

Launch of the Research Commons in the New Rhodes Library

3 September 2010

The Director of our University Library, Ms. Gwenda Thomas, librarians, DVC's, Deans, HoD's and colleagues

Welcome to the launch of the Research Commons in the new Rhodes Library.

Today's launch is a simple low-key internal affair. We hope that in November 2011, the President and other officials of the Carnegie Corporation of New York will visit Rhodes and officially open the Research Commons.

The Research Commons represents an exciting new chapter in the University's history of endeavours in the domain of research and knowledge production. In terms of our enrolment and academic planning we have committed ourselves to becoming more postgraduate and research oriented, and the Research Commons is a significant step in the direction of sustaining and further enhancing a research culture at Rhodes.

In this regard, it is a great pleasure to acknowledge that blazing the trail is Ms. Eileen Shepherd, the Principal Faculty Librarian for Science and Pharmacy. Eileen has just published a fully accredited article in an international journal titled 'In-service training for academic librarians: a pilot programme for staff'. This is in an ISI-listed journal and a wonderful example of the vision of the library moving from being a passive repository to one that also becomes a creator, or a co-creator of knowledge in partnership with academics.

The Research Commons has in large part been made possible by a generous grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

It is part of a prestigious \$2.5 million programme involving six South African universities: Rhodes, UCT, Stellenbosch, Wits, Pretoria and UKZN. The Rhodes share is over \$300 000 and is intended to cover three initiatives: the Research Commons, enhancing of staff capabilities in research librarianship, and the implementation of a portal that will use advanced discovery search tool software to access online information resources.

As can be seen, this new facility possesses state-of-the-art equipment and a lovely ambience which makes it eminently suitable for the production of new knowledge.

It is intended to serve senior postgraduate students and staff, and especially emerging researchers who may not otherwise have access to such a space. The idea has been to create an environment that is supportive and conducive to producing quality research, to develop a community of practice that young researchers will aspire to join and which can help to overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The Research Commons will be staffed by professional librarians on a roster-basis and, as you can see, there are facilities for photocopying, scanning, charging laptops, etc. as well as a seminar room.

Fifteen senior postgraduate students will be employed as research navigators to assist after normal office hours and training will also be available for users.

Note the comfortable lounge area, which will have daily newspapers, the kitchenette, lockers for safekeeping of personal belongings and the display shelf for key research texts and South African research literature.

The Research Commons can accommodate about 40 staff and students. It will be access-controlled because it is a dedicated space. This is in line with the principles agreed to by the Consortium, so that all these facilities are operated in the same way across the different universities.

The workstations, as you can see, arranged in a way that allows for different degrees of privacy and interaction, and laptops will be available for loan.

Turning to the building of capabilities among our librarians, some 16 Rhodes Library staff members have been selected to participate in national training workshops for the consortium partners. They have been exposed to the full spectrum of activities and dynamics involved in the research process, in order to understand and provide relevant support for researchers. My thanks to Prof Chrissie Boughey for her valuable input in this regard. 4 colleagues will be given the opportunity to participate in a 10-week internship in the USA, where they will immerse themselves in what a top-level research librarian does.

Regarding the portal, which is known as PRIMO, is described as a kind of Google-on-steroids for academic research. It has discovery tools that will make it easier for researchers to find what is available, not only at Rhodes but also through open source and other repositories.

With great pride it gives me enormous pleasure to report that, through exceptional project management by our Director of Library Services Gwenda Thomas, her staff, the project team as whole, and with lower than anticipated pricing on key components of the building, the estimated final cost of our wonderful new Library will now be in the region of R75 million.

This is R11 million or close to 13% below the original estimate. This is a wonderful achievement when one considers that construction has taken place at the time when South Africa was preparing for the Fifa World Cup and during one of the worst recessions ever experienced. We have much to celebrate and I do hope that as many of you as possible will be able to make the opening ceremony on the 4th of November.