

RHODES UNIVERSITY: 2010 AND BEYOND

Our students have returned from the summer holidays and the campus is once again abuzz with their energy, chatter and laughter. Our returners are joined by some 1 600 new first years, excited and impressed by what they see around them – welcoming and friendly staff, lovely old buildings, impressive facilities, comfortable residences, picturesque gardens and lawns and a quaint town.

The 1 600 first years were selected from over 5 900 students who applied to attend Rhodes University. Of these 4 600 were local students and 1 300 international students.

In total some 7 000 students will make up the 2010 student body. Of these, one in four are outstanding postgraduates who are excellent undergraduate tutors and inspirational role-models for our undergraduates.

One in five of our students are international students from some 50 countries around the world, including Zimbabwe, Namibia, Zambia, Uganda, Kenya, Mauritius, Ghana, Cameroon, Canada, America, Britain, Ireland, France, The Netherlands, Germany, Turkey, China, India and many others. The concomitant national, linguistic and cultural diversity makes Rhodes an exciting

and cosmopolitan place and enriches our institutional culture.

To begin with, first-year students have little understanding of what a university is or the full meaning of Rhodes University, the institution that they have chosen to attend for a wonderful three or more years. The Vice-Chancellor's Orientation Week welcome of new students and parents seeks to clarify that Rhodes exists to serve three fundamental purposes.

The first is to produce knowledge, so that we can advance understanding of our natural and social worlds and enrich our accumulated scientific and cultural heritage.

This means that we “test the inherited knowledge of earlier generations”, we “reinvigorate” knowledge and we share our findings with others.

We undertake research into arcane and abstract issues and strive to apply our discoveries for the benefit of humankind.

We grapple with urgent and “contemporary problems” and seek solutions to these. We also “forage” into issues and undertake enquiries “that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit”.

In the annual Vice-Chancellor's report, Dr Saleem Badat shares the University's recent achievements and its vision for 2010 and the years ahead



Above all, we ask questions. We don't immediately worry about the right answer or solution. It is the right questions, the proper questions, that lead to the great leaps in knowledge and science, to the great discoveries and innovations.

Our second purpose is to disseminate knowledge and to cultivate minds. Our goal is to ensure that our students can think imaginatively, "effectively and critically"; that they "achieve depth in some field of knowledge"; that they can critique and construct alternatives; that they can communicate cogently, orally and in writing; and that they have a "critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves".

We also seek that our students should have "a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times"; should be "able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it"; and that they should have "some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems".

Our final purpose is to undertake community engagement. This involves our students' voluntary participation in community projects undertaken through our Community Engagement office.

It also involves service-learning, in which our students and academics take part, through their academic courses, in activities where both the community and we benefit, "and where the goals are to provide a service to the community and, equally, to enhance our learning through rendering this service".

In short, students come to Rhodes to embark on a voyage centred on the pursuit, making and sharing of knowledge. This is why we refer to Rhodes as *indawo yolwazi* – a place of knowledge.

A few years ago, walking along one of those wide Manhattan, New York, avenues, my eyes fell upon some words on a board. The words read: "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire". The words are those of Irish poet William Butler Yeats, winner in 1923 of the Nobel Prize for literature.

The idea of education as the igniting of the intellect and of the desire to question, to learn, and to discover is one that we at Rhodes strongly embrace. However, the fire that higher education must light cannot be satisfied with imparting only technical and vocational skills.

Higher education is also intimately connected to the idea of democratic and critical citizenship, the assertion and pursuit of social and human rights and the cultivation of humanity.

We seek our graduates to be not just capable professionals, but also thoughtful, sensitive and critical intellectuals and citizens – people who think about ethical issues, and questions of justice, equity, human rights, and the common good.

Our teaching, research, and community engagement therefore seek to be alive to the social, economic and moral challenges of our local, national, African and international contexts.

As students begin their higher education at Rhodes they are reminded that South Africa continues to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions.

The Rhodes University slogan, 'Where Leaders Learn', expresses our commitment to produce outstanding people and leaders, who are not only knowledgeable, wise and visionary, but also ethical and compassionate. As the Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore put it: "We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy".

Academic qualities

With 7 000 students in 2010, Rhodes continues to be the smallest university in South Africa. We have no envy of our large sister universities because it is our smallness, we believe, that makes us a very special place.

Rhodes has a favourable academic staff to student ratio, which means that students are guaranteed easy access to academics and close supervision.

We have the best undergraduate pass rates 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 staff to student learning, develop-



Photo: Paul Greenway

ment and success.

50% of our academics have doctoral degrees, the highest proportion among South African universities.

We also enjoy among the best research outputs per academic staff member of any university in South Africa, which means that our students learn among academics who are leaders in their fields and disciplines.

We are one of the very few universities that permit our students a wide choice of combinations of courses and majors. It is not unheard of that students major in English and Physics, Music and Computer Science, and Chemistry and Accounting, or face the dilemma of deciding whether to do Honours in English or Physics.

While some may think these are 'weird' combinations, increasingly, great discoveries and innovations are at the boundaries of disciplines and fields.

Academic achievements

Three years in succession and in seven out of the past nine years, the prestigious Flanagan scholarship that is awarded to a South African woman has gone to a Rhodes student.

Two of our students have won Rhodes scholarships to study at Oxford University in 2010 and we have one of the best track records for the winning of Rhodes scholarships.

Last year, four out of the 28 Mandela Rhodes scholarships were awarded to Rhodes University students, the largest number awarded to a single university. All four chose to continue their postgraduate studies at Rhodes. This year again we have three of our own Mandela Rhodes scholars with us.

In late 2009, Rhodes received a prestigious Chair in Astronomy to complement its existing three South African Research Chairs in Medicinal Chemistry, Marine Science and Mathematics Education. The University will continue to pursue the establishment of further chairs and niche research groups in areas of academic excellence.

We continue to energetically pursue academic and scientific relationships with select universities in various parts of the world and especially in India and China in areas of mutual interest and benefit.

Developments

We are constantly thinking and acting to ensure that we remain an outstanding university of South Africa and Africa, respected for its commitment to knowledge, to academic freedom, the pursuit of truth and the flowering of the intellect, and to the production of graduates equipped to exercise leadership in our society.

As we seek to become more postgraduate and research-intensive, a tremendous challenge is to mobilise the necessary funding to support outstanding postgraduate Honours, Masters and Doctoral students. Having committed in 2010 support to 100 postgraduates through donor-funded prestigious scholarships and to 50 postgraduates through the University's own funds, we

desperately seek financial support for a further 250 deserving postgraduates.

This year our students, academics and the residents of Grahamstown will be the beneficiaries of a spectacular new four-storey library, which recently opened its doors. The new library possesses every facility essential for cutting-edge academic and research endeavours.

During the first six months of this year we will extensively refurbish the current library. The new and refurbished library is a R85-million investment, the biggest single project in the history of Rhodes and Grahamstown. Thus far we have raised almost R70-million, and are striving to raise the remaining R15-million during this year.

Later in the year, we will open, with a grant of R12-million from the Department of Environmental Affairs, a new building for environmental education, an area in which we are an international centre of excellence.

During 2007 to 2009, Rhodes won special state infrastructure funding of R80-million. As a measure of confidence in our academic qualities, a further R62-million for new academic infrastructure, scientific equipment and student residences has been committed by the state for 2010 to 2011. To access this new support, R8-million will have to be raised by Rhodes.

Negotiations are in process with a donor to fund the construction of a new School of Languages building that will also accommodate Rhodes' new Chinese Hanban-supported Confucius Institute.

In 2008 two self-funded new residences were opened to house an additional 146 students. With the support of R30-million in state funding a further two new residences housing 208 students opened in 2009.

Today, 3 266 students – almost 61% of our undergraduate students and the vast majority of new students – live in the University's 48 residences and are associated with its 11 halls, in which almost 10 000 meals are served daily.

Currently, excavations are in progress for the construction of three new residences, which will open next year. With the creative leveraging of committed state funding, we hope to build a further four residences in 2011 and 2012.

We continue to give attention to the academic and related infrastructure needs of Rhodes, to establishing priorities and to mobilising the necessary funds to support new buildings and facilities. In due course, our infrastructure and overall campus development plans will be consolidated in a Rhodes 20:20 Vision statement.

Finally, we are all too aware that there is a significant looming environmental challenge. The University must serve as an exemplar and catalyst for innovations to reduce carbon emissions and institute environmentally-friendly practices. Under discussion is the creation of a Green Fund and Green Challenge, through which all the constituencies and stakeholders of Rhodes can be mobilised.