

"The message I want to convey to you as Head of State is the following: you are welcome to Estonia," said President Toomas Hendrik Ilves who addressed the opening meeting of African Culture Week, which was organised by African students.

President Ilves, who was met by African students singing the national anthem of the Republic of Estonia, said the fact that more and more young persons from different countries choose Estonia and our universities as their place of study demonstrates the strength of education provided in Estonia. Just like young people from Estonia who go to some other country to continue their studies, the students who have come to our universities value the experience provided by the enlargement of the world.

What should you choose from Estonia to take back to your societies, asked President Ilves, in addressing the foreign students, and answered: "Why not the e-success story of Estonia, the so-called pilot project of liberal democratic digital society in the 21st century."

According to the Head of State, all countries need smart people and new skills, particularly smaller states like Estonia.

"In the 21st century world, the size of a country is not solely according to its area and population; it is also in terms of its openness to modern ideas and solutions. Young, educated people are those who can distribute such ideas and solutions," said President Ilves. "The mental size of a country is more important than its physical [geographic] size."

He encouraged Estonian universities to admit more foreign students, as the more we engage with each others and gain international experiences the easier it will become to eradicate suspicions and prejudice.

"Yes, I know, occasionally it must be difficult for you to be here. Yes, one may encounter racism in this country. This is something we need to talk about, instead of remaining silent. You must make yourself visible. African Culture Week is a good step in this direction," assured President Ilves.

"Doing things by ourselves or through civic initiative is one of the most important issues for me. I am pleased that African students have already established their own association and have organised such an event," he said.

African Culture Week, which was organised by the Association of African Students Estonia, includes a seminar, exhibition and football match between students and the members of the Riigikogu and Tallinn City Government. The week is full of good music, food and dancing. Currently, 130 students from 13 different African countries study in Tallinn University of Technology.

On Friday, 6 May, African culture, food, folk artefacts, music, dance and other forms of entertainment will be introduced in the Astrium building of Tallinn University. The event will start at 7 pm.

African Week will conclude on 7 May at Kalevi Stadium with a friendly football match between African students, members of the Riigikogu and Tallinn City Government. The game will start at 4 pm.

The Association of African Students Estonia (AASE) was established last year and the president of the association is Nkwusi Godswill, a postgraduate student of the Tallinn University of Technology. The association offers African students support and assistance in becoming adjusted to life in Estonia. The goal of the association is to foster the positive introduction and contribution of African culture and people to Estonian society, combined with enhancing the awareness of its membership of Estonian society and culture.

See also: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1300936413268963/> and <http://www.aaseesti.com>

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