

Official sundial unveiling – Thursday 12 June 2008

Transcript of speech given by HRH The Princess Royal

Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen, firstly it's a real pleasure to join you to help celebrate the 150th anniversary of the External degree programme. I think it is really rather astonishing to consider just how innovative the whole concept must have been in 1858. I suppose if we stop to think of what else was going on at the time, the concept of distance learning as far as Mauritius wouldn't have been an obvious experiment. But it worked, and it has opened doors to a whole range of students which probably would never have been open. And that says a lot about – not just those who created the idea and pursued it and made it real – but to those who have continued to make it possible and have allowed it to grow. And it has grown into an extremely well developed, large and successful operation, and it has taken British higher education to literally almost every corner of the world.

It is a real pleasure to preside over a number of their graduation ceremonies and to meet some of the students from all over the world – and from all walks of life – and to hear their stories and the reasons they took to the External degree system. They all have my admiration and respect for the self-motivation and discipline that that requires. And it doesn't really matter if you're in London, part of the UK, or in a completely different part of the world. Many of them, of course, study by themselves so that adds to the difficulties, but often holding down full-time jobs which strikes me as completely amazing. They're also supporting their families and they need the support of their families if they're going to do both. And some of those choose to study for a University of London degree with local institutions in their home countries, providing some of the tutorial support which gives them a little bit of the backup. Both of those options are hard work.

It is probably worth asking: alright, 150 years ago maybe the access to university degrees would have been unusual anyway, so that that was an attraction. But here we are 150 years later when, as you mentioned, the World Wide Web and information technology would seem to have the External System a bit old hat, and not quite up to speed. But this university provides a breadth of study programmes that really nobody else can do. There's a relevance to student needs and a flexibility to study for an internationally recognised qualification in their own time – and at their own pace – anywhere in the world. And, actually, at their own pace is probably rather crucial.

But I'm also delighted that Agricultural Economics is widely studied, with decision makers debating how best to address the world's food shortage. Well that's not something that happened last month when it became an issue in the media – this has been going on for some considerable time. That is a real encouragement, that there are people out there who've been having that debate. The courses in Sustainable Development have also been developed by the External System to help

meet the challenges that have been articulated in the Millennium Development Goals at the Rio Summit on Environment and Development; and the Declaration of the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development. Responding to, yes, global interests, but very much based on the local needs and the local inputs of the individuals concerned. International Primary Health Care is yet another course that brings together health professionals from all over the world, who are then able to share their experiences through interaction, certainly online, and that innovative approach won the programme the prestigious 2005 e-Tutor award. But it's also encouraging to know that Primary Health Care has such a high profile. Whatever we say about research into medicines and cures, primary health care and public health care are still the things that are going to make the biggest difference, and a worldwide understanding of how best to apply those standards is perhaps one of the most important areas of debate.

And these study programmes equip the student with much-needed skills, required to meet – not some of these global challenges specifically in food, health and the environment – but actually perhaps more importantly to involve individuals who have real experience in these debates at the appropriate levels. Sometimes, I think, we see that there are people who are rather far removed from living on a day-to-day with these problems, seem to have rather a high profile in discussing them and not much practice of living with them. This way, you really get the reality of the situation coming through.

And I'm delighted to see, if you look at the exhibition and read the book, five Nobel Prize winners – really quite an astonishing success rate. External System students making a real contribution to the world continues, and we have a number of those with us today who have made the best possible use of their External degree. Judge John Hicks was the first in his Chambers not to go to Oxbridge, but went on to become Head of Chambers and a High Court judge. And I'm very pleased to see Gordon Taylor here. He studied economics whilst playing professional football and is now Chief Executive of the English Professional Footballers' Association. I hope he's not unique, but maybe he can encourage others to follow in his footsteps.

But the list is actually endless, fortunately, at different levels and in different countries. It is clear that graduates of the External System do continue to make a real difference, not just to their own lives but to their fellow citizens and the wider global community. And I suppose you should say, well, these are highly self-motivated people who start down the External System, very highly focused, and they carry that on with them throughout their careers. I'm only too glad that there is an External System of this calibre and this broad programme spectrum that allows so many to take advantage of it. I always think that it is the forerunner of the concept of lifelong learning, because it was accessible to anybody, anytime, anywhere and I hope that this continues to set an example for many years to come. Irrespective of what the Net does, the network that is created by External

students and their desire to learn, and their ability to make use of information and knowledge out there, is a lesson for all of us. So I would merely not just add my congratulations, of course, to those who have studied successfully, but to those who have co-ordinated and supported here in London, and all the colleges brought in to support students wherever they are, who understand the value of External degrees and the scope that it gives them to reach so many more students.

So, as Chancellor, I congratulate the University of London External System, for all that it has achieved over the last 150 years. I have no doubt that it will continue successfully for many years to come.