*Spoken word applies.*

***Prof. Dr. Roman Jerala***

Dear award winners, esteemed Mr Chancellor, President of the Commission, dear colleagues,

I am honoured, esteemed Mr Chancellor, that you have invited me to address this year’s laureates of Student Prešeren Prizes. I have myself mentored several students granted Prešeren and numerous other awards. Each such award is a source of great joy to a student and mentor alike. I can honestly say that I truly love being there with the students, not only when they receive prizes or finish some important work, but first and foremost when I see them infected with the enthusiasm of discovering something new.

The laureates present here today stand for something more than the standard requirements of studies. With your research work, your have embarked on the path of science. So let me share my thoughts on this occasion. Science is much more than the details and particularities of each discipline; it is a process, a way of thinking and a way of living. And most importantly, in my opinion, science is the total opposite of dogma. It takes courage and personal integrity to mercilessly discard a hypothesis if the results are not consistent with it, even though you might have devoted several years of your life to it. We scientists are capable of that. I wish to see similar integrity and openness in all walks of life. Years ago, a colleague from Sweden told me a funny saying on the subject: “It is OK to sleep with your hypothesis, but never marry one.” On the other hand, one should trust one’s work and move ahead courageously and ambitiously.

As I was writing this address, I kept asking myself: What kind of advice would I be interested in receiving at your age?

Be ambitious and go for the big fish, that is, important discoveries. We live in times that are very interesting and productive for science. It might have seemed that decades ago we had discovered everything that was worth discovering. But then breakthroughs occurred that opened up new directions for research: from the fields of life sciences to new materials, from physics to social network analyses. What is considerably different today is the fact that science is one of the most globalised activities. This means that you too are able to make an important discovery in much the same way as a student from Stanford or Saigon. Scientific achievements are accessible to almost everyone from around the world, and many scientific fields do not require expensive equipment. What one needs is willingness, ideas and persistent work. I assure you that the world of science still has plenty of trophy fish for you, just waiting to be caught. Be daring and open to new challenges, even though they might seem overwhelming at first sight. Life is too short to be wasted on routine. With all due respect to the professional work indispensable for the functioning of the economy, state administration, even the University, I feel that those of you gathered here want something more.

I can tell you that for an individual who boldly sets a goal and pursues it persistently, almost nothing is impossible. It may take a bit longer and the circumstances may not be favourable, but almost nothing is impossible for those who really put their mind to it.

You now have a world of possibilities ahead of you. Most of you have probably already considered further research or a group where you could pursue a doctorate. After that, your choices will have seemed to narrow down to a more focused specialisation during doctoral and postdoctoral training. And yet, you may change your field at any given time and set off in new directions. This does come with a price though, either in the form of several months spent studying the new field and experimental methods, or several years trying to assert yourself in the new field.

I advise every student to venture into the world for a few years, to learn from the best and then return to Slovenia, so that together, we can improve Slovenian science even further. If you choose to return to Slovenia only for holidays, then there will not be enough of us left striving for the progress of science. The way our homeland is run is the responsibility and right of each and every one of us. Slovenia offers the possibility to engage in science and we do precisely that. And our science can rank alongside the world’s best. So it is up to you, dear laureates, to make our science even better, so that people in Slovenia can be proud of it, so that the public’s attitude becomes a bit less neglectful, so that together we may create the conditions for a better and science-friendly society.

The prevalent opinion in Slovenia is that we stand out in terms of the degree of enviousness towards others, but I think it is no greater than in other modest-sized environments. It is only natural that each of us is taken just a tiny bit aback when a colleague succeeds in making a major publication. The key thing here is to focus one’s energy on working even harder instead of turning it into envy.

One of the most crucial decisions in my career was to organise a group of students to take part in the 2006 iGEM competition. This decision was not only an important step for the generations of students participating in these teams, but it was a watershed for me and the research of our laboratory’s associates. Now over half of our research is done in this field I knew absolutely nothing about in 2006. It turned out we are very good in this field of research because here, a good idea is key to success. And ideas can be brought to life without the need for complex infrastructure. I can safely claim that the work we do in our fields of expertise is recognised and appreciated the world over. And still our results must be twice as good as others’ in order to have our work accepted for publication in reputable journals.

So, what would my final messages to you be? Science is a wonderful way of life. Be ambitious, generous towards others, and rejoice when they succeed. Just like we rejoice today with you today on the occasion of your achievements.

I thank you for your attention and wish you plenty of success in the future!