From A Painting to the Big Ben

LIYSF has to be the most intelligent program of all time (after NSTF, of course 🤣). It is a forum where 500 brilliant young minds from around the world come together to explore STEM, share and showcase their ideas, and build relationships that extend far beyond the forum itself.

Thanks to God, I was also one of the fortunate few who had the opportunity to attend the forum in 2026, funded by the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation via NSTF. What followed was not simply a trip to London. It was an eye-opening and life-changing experience that changed the way I see science, engineering, and my own future.

My name is Khayelihle Mhlongo, and this is my London experience.

I left South Africa on the 18th of July 2026 from OR Tambo International Airport. Thanks to NSTF, the arrangements were smooth from the beginning. The flight was so long that, at some point, I even forgot I was flying. It was comfortable, and there was food served—which was, lowkey, one of the things I was looking forward to the most. And yes, the food was really nice!

I landed at Heathrow International Airport on the 19th of July, and from there we took a train to the LIYSF accommodation. We were warmly welcomed by the staff. We were among the first participants to arrive, so I took a nap. When I woke up and went to dinner, there they were: young people who could one day become the world's future leaders, scientists, doctors, engineers and innovators.

It was honestly a beautiful thing to witness.

Of course, Khaya had to start building meaningful relationships. You really never know who you might meet on your path to greatness.

Thereafter, the real adventure began.

For the next two weeks, we attended lectures, explored different fields of STEM, interacted with students from around the world and experienced what it felt like to be part of an international scientific community.

Most, if not all, of our days looked something like this: we would have an English breakfast at Imperial College London, meet up with our group for the day and then attend lectures, most of which we were able to choose according to our interests. We would receive lunch packs along the way before returning to Imperial College for the main lecture.

The main lecture was probably the best part of my day.

These lectures were delivered by successful, globally recognised scientists who had achieved incredible things in their careers. Sitting in a room with 500 other students and listening to these people tell their stories was something I will never forget.

What touched me most was realising that their journeys were not completely different from mine.

They also had challenges. They also had moments when they did not know exactly what the future held. Yet they continued.

For the first time, I felt that the future I had always imagined for myself was not simply a dream. It was something that could happen.

After the lectures, we would have dinner at Tara Hotel or Imperial College, and our days would usually end with a cultural event. Students from different countries performed and showcased aspects of their cultures.

I fell in love with Jamaican dancing culture!

But wait, there is more.

It was a fully scheduled trip, but we still found ways to fit our own wish lists into the free time we had. One of those wishes was to visit Big Ben.

And this became one of the most emotional moments of my entire journey.

When I was about 12 years old, my mother bought me a painting that had Big Ben on it. She jokingly told me that she wanted me to go there one day. I wrote the words “God is good” on that painting.

Years later, I was standing in front of the real Big Ben.

Guess what?

God is indeed good.

That moment reminded me of something I had almost forgotten: sometimes the things we once write down as dreams can eventually become memories.

Then came Oxford University.

Oxford has always been one of my dream universities, and getting the opportunity to visit it made me even more determined to apply there one day.

What fascinated me even more was discovering that Oxford has museums containing pieces of scientific history. One of them contains Albert Einstein's blackboard from a lecture he gave at the university.

And then I noticed something unexpected.

The calculations on the blackboard contained a mistake.

That small discovery made me ask myself a much bigger question:

Does being the best mean being perfect?

My answer was no.

Being the best does not mean never making mistakes. It means being willing to learn, improve, keep going and remain committed to becoming better.

Nobody is perfect.

But obsession with improvement can take you somewhere extraordinary.

That is why I can proudly say today that I am obsessed with success.

Not because I believe success means being perfect, but because I have realised that greatness requires consistency, determination and an unwillingness to settle for less than what you know you can become.

And perhaps that is the greatest gift LIYSF gave me.

It did not simply show me London.

It showed me what is possible.

It showed me that there are thousands of young people across the world who are dreaming, building, researching and preparing to change the world. More importantly, it showed me that I belong among them.

I know that the best way I can say thank you to NSTF and Minister Nzimande for making this life-changing experience possible is not simply through words.

I therefore promise nothing but OBSESSION—obsession with learning, obsession with growth, obsession with excellence, and ultimately, obsession with becoming the person I know I can be.

My everyday wish is that those who make experiences like this possible for us could truly understand what they mean to us.

Unfortunately, even being part of NSTF, even having a brilliant mind, or even being the Minister of Science and Technology cannot fully help you understand what happens when an opportunity like this reaches someone who is ready to receive it. What it does inside us.

The seed that was planted in us at LIYSF is bigger than the experience itself.

It is a seed of possibility.

And I intend to grow it.

Don't worry, Khaya will take you with him to London next time.

Until then, stay blessed.

With Joy and Satisfaction,

KHAYELIHLE SIPHESIHLE MHLONGO