

Speech minister Meryame Kitir

Bursalen event op 7 december 2020

Dear representatives of VLIR, dear Professors,

But most of all: hello dear students,

What a pleasure to meet you all and to see all these young and enthusiast faces. Or at least those of you that are visible on my screen. Honestly, I have to admit that this is a welcome change from the daily online meetings with diplomats, other ministers, officials and politicians, I had to sit through since I was appointed minister two months ago.

When VLIR asked me to participate in this meeting and share some thoughts with you, I did not hesitate for one minute. Probably I am not the first to welcome you to Belgium, but I do hope that I am the first Minister you meet.

I might be stating the obvious, when telling that there are better circumstances to start an overseas experience. Undertaking this kind of adventure takes courage. I guess that you did not only come here to study, but also to enrich yourselves in many other ways. Of course you want to discover Belgium and Europe, but even more important this was an opportunity to explore your own future options.

Bad luck. For you have found COVID-19 on your path. The virus is boycotting your expeditions in many ways. We are all passing through difficult times. But for young people on the brink of starting their careers, it is even harder. The virus has robbed you of memorable experiences, of encounters with fellow students and of those determining moments. It has smothered your enthusiasm. It makes it harder to live your experience to the full. And for many of you the pandemic must also make you worry about those loved ones at home. Are they ok? Should I have stayed at home to help?

Going overseas means far more than achieving academic success. Studying abroad means being your own person, learning another language (how is your Dutch by the way?) and meeting new people. It also involves having fun: tasting Belgian beers, visiting museums, dancing or changing the world until three in the morning in a bar. Forging ties is a key element of the experience. And - who knows ? - also meeting your life long partner.

I never had the opportunity to study. But it is quite obvious that that would have been my preferred choice. I took a different road. Not an easy one, but I have always followed my heart

and I have met those kind of people that provided me with the trust and confidence I needed to become what I am today.

I am over 40 now and I rarely look back. When I became a Minister two months ago, a lot of attention was given to my unusual career path. Meanwhile, I was only thinking about the difference I had been making the last 20 years. First as a Trade Union representative in the automotive factory and then in the parliament. What I mean to say with all of this: please dare to follow your own path. Dare to take the road nobody is taking, even if all those around you want you to proceed on easier or more common paths. And most of all, dare to retrace your own steps if something does not turn out the way you want it to.

The only advice I can give you from experience is to follow your own goal. Mine was to better the lives of the people around me: first my family, then to help my colleagues at the factory or those I represented in parliament.... I want to be the voice of those that do not have the means to raise theirs. It is commonly said that our efforts to change things are just drops in the ocean. I strongly believe we need to value these small drops more. I do think that we can strive for a better world by making small steps into the right direction.

When you are young, of course all of this moves way too slow. But I am confident that we are moving forward and partly because of you. Whatever you are studying today: you do have the power to add your own drop of change. Do not let anyone tell you differently. Believe in yourself.

But I guess that is already what you are doing.

The main proof is that you are here today. Thanks to our aid and VLIR's efforts combined there are 300 of you spread over 5 universities. I am proud to meet 170 of you. You have experienced the quality of our universities meanwhile. They have not only been investing in your daily studies, but they have also tried to welcome you in difficult circumstance, to make your dream as real as possible. I wish to seize the moment to sincerely thank both VLIR and the individual universities for their efforts and especially for organizing this event.

Dear students,

In any way, you will return enriched by the experience. And when you get back you will – *or better should* – use your set of acquired skills to inspire others at home and to pass on your knowledge. Many have done this before you. I would like to raise the example of this young engineering student Vu Duc Dam. He studied at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* decades ago. Currently he is receiving worldwide acclaim for his successful containment of the Corona virus as a Vice Prime Minister of Vietnam.

I would also like to stress the importance of interuniversity collaboration. So when you return home do not forget Belgium. Create synergies through business, but foremost by linking your alma mater at home with your Belgian one. Learning is always a bi-directional process.

Before I end my speech, I would specifically call upon you young girls here. Sorry guys, but you have to forgive me. But we are still living in a men's world. We should not be naive. This is the reality. That glass ceiling? It needs many more cracks. Just until it disappears.

So, for the young women sitting here in front of me. I am proud of you. And you should be proud of yourselves. You have made it, where most girls could only dream of reaching this point. Too many girls are still discriminated during their educational career. Be a role model. Be a role model for your fellow female friends and colleagues, and girls in your family and hometown. But also be a role model for your male friends and colleagues. Show them your worth, and make sure they respect you for what you are. Bright, intelligent women who can change the world.

And for all of you, dear students, also the young men this time...:). If I may ask one thing to all of you, is to use your critical thinking to make this world a better place. Too many of us are disengaging from the public space and dialogue. I would like you to fully engage, to commit to being a citizen. A full citizen in a more equal world.

To conclude and maybe this is highly unusual, but these are unusual times, I would like to close my intervention by playing some of my favorite music. It has been too long since we have been able to enjoy dancing and singing together, exploits in the living rooms excluded. I want to share one of my favourite songs with you. And before leaving you I would like to tell you, please keep up your spirits in these dark winter evenings. Even in Belgium winter will end and spring will come.

In the end all be well.

Thank you!

Secondly, I believe in the strength of universities as laboratories of innovation and change. Not only on a scientific level, but mainly on a societal level. Critical thinking, the key 21st century skill, is something even more important than mere knowledge. And using that critical thinking in a constructive manner, in a dialogue with peers and strangers, is when innovation truly happens.