

**Speech Read at the First Cluster of the 2025 Graduation Ceremonies**

**University of the Witwatersrand**

**26<sup>th</sup> March 2025**

**Emeritus Professor Ernest Aryeetey**

The Honourable Chancellor of this great University,

Mr Vice-Chancellor,

Esteemed Senate and Faculty members

Distinguished Guests,

Most importantly, the graduating Class of 2025:

It is with profound humility and gratitude that I stand before you today to accept this honorary doctorate from the University of the Witwatersrand— an institution whose legacy and impact resonate well beyond the borders of South Africa. This honour is not merely a personal milestone, but a recognition of the collective efforts of those who have shaped my journey and the values we share with this remarkable university. I thank the Council of the University, the Vice Chancellor and the Senate for this vote of confidence expressed in me. I also thank my family, especially my spouse, Ellen for the support given me over the years to make this possible.

I am honoured to be asked to speak to the graduating Class of 2025.

As the Class of 2025, you are graduating into a world that has seen both remarkable progress and persistent challenges. Global efforts to combat **climate change, economic instability, technological disruptions** and **human rights abuses** have intensified, while South Africa has **navigated economic recovery, energy reforms, and**

**evolving social dynamics.** These developments underscore the urgency of your role as leaders and innovators.

### **My Journey with Wits**

My first direct contact with the University of the Witwatersrand was in 2013 when the outgoing Vice Chancellor Professor Loyiso Nongxa came to my office at the University of Ghana during a visit to West Africa. The visit was to deepen ties between our two universities and also introduce his successor Professor Adam Habib to me.

I worked closely with Professor Habib for several years in launching the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA). Wits provided administrative support for the Alliance without any charge to the network members. This gesture underscored the institution's commitment to research and higher education development in Africa. After Professor Habib left Wits at the end of 2020, I continued the relationship with Professor Zebulon Vilakazi in a manner that has seen the Alliance grow from strength to strength. In sum, anything that we achieved as a network could not have come through without significant support from the University of the Witwatersrand.

I think it is therefore only appropriate that I should express my deepest gratitude to Dr Robin Drennan, Dr Mahomed Moola and Ms Nancy Law Rametse for the excellent collaboration and assistance they gave my team and me. Without them I do not believe we could have done much.

The association with Wits gave me an opportunity to understand better the history of this unique university. I came to appreciate how it started in 1896 as the South African School of Mines in Kimberley and later established in Johannesburg in 1922 as the University of the Witwatersrand. Today, it has grown to become one of Africa's leading institutions of higher learning. Its history is deeply intertwined with the socio-political fabric of South Africa.

Since the dawn of democracy in 1994, Wits has undergone significant transformation, striving to redress the inequities of the past while maintaining academic excellence. Today, it stands as a beacon of inclusivity, innovation, and intellectual rigor, consistently ranked among the top universities on the continent and recognized globally for its research output and academic influence.

### **Global Thought Leadership**

Wits' contributions to global thought leadership are both profound and far-reaching. The university has been at the forefront of groundbreaking research in fields such as palaeontology, and here the work of Professor Lee Berger and his team leading to the discovery of *Homo naledi*, is acknowledged as a significant addition to our understanding of human evolution. In the health sciences, Wits researchers have made significant contributions to efforts aimed at combating HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and more recently, COVID-19, through pioneering clinical trials and public health interventions.

In recent times, Wits has continued to lead in groundbreaking research. For instance, the university has been at the forefront of developing an mRNA-based HIV vaccine with the African context in mind. This initiative has shown promising results in pre-clinical trials ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com)). Wits co-founded the African Leadership in Vaccinology Expertise (ALIVE) program, aiming to enhance vaccinology research and advocacy across the continent. These accomplishments remind us of the power of knowledge to transform our world.

Wits has produced globally recognized scholars and leaders, including Nobel laureates such as Nadine Gordimer, who received the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature for her profound exploration of social and political themes, and Aaron Klug, awarded the 1982 Nobel Prize in Chemistry for his pioneering work in crystallographic electron microscopy. Its law faculty has shaped some of South Africa's most influential legal minds, including former Constitutional Court justices who have played a pivotal role in safeguarding democracy and upholding the rule of law.

These achievements are not merely academic milestones; they are testaments to the university's commitment to addressing the most pressing challenges of our time, from social justice to scientific discovery.

### **Heritage and Responsibility**

As graduates of this esteemed institution, you inherit a legacy of excellence and responsibility. This mantle of excellence and responsibility entails:

- **Upholding Values:** Embracing the principles of equality, integrity, and excellence that Wits stands for.
- **Advocacy:** Being voices against injustice, much like the university's stance during challenging times in history.
- **Innovation:** Leveraging your education to drive positive change and contribute meaningfully to society.

Thus, your responsibility as graduates is not merely to excel in your chosen fields, but to use your education to address the inequities and challenges that persist in our society. Whether you are entering the sciences, humanities, business, or public service, you carry with you the values of critical thinking, empathy, and a commitment to justice that define this university.

### **Graduating into a Changing Society**

You are graduating at a time of profound change, both in South Africa and globally. South Africa continues to grapple with inequality, unemployment, and systemic poverty. Data on youth unemployment suggest that nearly half of young people aged 15 – 34 years are unemployed, a stark reminder of the challenges that lie ahead (<https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=17266>). Globally, we face the existential threat of climate change, the ethical dilemmas posed by artificial intelligence, and the ongoing struggle for human rights in an increasingly polarized world.

Yet, within these challenges lie opportunities. The Fourth Industrial Revolution, for instance, offers unprecedented potential for innovation and economic transformation. South Africa's renewable energy sector is growing rapidly, creating new industries and jobs. The global push for sustainability demands fresh thinking and leadership—qualities that Wits graduates are uniquely equipped to provide.

### **Call to Action**

As you step into this complex and dynamic world, I urge you to embrace your role as agents of change. Do not merely seek personal success; strive to create value for your communities and industries. Use your skills to address the pressing issues of our time—whether it is by developing sustainable technologies, advancing social justice, or fostering inclusive economic growth.

Be bold in your ambitions but grounded in your values. Remember that true leadership is not about titles or accolades but about the impact you have on the lives of others. Hold yourselves accountable to the highest standards of integrity and empathy and never lose sight of the humanity that binds us all.

In closing, I leave you with a challenge: **to be not only the beneficiaries of the Wits legacy but also its custodians.** Uphold the values of this institution, contribute to its ongoing transformation, and ensure that its impact continues to resonate for generations to come.

Congratulations, Class of 2025. May your journey be impactful and your legacy enduring. The world awaits your contributions.

I thank you for your attention.