

First-year Achievement Awards

Speech given by Prof Julia Blitz during the awards ceremony – guest speaker

It gives me enormous pleasure to be able to speak to you all this evening. This annual event has always been one of the joyful events of the year – it is so good for us to celebrate achievements. I remember in the pre-COVID years how everyone would arrive to mingle on the lawn as the sun was setting, with lovely music playing in the background, anticipating the move indoors to engage in happy celebrations and sit down to a really good meal. Well, here we are in the online space, and the occasion, although less social is no less joyful.

Let me greet the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Ramjugernath, the Senior Director of the Division for Learning and Teaching Enhancement, Dr Antoinette van der Merwe, the entire team of the Centre for Teaching and Learning, and the Vice-Deans: Learning and Teaching, some of whom are new, but many of whom were my close colleagues until just a few months ago.

But even more importantly, let me congratulate the second years in the room – what a wonderful start you had to your time in higher education last year. In the year that few anticipated and nobody knew how to deal with. I think that makes your achievements even more special.

However, we know from the letters that you wrote, that you attribute a large part of your success to your nominated teacher. So let me also congratulate them. How special to have an occasion where gratitude is both valued and expressed.

Converting gratitude from a noun (a quality) to a verb, an action (expressing gratitude) has been shown to have real benefits:

- opens the door to more relationships (because we overtly acknowledge others)
- improves physical health (take more care of your health)
- improves psychological health (reduces toxic emotions such as envy, resentment)
- enhances empathy and reduces aggression (because it is a prosocial behaviour)
- improves self-esteem (it reduces negative social comparisons)
- increases resilience (re-frame positively what you already have)

While, as teachers, we might want to believe it is “because” of us that you have done so well, we have to admit that is more likely to be a catalytic reaction between a student’s own ability, motivation, enthusiasm and focus AND our, the teacher’s, ability to convey their passion for their subject and create a conducive learning environment. It is this reaction that creates the spark that lights the fire of learning.

The mere fact that you are in higher education in South Africa is a feat in itself – only about 160000 school leavers enter university as newcomer first years across the country’s universities. You are undertaking a process that gives you entrance to an elite group – the 6% of people in this country who have a university degree. This has the potential to give you a head start in the labour market, would enable you to pursue higher degrees if you desire. But, even if this is not why you chose to enroll in higher education, you will exit with many advantages over people who were not able to.

But I want to ask you not to set yourselves apart. Rather to engage in the myriad activities that are available to you to broaden your experiences and the range of people that you can meet, interact with and learn from.

To the teacher awardees here this evening, I know what a thrill it is for us to see our students' success, to feel that we are making a difference not only in the life of a student, but also by someone joining us in our passion for the discipline that we have often devoted our academic lives to. You have now been (and may also have been previously) recognized for your teaching ability; this is such an important award in the spectrum of recognition of teaching excellence at Stellenbosch University. You play such a crucial role as teachers of first year students (whatever your academic rank, age, or duration of experience); it is you who assist students in the early steps on their journey to seeing what is possible, opening windows of opportunity for them and cultivating their enthusiasm. I also want to ask you not to set yourselves apart. I want to ask you to consider how you might encourage other teachers in your context to embrace your approach, to address learning-centred teaching, and to look at how you can work together at increasing your student's conceptual knowledge.

I wonder how we could, intentionally, remember and celebrate how much we gain as teachers and as students by expressing gratitude, working together, co-creating both learning and teaching. This is certainly something that we have been learning in the time of COVID – without collaboration and working out together how to adapt, higher education could have come to a standstill.

The Luo (East African) version of a well-known proverb states **“Alone a youth runs fast, with an elder slow; but together they go far.”** I think that “elder” in this proverb could be thought of not only as the “older”, but also as the teacher; it encourages us to think how far we could go if student and teacher travel together.

Education is not only about knowledge accumulation. As students starting to explore the discipline in which you are truly interested (as opposed to some of your school subjects which you did because you had to), I do hope that you are learning for understanding, for building of concepts, for seeing where things fit, for seeing how things fit together, for gaining a sense of the historical development of your discipline. I hope that you can recapture the three year old's curiosity and desire to understand, by asking “why?”. As teachers, we need to provoke these questions and provide the student with the capability to seek the answer themselves thus nurturing intellectual curiosity.

Michael Young in a 2014 paper referred to Knowledge as ‘powerful’ This is knowledge that enables people to go beyond the limits of their own experience; to better explain and understand the world; to think about alternative futures and how to influence them; to learn new ways of thinking; and to follow and participate in current debates of local, national or global significance.

Harland in a 2016 paper went on to suggest that we should seek to equip all undergraduate students with such powerful knowledge, going beyond the subject matter and allowing the student access to alternative ways of thinking and to the discourses they need if they are to make a contribution to work and society once they graduate. Such an education empowers students as critical thinkers and gives them deep insight into learning, knowledge and values.

This is knowledge that gives power TO students, and does not hold power OVER students

So where am I going with all this?

I want to talk about the responsibilities of those who achieve academically. As Stellenbosch University students and staff we should all accept and strive to foster the graduate attributes. If I can separate out one that might be most needed at this time, it might be “engaged citizenship”. This urges us to think about how we might be leaders and collaborators, social entrepreneurs and effective in a diverse environment. I think that can be summarized as how we might use our skills, knowledge and networks to make a positive contribution to work and society.

While acknowledging the individual seems to foster competition, this ceremony hints at the greater potential to be found in collaboration. Now imagine if you could spread that tenfold or a hundredfold – if as students you could assist the less strong student; if as teachers you could share with your colleagues what it is that helped your students reach these lofty achievements; if as a university we could realise our aim of responding to the needs of this country.

I first heard this expression used by Professor Bongani Mayosi, the late Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT and I now see that Bonang Mohale, the Chancellor of the University of the Free State and recently appointed President of Business Unity South Africa, has used it as a title for his recent book – **“lift as you rise”**. Success is personal, but how do we ensure that it is not individual, that others benefit from our achievements. “Lift as you rise” alludes to a voluntary effort – it isn’t something that just happens. So much of university is about prestige and excellence (and that is absolutely not wrong), but what is that prestige worth if it not used for the betterment of all. Success of others does nothing to diminish your own success. In fact, aligned with the notion of paying it forward, helping others can be your greatest success.

I would urge you, students and teachers, and my colleagues, “lift as you rise”; let’s help each other to develop powerful knowledge, let’s help each other to continue asking and answering the “why” questions, let us (students, teachers and the university) be engaged citizens and use our advantage to make a difference.

Thank you for this invitation to speak, thank you to our host and organisers. Thank you to the awardees (staff and students) for giving us a reason to spend a joyful evening together.

I’m sure that you all know the quote often repeated, but possibly mis-attributed to Maya Angelou: **People will never forget how you made them feel**. Thank you that through the expressions of gratitude we have shared this evening, we have been able to feel pride and joy. Congratulations to you all.