

Welcome Address by Professor Barend Erasmus, Director: Global Change Institute delivered on 27 January 2019

The Chancellor, Dr Judy Dlamini

Vice Chancellor Professor Adam Habib

Members of the senior executive team

SRC President, Ms Sisanda Aluta Mbolekwa

Academics

Parents, Guardians and Family members

and finally, all of the new Witsies!

A heartfelt welcome to Wits – we are looking forward to share your journey towards your first degree!

On the 5th December 2018, I was the invited speaker at a Wits graduation. It was a festive event, honouring the achievement of students becoming Wits graduates. What can I share with parents and new Witsies today that will help you stand on the stage at graduation, 3 or 4 years from now? It sounds like a lifetime away, but time will fly.

First of all, I need to congratulate you on making it this far, to this starting line. You are one of the few that have been selected to attend the premier university on the continent, and now you get an opportunity to attain a qualification that is internationally recognised for its excellence.

81% of all Wits graduates from the previous academic year, either found a job, or continued their studies. Of those that found a job,

97% did so within 6 months of graduation. From my own interaction with industry, I know that industry recruiters pay extra attention to Wits graduates.

You are at the start of a daunting, and exciting journey. Daunting, because it will challenge you in new ways, but exciting as you realise the true extent of your own abilities.

You are not alone on this journey. Choosing to do it with your classmates, your professors and the support systems that Wits has put in place, will dramatically increase your chances of success.

When you start attending classes next week, you will slowly start to discover that Wits is a very diverse place. You will encounter new ideas, or old ideas that you don't like; interact with people that come from backgrounds that is very different from your own. This can be quite challenging, but it is part of choosing not to do the journey alone.

Even though you will have to master discipline-specific knowledge, one of the most enduring and most important skills that you will take away from your time at Wits, is to become comfortable with this diversity, to navigate it, and to harness the power of diversity for the good of your community, your country, your continent, and the world.

There are many different cultures and world views on campus, in the student body and among the staff. But one thing sets us apart: we have the space to debate, agree and disagree in a way that can be very robust, but always has respect and tolerance at its core.

The world is facing serious challenges that threatens the existence of humanity as we know it – climate change, inequality, authoritarianism, migration, food insecurity, drought. In all likelihood, 2019 will be the warmest year on record, in the history of humanity. This will affect what you eat, how you work and how you live. We need to transform to a new normal, not just for heat, but

how we deal with multi-year droughts. It is a problem that need people who can navigate a diversity of ideas, views and facts.

The world is changing so quickly that in all likelihood the career you choose, may not exist at the moment. If you only rely on knowledge, you will not be competitive in the job market. But Wits teaches you how to think, how to find strength in diversity and how to lead – and these are the reasons why you will be ahead of the pack when you stand on the stage at graduation in a few years from now.

A few final thoughts:

To the parents and guardians:

- Support the student in your home. They are climbing a big mountain.
- Be informed about their progress. All students get regular feedback; do not wait until the end of the year to hear things have gone wrong long ago
- If things do go wrong, reach out to lecturers, classmates or Wits student support services. If you identify the problem early, then it is fixable.
- The experience of studying challenges students physically and mentally. Physical and mental health are equally important, and support for both is available on campus.

To the students:

- Find out what support services are there for you, academically, mentally and physically. You may need them in a hurry.
- Keep an eye out for each other. Not everyone knows when they need help.
- This is a time of growth, fun, and discovery. Experience all of it, but not in a way that jeopardises the end goal – to graduate.

- Don't let your experience of growth, fun and discovery limit someone else's experience.
- Tolerance and respect is the basis for learning the value of diversity. This applies to culture, as well as gender.

To wrap up, I leave you with a slightly revised quote from the Black Panther: "When faced with a challenge, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers".