

**Keynote Address by the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University
at the Graduation, Prize-giving and Induction Ceremony of the
Student Sponsorship Programme (Eastern Cape Class of 2010)**

The Emslie Centre, Selborne College, East London

15 January 2011

The officials and trustees of the Student Sponsorship Programme, the Programme Director, guest speakers, sponsors, and above all, the graduates

Molweni, good morning, goeie more!

Thank you for the privilege of being at this exciting event and addressing you this morning.

First and foremost, I wish to congratulate and express my great admiration for you, the graduates that we recognize and celebrate this morning.

You have worked hard and long hours and have succeeded and even excelled in your National Senior Certificate exams. This is a tremendous achievement, given a schooling system that still dismally and tragically fails to realize the talents and potential of all our children and youth.

While we have almost universal participation in schooling, there are major problems related to drop outs, retention, progression and successful completion. 2 out of 10 students drop-out after Grade 3; 4 out of 10 after grade 9, 6 out of 10 after grade 10 and 7.3 after grade 11.

A little more than a quarter of the students that begin grade 1 complete grade 12. 'The simple reality is that enrolment is not the same as attendance and attendance does not imply learning'.

Our challenge is indicated by the fact that some 10% of our 7 000 secondary schools – the independent and Model C schools - produce 60% of all students who can attend university. 10% of the historically black schools produce a further 20% of such students. The remaining 80% of secondary schools, largely historically black, produce only 20% of students who could attend university.

Of course, there is a powerful link between income and equity of opportunity and achievement in schooling. 60% of African children in South Africa are from families that earn less than R 800 a month; 60% of white children are from families whose income is more than R 6 000 per month. The consequences are evident in school performance and achievement.

Indisputably, the key challenge is to improve the quality of education in schools. Finances for equitable access for poor students, targeted nutrition programmes, facilities, toilets and the adequate remuneration of educators are all important. However, they are not enough for effective schooling and education. There are a number of other vital conditions.

One is a culture of effective learning and teaching, and to restore this where it is absent. Key here is courageous and effective educational leadership and management on the part of the national Department of Education, provincial ministries, district offices and especially school heads.

Effective leadership and management is a key distinguishing feature between the 10% of historically black schools that produce 20% of the students who can attend university and the other 80% that produce only 20%.

A second condition is 'qualified, motivated, and committed teachers', who are 'the single most important determinant of effective learning'.

A third is high quality learning material and textbooks. 'Effective assessment is also at the heart of ensuring that learning is effective', as is 'developing robust monitoring and assessment systems to monitor student performance'.

Finally, 'the more schools are held to be accountable the more effective they are', which raises the importance of school governing bodies.

The apartheid legacy in education and schooling is pervasive and pernicious. Yet, we cannot forever hold apartheid alone culpable. If we are not to permanently be its victims we have to take initiative and also not avoid certain hard questions. These questions include:

- Whether, as leaders, managers and educators, we fully understand the importance of knowledge and education, and the serious intellectual, moral, political and organisational responsibilities associated with educating our people
- Whether we fully grasp what is at stake and the implications of our choices, decisions, actions and non-actions for our society and current and future generations
- Whether we have the values, policies and strategies to progressively realize our education goals? Are these goals substantive or largely symbolic - nice words and goods intentions but with little commitment to effective interventions and practices!
- Whether we have at national, provincial and district levels an effective and efficient a public service that possesses the educational expertise, and leadership, management and administrative capabilities to support schools.

We continue to be plagued by stubborn and persistent realities that thwart the achievement of constitutionally and legally enshrined educational imperatives and goals. We need to honestly and openly acknowledge failings and shortcomings and what accounts for these, and creatively and courageously confront them.

Unless and until we do this we will continue to deny millions of South Africans an education that develops their capabilities and affirms and advances their human and social rights. We will also block a key avenue to social transformation and development. 'Although education cannot transform the world, the world cannot be transformed without education'.

To turn to more pleasant things, while you must be proud of your success, your success is, of course, not yours alone. It is also a testimony to the contributions of dedicated teachers,

parents and families and sponsors and I am sure you will gratefully acknowledge their efforts and sacrifices in enabling you to be a graduate today.

Graduating from secondary school is an important milestone in your lives. In Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho culture, such a graduation is like Ukuthweswa isidanga, ho apara purapura and umyezane.

In terms of Ukuthweswa isidanga you are a person who has overcome hurdles and has made history. But we also recognise that you are now on the threshold of making more history.

As when the blanket is wrapped around you, as a graduate you indicate your willingness to assume a new identity and mantle, and to take on new and greater responsibilities. You enter into a new covenant with your community.

In a few weeks time, you will enter higher education. Joining a university is the beginning of an exciting new phase in your life and in your intellectual and personal development.

You enter our country's universities as among the most intellectually talented women and men of our society. Having completed your schooling you are embarking on a new voyage.

I am sure that you are excited at the thought of going to university and becoming a university student. And yet, it is unlikely that you have much understanding of what a *university* is and the full meaning of a *university*.

So let me say a few words about universities and why we have them and what they do. Universities exist to serve three 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 dismantle the mumbo jumbo that masquerades for knowledge, we “reinvigorate” knowledge and we share our findings with others.

We undertake research into the most arcane and abstract issues and the “most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge”. At the same time we also strive to apply our discoveries for the benefit of humankind.

We “operate on both the short and the long horizon”. On the one hand, we grapple with urgent and “contemporary problems” and seek solutions to these.

On the other hand, we “forage” into issues and undertake enquiries “that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit”.

Above all, we ask *questions*. We don’t immediately worry about the right answer or solution. Instead, we worry *first* about the right *question* or the better question.

It is as Einstein has said: "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

Well maybe not always in 5 minutes. But what is true is that it is the right questions, the proper questions that lead to the great leaps in knowledge and science, to the great discoveries and innovations.

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

At the same time, we also seek that you 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 you should have “some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems.”

Our final purpose as universities is to undertake *community engagement*. On the one hand this involves your voluntary participation in community projects undertaken through our Community Engagement office.

On the other hand, it involves service-learning, in which through your academic courses you take part “in activities where both the community” and *you* benefit, “and where the goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance (your) *learning* through rendering this service” (CHE, 2006:15).

In going to a university you are embarking on a voyage and journey of the pursuit, making and sharing of knowledge. This is why we refer to Rhodes as indawo yolwazi - a place of knowledge.

This journey is at the same time also a voyage of self-discovery. Your time at university is an opportunity to discover who you are. It is said that ‘you are who you are’. That’s not true. You are who you *learn* to become. Universities must support you to learn, and to learn to become.

A few years ago, walking along one of those wide avenues in Manhattan, New York, to attend a meeting with one of our donors, 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”.

These words are those of William Butler Yeats, the great Irish poet and winner in 1923 of the Nobel Prize for literature.

The idea of education as the igniting of the mind and the intellect and of the desire to question, to learn, and to discover is one that we at Rhodes strongly embrace.

The fire that higher education must light cannot, however, be satisfied with providing you with only technical and vocational skills or simply preparing you to become productive labourers for the economy.

To reduce higher education to producing just competent accountants, pharmacists, scientists, lawyers and educators is to devalue higher education and to strip it of its considerably wider social value and functions.

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.

Our university graduates must 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 university 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 you begin your higher education you must remember that we continue to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions.

The divisions of race, class, gender and geography and the privileges and disadvantage associated with these are still all too evident – not least in this province.

Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of our fellow citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival on less than R 10 a day.

Patriarchy and sexism stifle the realization of the talent 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. Instead of an ethos of public good and selfless service, unbridled individualism, crass materialism, and a vulgar mentality of “greed is cool” and “grab what you can” run rampant in our society.

It is for good reason that the Rhodes University slogan is ‘Where Leaders Learn’. This 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 prize winner Rabindranath Tagore has put it: “We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy”.

By now some of you may be panicking. You may be saying to yourselves ‘what have I let myself in for? I thought a university was like a glitzy shopping mall – like Hemingways – where you rest, chat, chill, have fun and a good time.’

Have no fear there will be ample time to have a good time, to chill and to rest. But you will agree that one chill’s and rest’s when one is nice and tired after a hard and honest day’s work. You can’t chill and rest if you are not tired – that doesn’t make sense.

So chill and rest you will be able to, to your heart’s content – but only *after* a hard and honest day’s labour of lectures, tutorials, lab practicals, reading and writing, submission of assignments and the like.

And as for universities being shopping malls – not so. At a shopping mall, if you have the money, you can buy whatever you want. At university with all the money in the world, you won't be able to buy English 1 or Chemistry 2 or any course, let alone a degree. You will have to *earn* them through dedicated and hard intellectual labour.

You will join university communities where students and staff come from diverse social, cultural, linguistic, religious, educational and national backgrounds, and also different lived experiences.

At Rhodes, for example, you will rub shoulders with Zimbabwean, Namibian, Zambian, Ugandan, Kenyan, Mauritian, Ghanaian, Cameroonian, Canadian, American, British, Irish, French, Dutch, German, Turkish, Chinese and Indian students, and many others. The national, linguistic and cultural diversity of universities make us exciting and cosmopolitan places and enriches our lives.

University education is a *partnership* between students and academics, administrators and support staff.

Our responsibility as universities is to provide you with a stimulating and enabling environment that cultivates your intellect, and supports you to graduate as a professional, a critical intellectual and citizen, and hopefully also an ethical and compassionate person and leader.

Your responsibility is to grasp the opportunities that universities provides and to develop your potential, talents and promise to the full – to leave as men and women who are knowledgeable, skilled, competent, and decent humans who lead and stand out in all walks of life.

Together you and we enter into a partnership dedicated to learning, and the quest for knowledge and understanding, so that we can lead productive, rewarding and good lives and make a difference in our society.

Reading for a degree or diploma and succeeding 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.

Given the fierce competition for university places, students who do not meet academic requirements are inevitably excluded.

In closing, congratulations again to all of you who worked hard and succeeded in your matric exams.

Thank you too to all the dedicated teachers, who during a difficult schooling year provided you the support to succeed.

And, finally, but not least, thank you to all the sponsors and the Student Sponsorship Programme for their support in helping you to fulfill your dreams.