RHODES UNIVERSITY

*Where leaders learn*

# VICE-CHANCELLOR'S 2014 ADDRESSES

# TO GRADUATION CEREMONIES

**Thursday 10 April 2014**

**10.00: Graduation Ceremony for Education and Humanities**

**17:00: Graduation Ceremony for Commerce (Prof Neil Turok)**

**Friday 11 April 2014**

**10:00: Graduation Ceremony for Commerce, Law, Pharmacy and Science**

**14:30: Graduation ceremony for Humanities (Dr Gcina Mhlophe)**

**18:00: Graduation ceremony for Humanities**

**Saturday 12 April 2014**

**10.00: Graduation Ceremony for Science (Dr Sydney Brenner)**

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## Introduction

The Chancellor, Justice Lex Mpati
The Chairperson of the Rhodes University Council, Mr Vuyo Kahla, and members of the Council
The Chairperson of the Rhodes University Convocation, Reverend Simon Gqubule
Our Honorary Doctoral Graduand (Prof Neil Turok; Dr Gcina Mhlophe, Dr Sydney Brenner)
The Public Orator, Distinguished Prof Paul Maylam
Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Registrar, Heads of Academic Departments and Administrative Divisions
Academic and support staff colleagues
Members of the Students Representative Council
New graduates, and families and guardians of graduates
Dignitaries, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Molweni, dumelang, good morning, jambo, goeie more, sanibonani

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this graduation ceremony, at which we acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of the new graduates of Rhodes University.

This year's graduation ceremonies are marked by transition. First, we say goodbye to Judge Jos Jones, who has served as chairperson of the Rhodes University Council for the past 18 years. Sir, it has been a great pleasure to work with you. A Vice-Chancellor can ask for no more than the wonderful support that you have provided to me and the University leadership.

At the same time, we welcome Mr Vuyo Kahla as the new chairperson of the University Council. Mr Kahla, a former Rhodes SRC president, and Group Executive and Company Secretary of SASOL brings impressive expertise, experience and qualities to guide and support the University leadership in the years ahead. We look forward, sir, to your contributions.

Second, after joining Rhodes as Vice-Chancellor in June 2006, I will take my leave of the University in July to join the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in New York as its first Program Director of International Higher Education and Special Projects.

I thank Rhodes for the great privilege of leading the University for eight years, and I look forward to a continued association with the University. At the Mellon Foundation I will direct an annual budget of over R90 million to support the arts and humanities at South African universities. Rhodes will receive its fair share.

In 'Say Africa', Vusi Mahlasela sings:

> I may be walking in the streets of New York
> But the dust on my boots and the rhythm of my feet and my heart say Africa, say Africa

My new post will mean me walking the streets of New York, and London, and Dublin and Paris and Berlin and Beijing, but 'the dust on my boots and the rhythm of my feet and my heart will continue to' think Africa and 'say Africa.'

**Recognition**

I wish to congratulate you, our new graduates, on your tremendous achievement. To be awarded a degree, diploma or certificate from Rhodes University entails dedicated endeavour.

When you joined us you were told that at Rhodes learning and education is a partnership of mutual commitment: to the pursuit of wisdom, knowledge and understanding, to the development of expertise and skills, and to the embrace of appropriate values and attitudes.

Your graduation this evening is testimony that you have fulfilled *your* side of the partnership. You have displayed the necessary commitment to learn, to acquire and produce knowledge and to develop expertise.

You will, I trust, acknowledge the contributions of your lecturers and tutors, of laboratory and computer technicians, administrators and wardens, and cooks, cleaners and gardeners. All of these people have laboured to create a special intellectual, social and physical climate at Rhodes to support you and to enable you to succeed.

You will, hopefully, also recognize your parents, guardians, families, sponsors and benefactors, all of whom have contributed generously to your receiving a Rhodes education and to your graduating this morning/afternoon/evening.

**Citizenship**

During the past eight years I have used my graduation addresses to share ideas on critical issues related to our society. This morning/afternoon/evening, on the eve of the 20th anniversary of our democracy, I wish to reflect on the progress that we have made with respect to citizenship in post-1994 South Africa.

1994 was a revolutionary breakthrough. From being a racially exclusive authoritarian society in which millions were downtrodden subjects, we became a democracy in which for the first time black South Africans became citizens.

Critical here was a commendable Constitution, including a Bill of Rights, which held out the promise of an extensive range of human, social and economic rights that did not exist for all or at all prior to 1994.

During the past 20 years there have been significant economic and social gains and achievements. At the same time, there continue to be many challenges, and key institutions of our democracy have come under strain as a result of too many in power seeking to use the state as their private piggy bank.

Still, a relatively independent judiciary, free media, autonomous universities and the like remain intact. Witness in this regard the magnificent performance of the Public Protector's office under Thuli Madonsela.

However, a number of contemporary realities, compromise the ideal of full and substantive citizenship rights for all that the Constitution promises. Indeed, they condemn large numbers of people to conditions that are associated with subjecthood and being subjects.

First, we have the dubious honour of being the most unequal society on earth. During the past 20 years income inequality has increased; the richest 20% have increased their share of income while the share of income of the poorest 20% has fallen.

This poorest 20% receive a measly 2.7% of national income and obtain 55% of their income through social grants. The top 10% take home 52% of national income.

The consequences of the inherited and new divides of 'race', class, gender and geography are all too evident. Hunger, poverty and unemployment blight our democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, looting, corruption, unbridled accumulation and crass materialism run rampant.

It has to be posed: What does citizenship mean for those who are poor, unemployed and struggle to eke out a living in South Africa?

Second, patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle girls and women realizing their potential and the contribution they can make to society and development. Gender violence is a pervasive, morbid ill that that destroys innumerable lives through the rape and abuse of women, and the intolerance and so-called 'corrective' rape of gay and lesbian people.

To what extent are women and members of our LGBTi community able to lead secure lives and fully realize the promised fruits of citizenship that our Constitution proclaims?

Third, large parts of our schooling system continue to evince problems that compromise the provision of high quality education to children and youth and thwart them from fulfilling their potential.

Despite almost universal formal participation in schooling, our schools have significant problems related to drop-outs, retention, progression and successful completion. 'The simple reality is that enrolment is not the same as attendance and attendance does not imply learning'.

Education is intimately connected to the idea of democratic citizenship and the cultivation of our common humanity. It facilitates the pursuit of citizen and human rights and active democratic participation.

Yet, our schools by and large fail to develop the critical capacities that are essential for functioning as democratic citizens, not to mention the basic literacies that citizens require to function effectively in a complex and changing society.

What are the consequences of the educational failures of our schooling for millions of South Africans? What does this mean for the kind and quality of citizenship that can be exercised by those that have been and are being failed by our schools?

Fourth, we must keep a vigilant eye on those in our country who make 'recourse to rousing affirmations of identity and entitlement' and promote populist discourses of 'authenticity' – who claim to know 'who is a *real* South African, who is a *real* African, who is *black*, what is a *man*, (and) what is the role of *women*' in society.

Those who for self-serving reasons stridently give ever more 'narrow and exacting' answers to these questions and spread parochial and dubious views on culture and tradition could unleash dangerous developments and reduce millions to subjecthood.

We must of course energetically undo the huge social inequalities that were bequeathed to us by apartheid. But we must also be acutely aware that using solely 'race' to advance redress and social equity could dangerously ossify racial categorisations and continue to construct identities primarily along the lines of 'race'.

Our goals and strategies must surely be to *erode* and *dissolve* racial thinking and categories and permit rich, multiple, fluid and dynamic identities to emerge rather than ones frozen along 'race' lines.

We should never lose sight of the fact that the fundamental goal is a non-racial and non-sexist society in which all can flower, and in which 'race' has no significance.

In drawing attention to the limited economic and social rights and opportunities enjoyed by millions of South African citizens, I do not at all question the value of citizenship rights. Citizenship for all in South Africa was a huge achievement and a significant gift of our realization of democracy.

What I do wish, in the 20th year of our democracy, is to draw attention to the distance we have yet to travel to make citizenship count for *all* South Africans. I also wish to caution against narrow and limited notions of citizenship that reduce it purely to its formal, legal and political dimensions.

We need an expansive and multi-faceted notion of citizenship that encompasses wider economic and social dimensions. This is the only basis on which we can ensure that all South Africans lead rich, rewarding, productive and secure lives.

In the final chapter of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Tatamkhulu Nelson Mandela writes:

> The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed.
> For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.
> The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

'The truth' on the eve of the 20th anniversary of our democracy is that:

- We are citizens, but our citizenship is as yet inadequately developed and we are yet to 'live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others'.
- 'Our devotion' in practice to an extensive and multi-faceted conception of citizenship is debatable and has to be struggled for and still won.
- The idea that 'with freedom (and citizenship) comes responsibilities' has all too quickly been forgotten in many quarters in South Africa.

Despite the challenges, we must avoid despair and remain optimistic and, as Madiba urged, we must keep our 'head pointed toward the sun, and (our) feet moving forward.'

Next month, on May 7th we have an important opportunity to exercise our citizenship and shape the destiny of our country. Use this opportunity and all possible opportunities so that together we can realize the South Africa of our Constitutional ideals.

**Your alma mater**

You, our graduands have had the honour of studying at a very special and distinctive university, one that deservedly commands an enviable academic reputation nationally and internationally.

We celebrate that we are an environment in which knowledge and the intellect can flower. We take pride in our commitment to the pursuit of equity *and* excellence; that we are one of Africa's leading postgraduate and research universities that also takes undergraduate studies very seriously, and that we are a cosmopolitan institution with students from 68 countries around the world.

We rejoice that we enjoy among the best pass and graduation rates in South Africa; that we have among the most highly qualified academic staff and the best research output per academic staff member, and that we pursue socially committed and mutually respectful and beneficial engagements with various communities.

Beginning yesterday, over 3 days, 2 367 students will graduate at 6 graduation ceremonies – this total of 2 367 graduates is a new University record, which also necessitates 6 graduation ceremonies instead of the usual 5. Given our total student body of 7 485 students, this is by far the best graduation rate among South African universities.

1 286 students will receive undergraduate degrees, and 1 081, or 46.0% postgraduate degrees. The 1 081 and 46.0% postgraduate degrees also constitute new University records.

1 413 graduates or 60% are women. 504 students or 21% are international students from 37 countries in the rest of Africa and around the world.

We also celebrate a new University record of 71 PhD's – beating the previous record of 63 PhD's of last year – a fabulous achievement for the smallest university in the country! We congratulate our Science, Education and Humanities Faculties for their new records of graduating 39 PhD's, 14 PhD's and 12 PhD's respectively.

To appreciate the significance of the 71 PhD's you have to note that a sister university that is four times our size and has over 30 000 students will award 72 PhD's at its graduation ceremonies.

Finally, we celebrate three more new records: the award of a total of 286 Masters degrees, the award of 107 Masters degrees by the Humanities Faculty, and 104 Masters degrees by the Science Faculty. My congratulations to the Humanities and Science Faculties!

**Our graduates**

You, our graduates, are among the most talented of our society. It is to you that we look to lead, to re-imagine and reshape our future, to forge just and humane ways of conducting our affairs, and to ensure that reason, human development and justice are at the heart of all of our conduct and actions.

We look to you to exercise, with humility, *leadership* wherever you find yourself – in the classrooms and schools of our lands; in the theatres, galleries and concert halls; in hospital and clinic dispensaries; in the newsrooms, legal practices and courts; in financial services and the public service; in scientific laboratories and research institutions and universities.

Of course, this leadership and your knowledge and expertise must be put to work not only for your private benefit but also for the benefit of society at large, to advance the general public good, so that all our people may lead decent, fulfilling and productive lives.

Once you receive your degree, diploma or certificate, you become part of the community of Old Rhodians. I welcome you to this ever-growing and diverse and international community, and I invite you to visit the alumni table in the Monument foyer to receive your special graduation gift.

In the years ahead we look forward to applauding your successes and achievements as Old Rhodians. We will especially celebrate if as alumni you don't forget your alma mater, and contribute generously to our Alumni Annual Fund and other fundraising efforts.

During the past few years, you have benefitted from a spectacular new R75 million library, new Education and Environmental Learning buildings, a new postgraduate commons, 7 new residences and the new Desmond Tutu dining hall.

Over the next three years we will build with state, alumni and business support a R120 million new Life Science building, a R35 million new School of Languages complex, and a new postgraduate residence at a cost of R 20 million. We will also invest over R150 million in financial aid to deserving students so that as many talented people as possible can benefit from a Rhodes education.

In as much as we are an outstanding university and aspire constantly to even greater heights we are, alas, a relatively poor university. Your support is vital if we are to continue producing knowledge to enhance human understanding and fuel economic and social development, to continue educating to the full new generations of students, and continue serving our society and continent.

Let me make this concrete. In about 45 minutes, a young man will cross this stage to receive his degree. His name is Vuyile Sixaba. The Dean will state 'with distinctions in Mathematics and Applied Mathematics'. Vuyile Sixaba's transcript records that he has in the minimum of three years achieved distinctions in 19 out of his 22 modules in Mathematics, Applied Mathematics and Mathematical Statistics and, for good measure, Physics.

Vuyile Sixaba's hard working mother cannot afford to fund his Rhodes education. If it were not for financial aid, Vuyile could easily be another statistic adding to the 3 million youth between the ages of 18-14 who are not in education, training or employment. What a tragic loss of talent that would have been.

Today, dear graduates, is your day, to remember, to celebrate and cherish. No doubt the parties will extend long into the night and there will be many fond memories and much merriment.

You have earned it and I wish you a wonderful and joyful night (day, night…) of celebration of your achievement and your future promise.