



RHODES UNIVERSITY SEEKS GREATER GLOBAL RELEVANCE WITH ALUMNI HELP

Interview with Luzuko Jacobs, Director - Division Communication and Advancement, Rhodes University

WHAT AREAS OF RESEARCH, ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE, DOMAIN KNOWLEDGE, TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER AND INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL MOST DISTINGUISHES RHODES UNIVERSITY?

Rhodes University is a small university that punches well above its weight. It is a hub for postgraduate research excellence. The institution has the highest number of **SARCH**¹ chairs per capita in the South African Higher Education system and has an above average postgraduate to undergraduate ratio. The postgraduate cohort of the student body is 28% and growing. We have the most favourable academic staff-to-student ratio (1:15) in South Africa that sees students receive meaningful attention and care resulting in the highest graduation rate amongst South African universities. In the 2024 Autumn graduation ceremonies, 2035 students received their degrees: 65% undergraduate and 35% postgraduate (including honours, with 66 Masters, and 34 Doctoral). Sixty-five percent of graduating students were women.

Our current strategic focus is to strengthen and improve all our measurements in this regard to move RU from great to exceptional. This project is well underway and will be part of our ongoing conversations with our stakeholders in North America.

Our current performance is manifested in, for example, the Tebello Nyokong **Institute for Nanotechnology Innovation**, led by Distinguished Professor Tebello Nyokong. The INI is an international leader in science innovation, standing on the brink of bridging an “innovation chasm” between research and development. It offers postgraduate training and research with material application in the early detection of human diseases (like cancers), developing sensors for analysis of pollutants and neurotransmitters, and the photodynamic therapy of cancer as a chemotherapy alternative. Cleaner water and early cancer detection are but two of the many applications of the novel metallophthalocyanine molecules synthesized at the INI.

Professor Nyokong is a recipient of South Africa’s Order of Mapungubwe and will be honoured by **Imperial College with her sixth honorary doctorate, and third international award, in October**. In an exciting development, the INI has moved to a new facility that matches the advanced science done by its stellar researchers which will house new nanotech equipment, some of the most expensive in the Southern Hemisphere. The INI is one of Rhodes University’s **Priority Projects**. We seek funds for areas where our value proposition is strongest. These include establishing a state-of-the-art Centre for Postgraduate Students which is a big part of the future of Rhodes University, the Institute for Water Research, Student Culture and Experience, Student Access and Success, and Pathways to the Future and the Makhandla Circle of Unity.

¹ Department of Science and Technology and National Research Fund created the South African Research Chairs Initiative in 2006 to strengthen and improve research and innovation capacity of public universities for producing high quality postgraduate students and research and innovation outputs.



All of this, as a small rural university in one of South Africa's poorest provinces, sets Rhodes University apart, offering a unique value proposition for international funders to consider. As a knowledge leader rooted in its local community (Rhodes University is the first South African university to win top place for the prestigious MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship Matric Mentoring Programme) yet globally impactful, Rhodes University offers international stakeholders an opportunity to impact an environment which represents a microcosm of the many 21st-century challenges of water and healthcare access, inequality, and sustainability.

OUTSIDE OF FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS BY EXPAT ALUMNI, WHERE AND HOW CAN NORTH AMERICAN (NA) GRADUATES OF RHODES HELP YOU WITH YOUR MISSION AND MANDATE?

Alumni and others invested in the success of Rhodes University can open doors to funders and funding, leverage their networks, create organizational matching gift campaigns in their workplaces and share their expertise. We want to collaborate with and hear ideas and innovations that can advance Rhodes University to be the go-to liberal arts university in Africa. Our invitation to our alumni abroad is to help us establish productive networks that enable us to knock on the right doors to make a material impact on Rhodes University's sustainability and growth.

WHAT FUNDING SOURCES AND SEGMENTS HAVE YOU PRIORITIZED FOR RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT IN NA? IN WHAT WAY CAN TRUSTEES ASSIST?

We would like to partner with international foundations, corporations and trusts, and high-net-worth individuals to whom we can make a case for supporting Rhodes University. We recognize that securing funds internationally for a middle-income country like South Africa is challenging, so we need trustees to assist in creating spiderwebs of connections that expand and multiply. What we need from trustees, in the main, is enthusiasm for Rhodes university. We would love introductions to decision-makers and thought leaders or even identifying possible funding opportunities. We need assistance in maximising affinity. Think of us at the 'fundraising shop' in South Africa as an enabler, doing what's needed to position the Trust to make appeals and make the 'fundraising ask' or to connect the University to opportunity.

WHAT REFERRALS AND INTRODUCTIONS WOULD HAVE MOST VALUE FOR YOU? (FOUNDATIONS, MULTI-NATIONAL CORPORATES, NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS, INDUSTRY ASSOCIATIONS, RESEARCH CENTERS, ETC.)

Definitely, foundations and multinationals of the traditional sort, but also referrals to decision-makers who lead innovation in fundraising. Sometimes your next donor comes from an avenue you'd least expect, and often those are put down to luck. We believe that hard work and grit in fundraising pay off over time when luck is created. The introduction and referrals with the most value would be to prospects who are willing to hear the case for Rhodes University with an open mind and willing heart to have a conversation.

WHAT WILL ALUMNI FIND MOST TRANSFORMATIONAL ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS, FACILITIES AND EXPERIENCE IF THEY VISIT THEIR ALMA MATER? HAVE COMMUNITY SERVICE AND SECURITY PROBLEMS IN MAQKHANDA BEEN EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSED?

A number of new residences have been built on campus in recent years – the total stands at 54 residences. The Hobson New Residence built in 2022 is a new addition to Hobson Hall, bringing its residences to a total of five. In 2023, two residences were renamed. Jan Smuts Hall is now called Solomon Kalushi Mahlangu while Hilltop Hall was renamed Hugh Masekela Hall. Canterbury House is being refurbished. The Tebello Nyokong Institute of Nanotechnology Innovation was completed in January 2024. Various lighting projects which entailed thirteen, 20m



mast lights, 254 lights in Prince Alfred Street and the “Blue Route” were upgraded. These lights are connected to generators and therefore the university is lit up during power outages and loadshedding.

Rhodes University is in the process of final consultations for the refurbishment of the Sir Herbert Baker Main Admin Building. The project is estimated to cost over R100 million and is funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training.

Rhodes University’s vision, under Vice-Chancellor Prof Sizwe Mabizela and captured in the Institutional Development Plan (IDP) 2018-2028, has consistently been of a university that is closely intertwined with the local community. In this context, this recognises the risk posed to Rhodes University as it relates to service delivery issues, but also the successes. In short, when alumni visit the university, that occurs in a local context where challenges are being addressed collaboratively. One example of success in this sphere to mention is the Verge of Change Makhanda page on Facebook where local businesses are taking ownership of the responsibility to beautify Makhanda. It means when alumni visit they will still see potholes and donkeys in the streets, but they will also see beautifully positive changes in the town. [A recent post](#) by Brent Lindeque, aka the Good Things Guy, following his visit to Makhanda, gives beautiful context to the lived reality of Makhanda. The Oppidan student bus shelter, Oppidan common room, student entrepreneurial hub and the roof of Steve Biko Building are in the final stages of completion.

WHAT DIFFERENTIATES AND DISTINGUISHES RHODES UNIVERSITY AND UNDERScores ITS PERCEPTION AS “THE PRINCETON” OF SOUTH AFRICA?

The following factors differentiate Rhodes University from most other Higher Education institutions in South Africa:

- Location as a research-intensive university within a small town, rural context.
- Limited size combined with sound management.
- High research output per capita; and its research niche areas.
- Unique academic proposition focusing on the nexus between research, teaching and learning and community engagement.
- Retention of general formative degrees with dual majors.
- Long record of excellent student performance.
- Substantial role played by its highly rated residence system in student leadership development and the academic and social support it offers.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES TO GAINING SHARE-OF-MIND AND SUPPORT FROM ALUMNI LIVING ABROAD?

As a research-intensive institution, Rhodes University focuses on key areas such as nanotechnology, biotechnology, water, and critical sexualities. What sets us apart and holds diverse focus areas is the connection between research and context; the nexus between [engagement, research and innovation](#), research that is responsive to context, research that is informed by communities and shapes future interventions and innovations. It looks directly at social and environmental issues pertaining to Makhanda, the Eastern Cape, South Africa, and Africa. We are deeply embedded in the context in which our small university exists and responsive to the realities around us. Investing in Rhodes University research is investing in community, inclusive solutions, and investing in the common good. In world where academic research has increasingly become a commodity that is gamed to the benefit of institutional and individual status, Rhodes University remains committed to engaged research that makes a difference.



Celebrating 10 years since its inception, the Rhodes University Biotechnology Innovation Centre (RUBIC), led by **Professor Janice Limson**, exemplifies engaged research and innovation in this context, providing students with training in a transdisciplinary research, learning and innovation environment. Responsive to water supply and quality issues in Makhanda, RUBIC co-created a water testing facility along with communities. This facility enables access to a university facility for citizens of Makhanda, **assisting with monitoring of water contamination in the community**. This facility is a significant intervention in developing high quality water testing and monitoring innovations being developed at RUBIC and has created an opportunity for longer-standing collaborations with communities. RUBIC is also host to the UNICEF diagnostics lab which has resulted in the development of novel aptamers – molecules that can serve to diagnose illness that can be incorporated into diagnostic tests being developed at the facility. Prof Limson has received funding to open a Department of Science & Innovation funded laboratory that will help researchers manufacture paper-based diagnostic tests. This represents an opportunity for researchers to bridge the gap between research and prototype development and the formation of spin-out companies.

RUBIC is an innovator in stem cell biotechnology, led by **Dr Earl Prinsloo**, holding great potential for regenerative medicine and drug discovery.

Still working in context, **novel biopesticides have been developed by PhD researchers Tamryn Marsberg and Michael Jukes** leading to the patenting of viral-based alternatives to conventional and harmful pesticides used on apples, litchis and citrus. Using these products means the pest is controlled without knock-on environmental harm. RU researchers have developed numerous patents which the Technology Transfer office has filed in different territories, including the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and South Africa.