support staff. In joining Rhodes you are entering into a relationship of mutual commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of our society and our world.

On the part of Rhodes, we are committed to ensuring that there is the necessary environment, culture, structures, high quality academic programmes, and facilities to support learning on the part of you the students. We are well-known for striving for academic excellence and to produce high quality graduates.

Rhodes has the most favourable academic staff to student ratio among South African universities, which means that you are guaranteed easy access to academics and close supervision. We enjoy the distinction of having among the best undergraduate pass and graduation rates in South Africa, and outstanding postgraduate success rates. This is testimony to the quality of our academic provision, and to the commitment of Rhodes staff to student learning, development and success. We have the best research output per academic staff member of any university in South Africa, which means that you will be learning with academics that are leaders in their fields and disciplines.

Almost 50% of all Rhodes' students and the vast majority of you will live in the University's 42 residences and be associated with its 10 halls. The residences are an important part of the student culture at Rhodes and through a well-established structure of wardens, sub-wardens and house committees, the residences play an important role in supporting student development and success.

I recognise that we are not able to accommodate all first years in the residence and I sincerely apologise for this. This is a matter of great concern to us and we are making efforts to overcome this situation. Finances are a major issue. It currently costs R 210 000 to build a

single room. We have embarked on building two new residences to house 150 more students at a cost R 32 million and will continue to energetically explore ways of accommodating all first-years in residences.

Rhodes seeks to produce graduates who are professionals that can think imaginatively; gather and analyse information with rigour; critique and construct alternatives, and communicate effectively orally and in writing.

However, we want our graduates to be not just capable professionals, but also conscious and sensitive intellectuals and critical citizens – people who think about ethical issues, and also questions of justice, equity, human rights, and non-racialism and non-sexism. Our teaching, research, and community engagement therefore seeks to be alive to the social and economic challenges of our local, national, African and international contexts.

Bertolt Brecht writes of the ‘struggle of the mountains’ and the ‘battle of the plains’. If the vote and citizenship for all are the mountains, they have been largely won. It is now the infinitely more arduous and protracted ‘battle of the plains’, of creating an equitable, just, and humane society that must be joined and won.

We continue to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions. The faultlines of race, class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of our fellow citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival. Patriarchy and sexism stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to the development of our society. Crime, rape and abuse of

women are pervasive, morbid, ills that wreak havoc in our country. Alongside these, unbridled individualism, crass materialism, and a vulgar mentality of “greed is cool” and “get what you can” runs rampant in our society.

It is for good reason that the Rhodes University slogan is ‘Where Leaders Learn’. This well expresses our commitment to produce leaders and outstanding and great people, not necessarily in the sense of being rich, but in terms of the selfless contribution we hope they make to improve our society.

On your part, as students, we expect from you a commitment and willingness to learn, to actively participate in learning, and to making full use of the various opportunities we provide for your personal, social and intellectual growth and development. We cannot force you to learn. We can only support you. Your development is, ultimately, your own undertaking, achievement and accomplishment.

At Rhodes opportunities for learning and for acquiring expertise and leadership skills extend beyond your academic programme. The partnership between students, academics and other staff extends to the governance of the university. Through the Students Representative Council and other representative bodies, students participate in the Council, Senate and other decision- and policy-making committees of the University. These structures enable students to shape the nature and direction of Rhodes, and also provide you with invaluable opportunities to develop leadership skills.

Our Community Engagement Office runs an active student volunteer and outreach programme through which hundreds of students are involved in community projects. Through these you can develop

valuable awareness, expertise and skills and contribute to social development.

Furthermore, the House Committees, posts such as sub-wardens, tutors, mentors, and our extensive range of clubs and societies all provide additional wonderful opportunities for you to develop, and acquire leadership skills.

Before concluding it would be remiss of me not to raise four issues.

1. One is on what is called town and gown. Please remember that many of are temporary residents of the town. The onus is on us, as members of the Rhodes University community, to cultivate good relationships and to build mutually respectful relations with Grahamstown's permanent residents. This means avoiding being disruptive and excessively noisy, especially late at night.
2. The second issue concerns the use, or rather the abuse, of alcohol. Each year there is among a small number of students the irresponsible use or abuse of alcohol, which ends up causing much grief to the individuals concerned, their families and to the University. Heavily intoxicated women have ended up as victims of unpleasant social and sexual incidents, as have a few men. As much as we have an effective Campus Protection Unit and try to provide a safe environment, safety is also your responsibility.

All initiation practices are illegal and have been for some time. There may be individuals who could seek to initiate you into a drinking culture, saying that is how you become part of the in-crowd at Rhodes. Be bold and say no to them. They are not hip or cool – they are socially irresponsible and must be told so.

3. The third issue is – yes you've guessed it, and I know you may be tired of being told about it – but it is HIV/AIDS. One would think that those who come to Rhodes – like you - would be really aware of key aspects to do with HIV/AIDS. The reality is that there is a bewildering level of ignorance among some of you. Please, if you are going to be sexually active become aware of important issues related to HIV/AIDS, and make use of the testing and counselling services that are provided by Rhodes. There is no place for embarrassment on this issue – it is literally a matter of life and death.

4. The final issue that I am obliged to raise is to make clear that there are no first class and second class students and people at Rhodes. Everyone is treated equally and equitably. Your 'race', sex, gender, nationality, school, religion, make and model of car, the size of your bank balance or the status and wealth of your parents confer on you no special privileges or rights.

Conduct, relationships and responsibilities at Rhodes are guided by the values of our *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights* – respect for human dignity, human rights, equality, non-sexism and non-racialism. Everyone at Rhodes - other students, academics, house and hall wardens, technicians, secretaries, messengers and ground staff - deserves respect and dignity. Rhodes is a home for all!

We are emerging from a painful past and we have still a long way to go before we can claim to be genuinely a 'rainbow nation'. At institutions like universities and Rhodes, we must nurture the prospect and cultivate the process of becoming the 'rainbow nation'. The diversity we find at Rhodes is a matter of pride and celebration and makes us an exciting and vibrant place of knowledge and learning.

Since registering over the past two days you will have hopefully observed some things about the environment in which you will spend the next three or longer years.

If big glitzy shopping malls, the adrenaline of hectic rush hour city traffic, and Nandos, McDonalds and the like have been your kind of things, its time to let go. Instead, learn to enjoy quaint little Grahamstown's clean fresh air, generally friendly people, laid-back atmosphere, and relative safety and security. And, hey, where else in South Africa, or anywhere else for that matter, will you be able to experience summer, winter, spring and autumn all in one day. By now you should have also worked out that you're never going to be able claim that you were late for class because of traffic - that would be the most lame and unimaginative excuse imaginable.

In closing:

- Reading for a Rhodes University degree is an exacting challenge, and I urge you to take seriously the considerable demands that your academic programme will make on your mind and time. It is vital that you strike a good balance between your academic studies and the many temptations and distractions of social life. Students that do not meet our academic requirements are inevitably excluded, and it is my sincere hope that the Deans and I will not have to read your appeal against exclusion as a result of your failure to give due attention to your academic studies.
- Our responsibility as Rhodes University is to provide you with a stimulating and enabling environment that cultivates your intellect, and supports you to graduate as a professional, as a critical intellectual and citizen, and hopefully also a caring and compassionate person and leader.

- Your responsibility is to grasp the opportunities that Rhodes provides and to develop your potential, talents and promise to the full – to leave Rhodes as men and women who are knowledgeable, skilled, competent, and decent humans who lead and stand out in all walks of life.
- Together we begin today a partnership dedicated to learning, and the quest for knowledge and understanding, so that we can lead productive and rewarding lives and make a difference in our society.

Having been selected from thousands of applications to attend Rhodes, you are one of the fortunate few with the opportunity to learn and develop, and graduate as a leader. Seize this opportunity. Notwithstanding all our challenges, the future is exciting, and your future is in your hands.

I wish you a pleasant evening and I wish all parents safe trips home.

Thank you.