

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



AFRICAN CULTURAL AND DINNER NIGHT 2016

20 AUGUST 2016

VC'S SPEAKING NOTES

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it was with great delight that I accepted the invitation to be one of the guest speakers at this evening's African Cultural and Dinner Night. I would like to thank Joe Nwokolo and the ACDN Planning Committee for extending the invitation to speak to you all, and for the opportunity to celebrate with you this evening.

I would also like to extend my thanks to the organising and supporting partners, including the Igbo Community Australia, the Liverpool Migrant Resource Centre, Cabramatta Community Centre and the Rwandan Community of NSW.

There has been an African presence in Australia for over 150 years – the Australian census of 1861 recorded 1590 migrants from Africa. Currently, African-Australians represent 1.2% of the Australian population (or 272,520).

Like many other migrant communities, the members of Australia's African community have worked hard, undertaken further study, and contributed to the Australian economy. They have also encouraged their children to study hard and to aspire to higher education, demonstrating a clear understanding that education is the key to unlocking the potential of an individual.

Education, however, not only serves as a driving force for the advancement of a person, but also for society more broadly. Put simply, education has the power to instigate social change.

I am proud to lead a University that recognises this. Indeed, Western Sydney University's commitment to ensuring equity in, and access to, higher education is a crucial part of its mission.

To achieve these objectives, we aim to minimise barriers to higher education, be they financial, physical, emotional, social, or cultural.

Circumstance should not be a barrier to success, and we provide the tools necessary to assist our students achieve this success.

In this, Western Sydney University chooses to lead by example. In response to the international refugee crisis, in late 2015 the University established a Refugee Scholarship Fund. The scholarship provides recipients with \$7500 per year for the duration of their degree. This year was the first year of the scheme and we were able to provide 14 donor-funded scholarships. As this endowment grows, the University will increase the number of scholarships available under this scheme to help support the educational aspirations of the local refugee community.

Educational institutions, however, also have a further responsibility to their students. In an increasingly globalised world, it is imperative that universities foster in their students the drive and commitment to engage in their society. That is, to be active global citizens.

To achieve this requires universities to conceive of their roles as educators on a global scale. Learning should not be limited to the classroom. As a young institution, we recognise the importance of engagement with our international colleagues and the subsequent flow on effect this has for our students.

For example, our membership of the Australia Africa Universities Network (AAUN) provides many opportunities for institutional collaboration between Australia and Africa. These collaborations will allow us to work together to address the grand challenges facing both continents, through research and through teaching and learning.

Western Sydney University is taking the lead in training the next generation of humanitarian and development workers. In December 2015, we launched the Bachelor of Humanitarian and Development Studies.

This program provides students with the opportunity to gain knowledge and practical experience in all aspects of disaster management, humanitarian response and development assistance, and to learn from experts and practitioners with national and international agencies, including the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the World Health Organisation, agencies of the United Nations and other non-government organisations.

The program was developed by Professor Andre Renzaho, originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo and now a senior academic at Western Sydney University. Professor Renzaho has been working to build support for our humanitarian program in Uganda and earlier this year, he led a small group from the University to visit Rwamwanja Refugee Camp in Uganda, managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister's Department of Refugees (OPM). As well as meeting with the Office of the Prime Minister, the group also participated in a number of activities at the camp, including food distribution.

Our broader engagement with the African continent is also growing, particularly in Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya, and we continue to explore education, research, and training opportunities – all vital, not just for our students, but also for helping to build capacity in Africa.

Western Sydney University is also one of the most culturally diverse universities in Australia, with over 100 different ethnic and cultural backgrounds represented in our student population. This cultural diversity is one of our strengths, ensuring that our students are exposed to a multitude of worldviews and mindsets.

We have a small yet significant cohort of just over 1500 students of African background with ties across the continent, including with South Africa, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Uganda, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone.

They are active and engaged, participating in University life but also contributing to the wider community, both while they are students and as graduates.

For example, Sudanese Bachelor of Social Science (Peace and Development) student, Piath Machut was recently appointed by the NSW Government to the Youth Advisory Council to help shape state government policies and legislation, giving her another chance to share her perspective to help the wider community.

Rwandan-born graduate, Noel Zihabamwe, undertook a degree in Community Welfare and International Social Development at Western Sydney University. He is now actively engaged in community work and development in the western Sydney area and is particularly committed to assisting new refugees and new migrant communities in areas of settlement, capacity building, education and employment. In 2014, Noel's achievements and ongoing work were recognised when he received an Outstanding Community Services Award at NSW Parliament House.

And of course, I'm sure many of you would have seen the short film about Deng Adut, refugee lawyer and Western Sydney University graduate. As part of University's rebranding, we were privileged to share his story with the world.

This film had a strong impact reaching a large global audience. It achieved over 5 million views on online platforms alone and has been the recipient of a number of awards, including the very prestigious Silver Lion at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity earlier this year.

Deng himself was invited by the Premier of New South Wales, The Hon Mike Baird, to give the 2016 Australia Day Address at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Most recently, he has been nominated for the 2017 Australia of the Year Awards.

I hope, in the course of the last ten minutes, that I have provided you with some compelling examples of the power of education. Too often the metrics used to measure a 'good university' are based solely on its capacity to produce 'job-ready' graduates. Universities must remain cognisant that our purpose is also something higher - to foster educated global citizens able to contribute to the development of

their community. I think - I believe - that Western Sydney University is doing just that.

I would like to end with a quote from UNESCO which I think succinctly captures the main theme of my speech tonight – that of the transformational power of education: ‘Education should be a means to empower children and adults alike to become active participants in the transformation of their societies. Learning should also focus on the values, attitudes and behaviours which enable individuals to learn to live together in a world characterized by diversity and pluralism.’

Thank you for inviting me to speak tonight; I hope you all have an enjoyable evening.