Vice-Chancellor's Report to Convocation

The Vice-Chancellor reported as follows on recent and unfolding events:

The Vice-Chancellor paid tribute to Mrs Gqubule, who had passed away a year previously after a valiant battle with cancer. She was missed by all who had known her.

Dr Badat then reported on current enrolments and enrolment planning. The University planned to grow to 7600 students in 2013, with most growth at postgraduate level. It was hoped that students studying for Honours, Master's and PhD degrees would account for 30% of total enrolments in 2013. Exciting academic programmes to retain and attract students from elsewhere were an important element of the postgraduate development strategy; examples of these were new Master's programmes in Social Policy, Bioinformatics and Creative Writing. The Science Faculty currently contributed a disproportionate percentage of research and postgraduate outputs. The newly-established Research Focus Areas in Humanities, funded by the Mellon Foundation, would strengthen postgraduate growth in Humanities. The Four Focus Areas were: Southern African Literature in Focus, led by Professor Dirk Klopper; Visual and Performing Arts of Africa, led by Professor Ruth Simbao; Critical Sexual and Reproductive Health Studies, led by Professor Catriona Macleod; and Media and Citizenship, led by Professors Herman Wasserman and Anthea Garman. The Focus Areas would use a research model more commonly found in the Sciences, bringing together teams of scholars around a niche area of expertise. Besides the Four Focus Areas, the Mellon Foundation was also funding the Senior Scholars Programme; the WASA Research and Publications programme for women; and seed money for a possible programme in Jazz Heritage Studies. The University would also be funding two Research and Postgraduate Focus Areas in the Faculty of Commerce and it was hoped to begin a Focus Area in the Faculty of Law in the near future. There were also plans to begin a programme in Forensic Studies, by the Faculties of Science and Law, drawing on the R12 million pledged by the Board of Governors as seed funding for new postgraduate initiatives.

Leading a consortium of South African universities (including Fort Hare, UWC and Walter Sisulu), Rhodes University's Faculty of Education had secured the largest single research grant made thus far within the South African Higher Education sector, from the European Union via the Department of Higher Education and Training, for research into Foundation Phase Education. The Institute for the Study of English in Africa (ISEA) was introducing programmes in Teacher Education and Early Childhood Education in the Northern Cape, funded by Sishen Iron Ore. Meanwhile, Professor Martin Hill of Entomology had secured a R9 million renewal research grant from Working for Water.

Rhodes University had one of the best pass rates at undergraduate level. Throughput and graduation rates for higher degrees at postgraduate level, however, left much to be desired. Poor postgraduate throughput was a broader national problem; serious attention was needed to understand the causes, improve postgraduate support and prevent wasting valuable talent and potential. South Africa needed to produce more PhDs if it was serious about being a big international player. The University of Sao Paolo in Brazil, for example, graduated an average of 8000 PhD degrees out of a total of 80 000 students.

Research continued to be one of the real strengths of Rhodes University and the University was becoming increasingly dependent on research funding, with R128 million currently raised through research grants alone.

The University had been fortunate to attract Di Hornby as Director of Community Engagement and wonderful developments were happening, including a long-term partnership with the community of Keiskammahoek, involving the Faculty of Education, the Department of Computer Science and the Department of Ichthyology and Fisheries Science, among others. The success of the Keiskammahoek initiatives was based on serious commitment to partnership and development, from both the community and the University.

Concerning infrastructure, the Library Building project had eventually been completed for R73 million, R24 million below the projected budget cost of R97 million. Another successful project, built along 'green' principles, was the Environmental Education Centre. The University had also completed new residences and a new dining hall. As a result, the undergraduate accommodation backlog had been broken and there was sufficient accommodation for every first-year student to live in residence. A much-needed new building for the Life Sciences and a new building for Teacher Education were now the top-priority new infrastructure projects and an application was being prepared for the next round of state infrastructure funding.

The Vice-Chancellor congratulated Professor Nyokong on her latest awards and achievements. Professor Nyokong had been invited to sit on a global UNESCO Panel on Science, Technology and Innovation for Development. She had also been named the 2011 Distinguished Woman in Chemistry by the Pan African Chemistry Network of the Royal Society of the United Kingdom. The award would be made in November 2011 in Accra, Ghana, and was planned to coincide with the celebrations of the International Year of Chemistry and the centenary of Marie Curie's Nobel Prize for Chemistry.

Professor Janice Limson was congratulated for being first runner-up in the category Distinguished Young Woman Researcher in the Life and Physical Sciences, in the 2011 DCT Women in Science Awards.

Students from the University had continued to make a strong showing in terms of prestigious international scholarships such as the Fulbright, Commonwealth and Rhodes scholarships to Oxford. Furthermore, Rhodes University students continued to dominate the Mandela/Rhodes scholarship awards and it was gratifying to note that almost all these recipients had chosen to pursue further studies at Rhodes University.

Rhodes University had a total budget of approximately R450 million, including a residence budget of approximately R130 million and R140 million in research and donor funds. University land covered 250 hectares and the University employed 1400 people. The University therefore had a significant and growing impact on its surroundings and Grahamstown was becoming over-reliant on Rhodes financially, in terms of municipal rates and taxes. It was thus in the interests of both town and gown to encourage the growth of other types of development in the region.

Financially, the University continued to operate a balanced budget, aiming for zero deficits and modest surpluses. Prudent financial management had resulted in a kitty of R20 million, built up during the last five years. This had been used to establish an Infrastructure Reserve Fund to address backlogs and supplement government and other funding for important projects when required. More attention was being paid to maintenance and five-year maintenance plans were being drawn up for various sectors. A special fund had been established for the maintenance of residences, following problems in Dingemans and Cullen Bowles Houses. Certain roads on campus required major work; this raised issues concerning municipal versus University responsibility.

Rhodes University was in a very healthy situation compared to neighbouring universities and was in the top category of South African universities according to all key indicators. It was also well-recognised among government and funding circles that Rhodes utilised its funding effectively. There was, however, no justification for complacency and many areas required attention, including the modernisation of administrative systems and processes. Pursuing a postgraduate and research trajectory, without compromising the quality of undergraduate education, would require careful shifting of priorities. Faculty responses to the Vice-Chancellor's document on postgraduate development were being collated. A graduate centre and a Chair in Postgraduate Studies were two of the possible initiatives under consideration.

In summing up his last five years as Vice-Chancellor, Dr Badat referred to an ongoing two-pronged strategy of transformation and modernisation. The University was being re-made, quietly, with many changes that might seem imperceptible individually, but contributed towards profound and substantive shifts in institutional culture. Simultaneously, systems were being updated and streamlined and backlogs tackled to enable the University to function even more efficiently. There were exciting plans and possibilities for the next five years ahead.

Finally, the Vice-Chancellor thanked those present for their support and thanked Revd Gqubule for presiding over Convocation for many years.