Guest Speaker's Speech

Ms. Juliana Rotich

- The University Chancellor, Hon. Prof. Margaret Kobia,
- The Chairman Board of Trustee and the Moderator of the 24th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, The Rt. Revd. Thegu Mutahi
- The Council Chairman and the Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Kenya, His Grace the Most Revd. Dr. Jackson Ole Sapit,
- The University Vice Chancellor, Prof. James Kombo
- Members of the University Governing Council and Board of Trustee
- Members of the University Management Board and Senate,
- Members of Faculty and Staff,
- The Graduating Class of 2025,
- Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to today's graduation ceremony. Let me take you back to 1984, I was in Standard three at Mukumu Girls in Western Province, this was before we had counties. We had PE/Physical education class and were told to run from one end of the field to the other. I closed my eyes (not sure why) and ran as fast as I could. In my mind, I thought I was doing great and surely would have a great result. I opened my eyes when I did not hear anyone else around me, and thought I was at the end of the field… I opened my eyes and I was dead last. That is when I realized, that this Nandi girl is not quite suited to running, there will be no marathon medals in my future. I turned to books, devoured the encyclopaedia and any book I could get my hands on. I had my dad's magnifying glass which I used to look at the spores on the moss, because I read about it in the Malkiat Singh encyclopaedia. I may not have known it then, but yes… I was a nerd. A geek, a bookworm, a choppie…what is the genZ word for this?

I mention this because all of us here have a multitude of journeys we've travelled and more to embark on. In all these journeys, we've got to keep our eyes open and aware of where we are and what the next step needs to be.

This graduation day is happening in a year, a decade of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Yes. The VUCA has been strong lately.

1. The speed of disruption is unprecedented. Global platforms like ChatGPT reached 100mn users globally in two months, something that took Netflix 3 and a half years, Facebook 4.5 years, telephone, 75 years. The time to adapt has shrunk significantly.

2. Predictions on AI/Artificial intelligence impact on the job market are divergent. A report by World Economic Forum predicts creation of 97 mn jobs, yet a Goldman Sachs report predicts displacement of 300mn jobs. - Uncertainty on where things will land.
3. AI capabilities are doubling approx every 6-10 months while AI safety research is less than 1% total investment. Indeed, increasingly powerful global platforms are built faster than measures can be put in place for safety, alignment with human values and protection from harm to people, institutions and governance systems.

There is rapid disruption that is outpacing our ability to predict, prepare, protect.

There are two Kenyans who inspire my thinking about AI, tech, and society. Considering my many years in the tech and entrepreneurship space, we can take two key learnings from them.

Starting with the story of MPESA, which you all know…when I was co-founding starting one of the ventures in crowdsourcing, 2008 - Mpesa had approximately 2.1 million users. Now it has more than 34 million. In yesterday's financial results announcement, Dr. Peter Ndegwa mentioned that purpose is a key pillar in Safaricom's strategy. In a TED talk this year, Sitoyo Lopokoiyit who is CEO of MPESA Africa provided the insight 60% of Kenya's GDP flows through MPESA and through the Hustler fund, we saw the single largest act of empathy at scale and second chances. Disruption can be flipped into transformation. When you observe disruptions, be it in tech, research techniques, tools, in your various fields… harness it and angle it towards transformation. Towards constructive value creation, and innovation. Work with the various shareholders and stakeholders to scale and it is possible to do this while staying true to your purpose and values.

The next lesson comes from Nanjira Sambuli. A noted researcher. In her recent appearance at the Doha Debates where she represented Kenya superbly, she emphasizes the need to maintain agency. Africa cannot afford to be a passive participant in the AI revolution. If we do not shape these technologies with our realities in mind, they will be shaped for us, and not in ways that necessarily serve us.

Through your studies, you have the skills, and at this university, you've also been given something valuable. A compass. The terrain is shifting so the map you thought you had may be obsolete in 6 months. Navigate using the values, lean on your skills and community you have created. Keep the connections you've made alive even after this day; as you will need each other to navigate the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity in the world.

With moral imagination, you can build technology that matters, innovate to serve the needs in your chosen field, fix the issues you see around you and last but not least, help others along the way as your brother's/sister's keeper.

This country needs your attention, your focus, your creativity in order to make our society resilient and adaptive in a world that is increasingly volatile. Protect your attention, your data and always remain the man… the woman in the arena.

Your agency, your participation, your entrepreneurship in this new era is not only critical, it is central to determining a future where we continue to be stewards and custodians of Kenyan society. Integrate tech with careful intent, iterate to keep evolving, and infinitely learn.

Thank you for your kind attention.