

3 April 2020

Dear Graduand

The first week of life under lockdown is behind us. We find ourselves under radically changed circumstances and are all doing our bit to adhere to the imposed restrictions in an effort to stem the spread of the disease. Whilst the predicted rate of infections is showing signs of slowing down, we cannot afford to become complacent and allow the virus a free passage to destruction and heartache on the scale that we have thus far seen across the world.

To you, the personal costs may feel particularly high: when one has to momentarily sacrifice the apex moment of your studies: walking across the stage at graduation to receive your hard-earned degree or diploma. And that is the reality of scores of our graduands whose qualifications will be conferred virtually today (notwithstanding the fact that your opportunity to cross the stage has been deferred to December 2020, circumstances permitting). To you I want to extend a special word of congratulations. You will go down in the annals of this university as the class who experienced first-hand how unpredictable the future can be and the value of an excellent education to equip you to deal with the uncertainties of tomorrow.

As an institution we are guided by our motto of “forward, together” – more so in times of crises such as the one that we are experiencing currently. I was heart-warmingly struck this past week by an incident that demonstrates the SU’s inclination and spirit that we can overcome any challenge together.

It is clear from the constraints of our public health services that our country desperately needs more medical professionals in our clinics and hospitals to provide essential health services to cope with the increase in COVID-19 related infections. Given this reality our Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences put out a call for volunteers to our senior medical students. Within the first hour, more than 300 of our students took up the challenge to be part of the frontline in fighting the disease!

A common sense of purpose draw these students from divergent backgrounds together: saving lives and improving the quality of life of our people, for the most part, against the odds. These odds include social circumstance characterised by poverty and inequity, badly equipped medical facilities and poor working conditions and running the risk of being infected. But these students are undeterred and mobilised by the realisation of a sense of both professional and civic duty. They are currently being deployed at the centres of need.

So, when the confines of our homes under lockdown become unbearable and depressing, know that our discomfort, our lives of social distance and digital existence form part of the united effort to stop the virus' unbridled growth. We are fighting our own odds, together, in the interest of the common good.

Let us take solace in the fact that we are all in this together and let us take the bitter with the sweet to safeguard our future. If ever there was a time to celebrate our togetherness, it is now.

Please take care and stay safe. Hopefully we will meet again in December 2020.

Warm regards

Prof Wim de Villiers
Rector and Vice-Chancellor