



**COMMENCEMENT SPEECH BY PROF. PATRICK
VERKOOIJEN, CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI
CHANCELLOR, DURING THE 71ST GRADUATION
CEREMONY HELD AT THE GREAT COURT ON FRIDAY,
SEPTEMBER 20, 2024**

- Cabinet Secretary, Ministry of Education
 - Chairman, of Council, UoN
 - Vice Chancellor
 - Deputy Vice Chancellors
 - Chief Operations Officer
 - Deans and Directors
 - Students
 - Ladies and Gentlemen
-

Thank you Vice Chancellor Hutchinson, it is such an honour for me to be with you and your families.

Please be seated.

[LONG PAUSE]

GRADUATES IN JOBS.

WITH THE RIGHT SKILLS.

FULL OF HOPE.

Africa's youth, shaping Africa's bright future.

[PAUSE]

Students Graduating

Your friends and family,
Deans of Faculty,
Chief Operating Officer
Chair of the Alumni Association
Chairperson of Council
Vice-Chancellor
Honorable Cabinet Secretary

My name is Patrick Verkooijen, and I am humbled to be here before you today..
For the first time..
As YOUR Chancellor of THE University of Nairobi.

And it is also my great honour to be able to share my vision with you..
for this university, which represents..
the true essence of the great nation of Kenya.

And whose founding President, and first chancellor of this University..

Jomo Kenyatta, once said:

“Our task is to make ourselves the architects of the future”.

And that is what THE University of Nairobi stands for, has done, is doing, and will continue to do –

brick by brick, graduate by graduate.

And that is why I feel humble..

To be part of this immense, inspiring task ...

In which each of you has a role to play.

“ELIMU – HAINA – MWISHO”

“Knowledge – Learning – Never Ends.”

[PAUSE]

I opened with a view into a bright future.

Yet, we cannot hide from the stark reality facing Africa, Kenya and Nairobi’s youth today..

Which in fact is:

NO JOBS.

WRONG SKILLS.

LACK OF HOPE.

This is the headline message of the latest jobs report on Africa from the International Labour Organization, the ILO.

It warns of a “Youthquake.”

Now, I dare to believe..

That YOU, Graduates, that this University, CAN have a DIFFERENT future.

United, and with hard work – our motto, after all.

YOU, WE, can become UNSTOPPABLE.

You arrived here this morning: students.

You leave here today: GRADUATES.

CONGRATULATIONS ! HONGERA sana !

[PAUSE–APPLAUSE]

I want to address you today..

In this life-pivoting moment..

In both capacities.

YOU, as students, UNTIL this day.

And YOU as graduates, FROM this day.

In a moment, you finally receive your degrees. The crowning occasion that culminates your individual academic achievements.

Before these are conferred, allow us to step back, for a moment..

And reflect:

Each of you here..

finds yourself in a World DIVIDED..

Filled with never-before-seen challenges.

A global crisis of the climate.

Last year, I met Mary, who was suffering from the drought which struck Makweni.

This year, her village, like many others, across the nation.. Was washed away by the floods.

Challenging times.

We lived through the worst worldwide PANDEMIC in over a century..

Many of you here have been students through that. It's very likely, not to be your last.

Challenging times.

And, of course, we now have a COST OF LIVING CRISIS..

COMING OUT of the pandemic.

Conflicts adding fuel to the financial bonfire – of especially African nations' – debt headaches.

Challenging times.

And it is here in Africa, in Kenya..

That YOU face all these interconnected crises..

THE most youthful continent on Earth today.

Where ONE MILLION young Africans enter the workforce.. EVERY SINGLE MONTH.

ONE MILLION.

4,000 of you graduate today. I could NOT be more proud.

Yet ONLY one in four of the one million young people.. like you.. who enter the labour market, this month, will secure a formal job.

One in four.

As your Chancellor, I believe..

It's not RIGHT that any one of you completes years at this great university..

To end up, a taxi driver.

It's not RIGHT that you learn chemistry or philosophy in our halls..

To end up, working tables.

It's not RIGHT that you meet all requirements to obtain your degree..

To end up, scraping from one low-paid job to the next.

No, THIS is FAILURE in my book.

Not failure of YOU, the graduates, or the students: The SYSTEM is failing you.

Well, NOT ON MY WATCH.

[PAUSE]

There is, however, a sad irony.

Because the captains of industry that I meet..
the employers in this country, in fact, across the continent..
they tell me of their DESPARATION to find skilled people
to employ.

We must BRIDGE this disconnect.

We must RISE to the challenge of becoming fit-for-
purpose.

After all, Africa is changing at the speed of light.

And the education system MUST catch-up.

By 2050, ONE IN THREE people ALIVE, below the age of
25..
WILL be AFRICAN.

The “YOUTH-QUAKE” is upon us.

We are at a tipping point.
The TRAGIC
HAVOC
which ROCKED
THIS nation, THIS year, underlines ...

... the fierce urgency of now.

YOU waited, long enough.

YOU have been PATIENT, long enough.

YOU – DELIVERED – which is why YOU are here today.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Graduates,

It would be typical for someone addressing a graduation such as this, to offer some advice.

You might well be wondering, what advice can I possibly offer?

Indeed, I cannot claim to know..
how hard..

YOU and your families..
must have worked, to be admitted into this great school.

I cannot claim to have grown up in Makweni or Mukuru or Mombassa.

But I do know something about student debt.

I do know something about being the first in my family to earn a university degree.

And I do know something about holding down a job as I studied.

All the same, I will NOT be offering you graduates ANY advice today.

No. But, I DO have advice for everyone else.

WE – the rest of us – we need to listen to YOU.

As students of THIS fine University, I work for YOU.

YOU are my main shareholders.

In 10 or 15 years..

If not sooner!

Society WILL be shaped by YOU.

This journey, it is YOUR journey. The future: YOUR FUTURE. So, it is..

YOUR needs that count.

[PAUSE]

I am from the Netherlands. Home to the legendary philosopher, Erasmus.

Erasmus said: “Give light, and darkness disappears, of itself.”

Well, you, the graduates, YOU are the light.

And OUR job as educators? Making sure that you can shine.

[PAUSE]

You stand here today.

You have laboured. You have learned.

You have been ADAPTIVE.

Or you would not be here.

And I happen to know something about adaptation.

In my other role – chancellor being a voluntary one -
I am CEO of the Global Center on Adaptation.

We are the world's largest global organization dedicated to
helping the world to adapt to the climate crisis.

In the climate field we say: “adapt or die”.

Because for a subsistence farmer..
losing an entire year's harvest to a flash flood..
THAT, can lead to death in a family.

But if you manage to adapt.. to innovate..
You can not ONLY survive, you THRIVE.

[PAUSE]

The theme of this 71st graduation ceremony of THE
University of Nairobi..

“Transforming society with adaptive and innovative graduates”

Goes right to the heart of the matter.

Adaptation is an absolutely key asset, that you ALREADY have.

That is why I see among you the next Bill Gates
Future Judges, Presidents, Pioneers

It was Nelson Mandela who said:

It is through education that the daughter of a peasant becomes a doctor.

It is through education that the son of a mine worker, the head of the mine.

It is through education that a child of a farm worker, can become the president of a great nation.

[PAUSE]

Graduating Students,

You have made it this far—an achievement you will carry ALL YOUR LIFE.

We gather here today to celebrate you.

But what will matter most, when you leave here, a graduate..

Is what you do tomorrow, after graduation, Monday morning.

Earlier this year, I was appointed chancellor by his Excellency William Sameo Ruto, President of the Republic of Kenya.

100 days into this role of chancellor, I announced the “Big 5”.

Because the enormous challenges we face..
REQUIRE equally bold responses of our own.

And we MUST be LASER focused on what is most important..
To overcome the challenges.

Given..
the fierce urgency of now.

NOT the time..
NOT the resources..
NOT the luxury..
To NOT be focused.

5 Big BOLD INITIATIVES, all connected, to transform UoN, starting today..
for the world of today AND tomorrow.

The first of these: “Silicon Savannah”.

Nairobi IS already the startup capital of Africa.
40% of all Sub-Saharan African startups last year were right here in Nairobi.

If any of you have been to Stanford, you would know the epicenter of Silicon Valley is the world's first ever university research park there.

It consists of the University, technology labs, industry partners, and venture capitalists.

All in one location.

If the promising trickle of Kenya's tech startups of today, is to become a stampede, tomorrow..

We simply MUST create the Silicon Savannah Park of our own.

So I am thrilled to announce that France has already signed us a 35 million EURO promissory note.. that we will draw on to build this park, starting THIS academic year.

[PAUSE–APPLAUSE]

Number two: our second bold idea.

There is ONE single technological sector that WILL add more to the world economy than anything else in the next decade.

15 TRILLION U.S. dollars, in fact.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLEGEENCE.

The world of work requires you to MASTER it.

According to Chat GPT itself, by 2030, A.I.'s capabilities will improve by 100,000 times.. and possibly as much as 10 million times OR MORE.

Yet, who stands to benefit from the economic dividend of A.I.?

The Global North.

[PAUSE]

But it should NOT have to be this way.

When I learned there is a second-year student at our university—his name is Brian.

Brian, developed an A.I. powered app, to help school teachers here in Kenya mark their papers.

When you have 80 students in your class, let me tell you just how useful that can be.

Knowing about talent like Brian, I became absolutely convinced that Nairobi can bring A.I. home to Africa.

Only, HOWEVER, if we NURTURE and SUPPORT that talent.

This is EXACTLY why we will create East Africa's first School of A.I. right here in Nairobi.

We already have among the top maths schools in Africa.. One of the top computer science schools, and statistics faculties.

It simply needs consolidating TOGETHER.

I am convinced that our new A.I. school, and its graduates, WILL lead Africa's A.I. revolution, if not the world.

A.I. coming home..
to Africa.

[PAUSE-APPLAUSE]

Speaking about leadership, brings me to our THIRD initiative.

This great University, certainly has Kenya's most distinguished alumni:

Political leaders, chief justices, captains of industry..
all call UoN their alma mater.

But today, young Africans who want to train in leadership..

THOSE who can afford it..

They are travelling to the U.S., to attend Harvard or
Columbia or MIT..

THOSE who can afford it..

Are travelling to Europe, to attend Oxford or Cambridge or
LSE..

But what if you come from Mekweni or Mukuru or
Mombassa?

Well, what if we created a leadership school right here in
Nairobi..

MODELLED on global schools like Harvard's Kennedy
School, my own alma mater..

So the incredible talent of this University, of Kenya and
Africa, can be trained as leaders, HOME-GROWN.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I am extremely pleased to
inform you that Harvard stands ready to be our partner.

And I have further good news for you: we have already
drawn up the plans, and secured the financing of the
building to house this new leadership School.

We break ground next year.

The fierce urgency of now.

[PAUSE]

Fourth: JOBS JOBS JOBS.

But not..

20th century jobs. We're in the 21st century.

We are living a green revolution, a digital revolution.
We have to, if we are going to survive, and thrive.

Green jobs are here for the taking, digital jobs too, that is..
PROVIDED, we bring the right skills to the table.

PROVIDED, we work closely to meet the REAL needs of
industry.

And PROVIDED, we, as a university, offer the right
curricula..

so that any given graduate like yourselves..

Can PERFORM in those new green and digital jobs..
that will be yours.

And that is why we are building, the Kenya Green and
Digital Jobs Center right here at UoN.

[PAUSE–APPLAUSE]

We, at UoN, we are not waiting.

Starting this academic year, we will be rolling out 101 courses, in areas like climate change, occupational readiness, and A.I..

So that every UoN student, from any field, will be literate in the skills required for the workforce of today and tomorrow.

Giving every UoN student, no matter the faculty, the means to upskill into the digital and green revolutions.

[PAUSE]

Talking of revolutions..

During the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic..

OUR health faculty, was a guiding star.

Which brings me to the final pillar of the Big 5: health.

The same incredible health faculty is pushing the envelope with pathbreaking research.

But imagine for one second..

If we could double our laboratory capacity..

If we could secure the most advanced equipment possible..

If we could provide the infrastructure needed to support world-class clinical trials.

That, graduates, is WHY, we will create Africa's most advanced health research institute.

And that, graduates..
THAT is the BIG 5.

[PAUSE]

Once delivered, it will be transformation PERSONIFIED,
transformation MATERIALIZED.

The fulcrum upon which to move our university into the
center of what is Africa's century.

The fierce urgency of now..

The Big 5..
This academic year..
Into action.

This is my offering to you.

And I know very well, that the incredible FIRST female
Vice Chancellor of this University..

[PAUSE –APPLAUSE]

She has my FULL SUPPORT..
and she is also EXTREMELY dedicated to implementing
the Big 5.

And after meeting with the students this week, I know they
will be spearheading the design.. AND the execution of the
Big 5.

And we ALL will be judged on how we deliver this Big 5 transformation.

[PAUSE]

Graduates,
You leave us today..
I may not have any advice for you, but I DO have one appeal:
Come BACK.

Many Big 5 activities offer continuing education.

Looking for leadership skills – come back.
Entrepreneurship is your focus – we'll be there for you.
A.I. proficiency - sign up to the A.I. school.
Career fairs at the Green and Digital Job Center – join us.
You have technology projects of you're own? Silicon Savannah can..
Be..
Your..
Home..
too.

Because Knowledge – Learning – Never Ends.

ELIMU – HAINA – MWISHO.

[PAUSE]

Graduates,

Since I took up the mantle of chancellor..
I learned that there are hundreds and hundreds of
secondary schools in Kenya..
That send no students to any university in the nation.

Mandela also said that education was the great equalizer.

So my pledge to you today as Chancellor:
I am launching an all-new foundation, which I will privately
endow, myself.

That foundation will provide full scholarships to a number
of students from those schools..
That for lack of means..
but *NOT* talent..
NEVER get to walk through the gates of our University.

Starting next year, I hope we can begin to change that.

The fierce urgency of now.

[PAUSE]

In closing, graduates, ladies and gentlemen,

I truly – TRULY – believe that the University of Nairobi can
be Africa's greatest university..
And, indeed, one of the most important higher learning
establishments of the 21st century: Africa's century.

Earlier in my career, I was an ACTIVE scholar.

Today, I want to assure you that I am now your ACTIVIST chancellor.

Let us not measure ourselves against Kampala or Kinshasa or Kigali or Khartoum.

Let us set our sights on my own alma mater, Harvard, and on Stanford, on Oxford.

UoN leading. YOU, in the driver's seat.

But to get there, we have to re-imagine higher education,
Which means..
re-imagining the society we build.

I return once more to Nelson Mandela, who said:
“Education is the greatest weapon to change our world”.

What type of world do you want to live in? Leaving here today, embarking on YOUR future.

I am certain we share unity of purpose and unity of –
BOLD – ambition.

The FIERCE urgency of NOW.

Yourselves, your alma mater, Kenya, Africa.

Together, united, unstoppable.

ELIMU

HAINA

MWISHO

[PAUSE]

Asante sana.