

Xenophobic violence is deplorable: Rhodes University condemns the recent attacks on Internationals

The recent news of an upsurge in xenophobic violence in South Africa is deplorable and unjustifiable. As in the past, Rhodes University continues to reject xenophobia of any kind.

We extend our heart-felt sympathy to the latest victims of this recent surge of hatred. The International Office would like to commend the 5,000 plus people who took to the streets in Durban, rejecting xenophobia and all those who are taking an active stand against xenophobia at this time.

Recognising that there are many complex underlying issues that manifest as xenophobia:

- We call on all leaders in the country to speak out and take stronger action against this appalling immoral, destructive and senseless violence.
- We call on all South Africans citizens here at Rhodes University and in Grahamstown to speak out against xenophobia.
- We call on staff and students who receive bullying and cowardly hate speech texts to please report them.
- We call staff and students who are anxious to please come forward and we will endeavor to provide the support we can.

In 2013, the Director of Internationalisation issued a statement deploring xenophobic violence. In 2009, a statement by Rhodes University Deputy Vice Chancellor, Dr Peter Clayton read “Rhodes University, whose fundamental aspiration is to be Indawo Yolwazi – a place of knowledge, a place of learning - for all who study and work here, both South African and International, vigorously rejects all forms of xenophobia. We believe that the diversity of culture, experience, and viewpoints, that international students and staff bring to our university, add substantially to the richness of our intellectual space.”

In 2015, we are yet again asserting that our international staff and students are valued and that they deserve the dignity that is the constitutional right of everyone living in South Africa to live free from the threat of harm or damage to property.

The International Office is the key driver of the internationalisation process at Rhodes University. Together with other divisions and departments, it assists the University to enrich the institution by contributing to and sharing international perspectives across all of our academic work. The institutional culture of the University is greatly enhanced by the contributions of international staff and students.

Teaching and learning are a key component of every university; this is true particularly in relation to students within universities but it is also in part the role of universities to contribute to public thinking and to provide analysis on issues like xenophobia. For Human Rights Day in 2012, the International Office organised an open panel discussion taking a quote from the Constitution and entitled the discussion “Is South Africa a home for all?” All the panelists had experience of working with immigrant populations and South Africans, either at a practical or an academic level and, the panel concluded that South Africa had a long way to go to be a home for many of its indigenous people, as well as international immigrants. Professor Barney Pitso, who chaired the debate, concluded that we needed to increase the frequency of discussions on xenophobia in South Africa.

While more thinking and awareness-raising at tertiary level will be a very welcome start, this in itself will not be sufficient to address the underlying issues that manifest as xenophobia. The forms of extreme xenophobia that recently manifested in South Africa are prevalent in communities, where inequality and poverty continues to dehumanise and divide. Tensions are heightened when internationals are perceived to be doing well economically, while locals are doing less well economically. It is clear that unless there is economic empowerment of the local population, incidents involving internationals can quickly escalate into a violent outburst of xenophobia. This problem has to be dealt with by both the government and South African civil society. The time has come for more action and more intervention by the government to indicate its complete disapproval of these hate crimes and for South African civil society to start promoting tolerance of others.

People who get to know each other, as human beings, are less likely to resort to immediate violence, when there is a critical incident. The International Office has run an “Internationalisation at Home” Programme at Rhodes University for the last four years to help create new spaces and new experiences for people to come together. Through creating new spaces for people, who might not otherwise have the opportunity to come together and

do things together socially, we can start to make familiar the unfamiliar and slowly develop an understanding of our common humanity.

The Rhodes University International Office organised its fourth International Parade on the 17th May 2014, where in spite of the pouring rain, approximately 1000 International and South African students; children from local schools and members of the local Grahamstown community, took to the streets in celebration of the uniquely international and intercultural nature of our community. An open invitation was issued for all local residents to join the Parade to *Celebrate our diversity, highlight our international links and to say “no” to xenophobia!*

We are currently preparing for the 2015 International week next month. The activities will include our fifth International Parade, with a strong anti-xenophobic message. The week will see the launch of the “Know Africa” programme, which aims to ensure that the University constituency and the people living in the surrounding area have a much better general knowledge about the continent of Africa. The week’s activities will include discussions from visiting academics and former high level South African politicians. It will end with an African Ball, which has proved to be a hugely successful multi-cultural event.

While activities and events like this are not in themselves a solution to xenophobia, they do begin however to model a way of people reaching out to one another, when grinding poverty and inequality threatens to erode a common understanding of our shared humanity.

Orla Quinlan
Director: International Office

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