

VC acts swiftly to avoid racist storm at Rhodes

New Rhodes University vice-chancellor, Dr Mabizela has acted and moved swiftly to diffuse a potential racism storm brewing on campus.

Dr Mabizela, the Director of Student Affairs Division and SRC president held an open Student Body Forum to discuss transformation issues with hundreds of students on Thursday night.

It was a very positive discussion with views and opinions expressed by all parties and stakeholders.

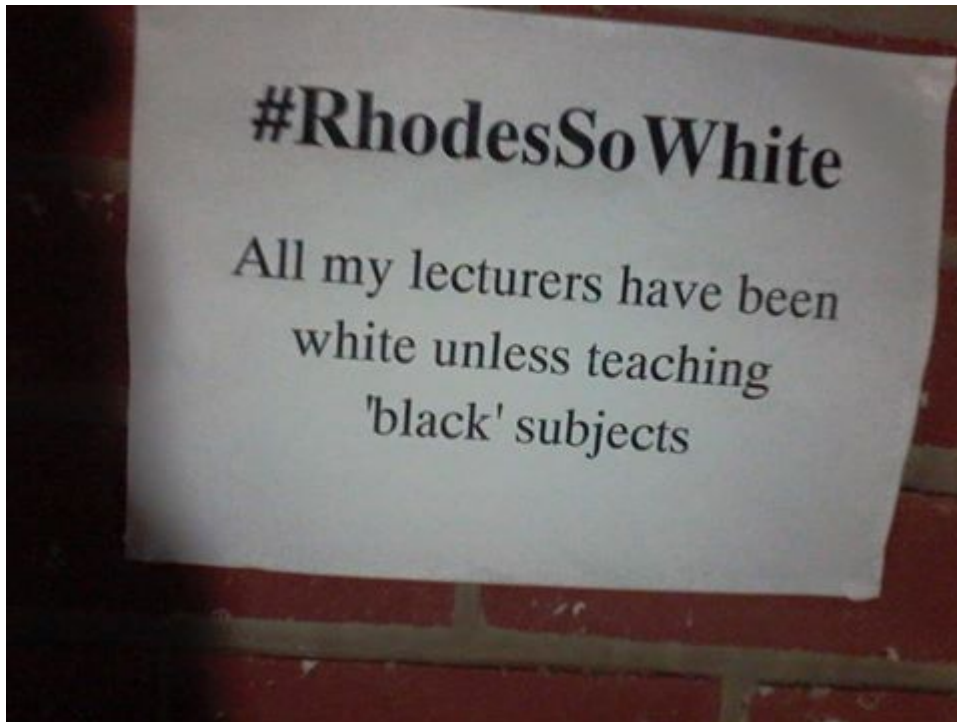
“The debate was conducted in very good spirit. It went off without an incident. I’m very proud of our students and am so deeply honoured and privileged to be the Vice-Chancellor of this University. I’m confident that we can work through all the issues raised with all constituencies and stakeholders to make the best decisions for our University. I was deeply hurt by one student who made a homophobic statement. I must make it abundantly clear that our University will not tolerate racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic or any other form of bigotry, prejudice or chauvinistic behaviour.” – Dr Mabizela.

The Vice-Chancellor made it clear that the University will be taking all the issues very seriously and will not sit on them. He commended the student leadership for organising the forum in which important and, at times, uncomfortable issues could be discussed.

“I am aware that there are students and parents who are worried, anxious and afraid that the statements appearing in the social media might lead to racial tensions on campus. My own view is that there is no need for such anxiety and fear. We must engage in robust debate and discussion, avoid making unjustified generalisations and unfounded, injurious and racist accusations. Above all, we must respect each other’s views.” – Dr Mabizela.

The hastily organized discussion followed “Rhodes Must Fall” quickly becoming a social media phenomenon this week. It started at UCT, where students were protesting against the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, and what it stands for. It eventually moved to Rhodes University, where the changing of the name "Rhodes" became a central issue of transformation. In the past 20 years there have been occasional debates on the name of the University and the position has always been that there were far more important and pressing challenges for the University to address than divert attention to the issue of its name. On Tuesday, Rhodes University students gathered on the front lawns in protest against the University's name, and standing in solidarity with UCT.

Some students took it further with placing posters on campus.



From day one as VC, Dr Mabizela has been a strong advocate of transformation and he may be softly spoken but is hard on this issue.

“We must, in the first instance, embrace diversity and celebrate difference. However, as an institution of higher learning we must go further than that and use the power of civil and reasoned argument, logic and debate to engage differences with a view to narrowing them, breaking new ground and enhancing and deepening shared understanding.

In 1994, our country emerged from a great struggle against racism, hatred and inequality. Many lost their lives in that struggle. As a nation, we cannot afford to go backwards and, as a place of knowledge and an institution of higher learning, Rhodes University has to take a stand against any attempts to do so, however conscious or unconscious they may be.

We have made significant progress in the transformation of the demographic and social composition of the student body. The ‘race’, class, gender, ethnic, national, linguistic, cultural and religious composition of our student population has changed and will continue to change given our imperatives of social equity and social justice.

As academics, do we see that the students who sit in front of us in the lecture and seminar rooms of our campus are different to those who sat beside us when we were students? Have we adapted our pedagogical approaches to ensure that every one of those students is included as an equal in the learning that goes on in our classrooms? Does our approach to diversity of participation, and to diversity of knowledge, assist our graduates to provide leadership for a more sustainable and resilient society? These are the kinds of questions we need to be asking as we move forward into a more equitable future.” – Dr Mabizela

The issue of the name change is very sensitive and potentially divisive and everyone has their own opinion, which they are fully entitled to.

The placards and posters said one thing, some said something else.

As one student put it:

“The name Rhodes is not a reminder of our terrible and humiliating past. The name Rhodes represents US. Our present and our future. I am proud to be anti-racism. I am proud to be pro homosexuality. I am proud to be pro gender equality. I am proud to be a RHODENT.”

Students have a right to freedom of expression.

SRC on twitter: The Student Body has spoken! A statement with a mandate will be released, with a detailed timeline. [#YouHaveSpoken](#) [#RhodesLetsTalk](#)

Dr Mabizela is confronting the issues head on and his interview with 702 on the subject can be listened to here.

<https://soundcloud.com/primediabroadcasting/dr-sizwe-mabizela-on-rhodes-university-name-change-the-name-now-represents-academic-excellence>