

Welcoming new students to Stellenbosch University | Verwelkoming van nuwelingsstudente by die US

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Having to make a speech in front of a crowd like this is incredibly intimidating, not only because of the amount of people that are watching me right now, but also because of the weight of the stories that each person here carries with them. In this crowd, there are people who have never been worried about paying for university. There are also people who did not know how they would get here until a few days ago. For some, this is a lifelong dream and for others they did not imagine that this would even be an option for them. Being at University is an exceptional privilege in this country. You will immerse yourself in a global academic tradition that has been a main source of human development across centuries. You will see, learn and experience things that will challenge you, grow you and turn you into the exceptional person you are destined to become.

The opportunities that you are surrounded with for the next few years will change your life path forever. Your time has come to take responsibility for the life you live and make choices that contribute to a future that we all wish to see for this country, for Africa, and for the world at large. This might sound like too much responsibility, or too big to comprehend. For whilst the future of this planet is in your hands, you might also be thinking; what am I doing here? Maybe it feels too Afrikaans, or maybe it will be the first time you hear someone speak siPedi. In the residence and PSO structures you will operate in some of the most diverse spaces you have ever experienced. You will be challenged to forge your own way in life. The truth is, the way you navigate these challenges *are what determines our future*. The choices you make, the habits you cultivate, and the way that you treat others are entirely in your hands. Think about that when you go through the next year, and make sure that how you live is aligned with who you strive to be.

In a year from now you will have expanded your mind to new levels, you will have discovered new interests, you will meet people from all walks of life. University is both a theme park of fun, new experiences; as well as a space for hard work, focus, and determination. You will need to find a balance between your in class and out of class experiences. Be conscious of what you give focus to in your life, and always try to push your comfort zone.

As much as this space is yours and your life to create, you are walking into an institution with over a hundred years of history. This fact brings its own challenges. Ask yourself, what do you want the next hundred to look like? While understanding the particular challenges we face in our country, and propping our heads full of theories and thoughts, always keep in mind that nothing is possible without the connection you have with those sitting next to you. Whether you know each other or not, this life with all its difficulties and joys is at its core, a *shared life*. The way we relate to one another as global

citizens, as groups, as incomplete stereotypes, are at its core individuals that relate to one another in this shared reality. We all need to eat, sleep, socialise, exercise and learn. We all need to make a living on this planet. We all need the plants, the trees, the earth, the sky, the animals, the buildings, the institutions and the currency that determines so much of how it all goes around. We all need to think, to listen, to talk and to share. You cannot exist without all these things around you, and for that mere fact, you are never alone. Each and every one of us comes into this space with our own life experiences already shaping a massive part of who we are, we all bring our own anxieties, fears, biases, expectations and hopes. Therefore, we must live consciously; know what make you tick and know what makes you, *you*. Be proud of your cultural history, your language, your interests and your quirks, and know that others can be proud of theirs too. Accept the reality of the times we live in, the challenges we inherited as a generation, the past with all its conflict, the future with all its possibility. We as the new generation have inherited an urgent climate emergency. If climate activist Gretha Thunberg can start a global movement at only 15 years old, imagine what 5000 students empowered by the opportunities that Stellenbosch University gives them can achieve. Use your time at this institution to learn and cultivate a sustainable future where those that come after us do not have to worry about the same problems that we do.

Know that the world is not an ideal place. Know that not all of us are equally blessed, equally privileged, or treated equally by all. There are certainly many ways to go about creating awareness for, and putting a stop to the unfair treatment that we are subject to in our daily lives – but none of these ways are meaningful if we are not aware of how we ourselves, as individuals, in our daily actions, habits and modes of being, unwittingly contribute to the social ills that continue to plague our society. Homophobia, transphobia, discrimination against women, racial discrimination, xenophobia, bullying – all these social ills originate from the same place, a place of fear. As humans we tend to find change uncomfortable, we tend towards sameness and we are wary of difference. Yet we all want to *feel* comfortable and accepted for who we are in this sometimes harsh society. It is exactly for that reason that we need to be intentional about cultivating that one human resource that can never run out, that can always be employed to any challenges we face – and that is the resource of kindness. Within each one of us we have the capacity for endless, unconditional, kindness and acceptance. Yes, we might be angry, scared, and impassioned in our quest for a better world – but without kindness at the core we will never be able to change ourselves or the world for the better.

Thus, as you embark on this once in a lifetime journey of higher education at Stellenbosch University, I recommend the following rules of thumb: Firstly, live your truth – be who you want to be and damn the rest. With that comes the responsibility of always also accepting those around you for who they are. Accept and be accepted. Secondly, speak your mind. Do not be afraid to air your beliefs and let them be tested and challenged in the public domain. But, know that communication is more than just words, give people the benefit of the doubt. You have a responsibility to not just live in your head; know that

you are, just like everybody else, a human worthy of respect and love – no matter what others might say. Therefore, speak *and* listen. Lastly, kindness is the answer. Be kind to yourself, be kind to your fellow humans, be kind to the animals and the plants. Have gratitude for every moment of this exceptional existence that we are blessed enough to experience for the briefest of moments. Know that it costs nothing to be kind. Kindness can manifest without sense, without understanding – we can argue and disagree, but we can always be kind.