

Official sundial unveiling – Thursday 12 June 2008

Transcript of speech given by Sir Graeme Davies, Vice-Chancellor of the University of London

This is a very special occasion where we create a permanent and lasting memorial to our 150th Anniversary of the External System.

If you look at some of the documents that are around you, you will see that it reflects someone who had a deeply developed imagination. The fact that the System itself was created in 1858 to deal with some of the needs of the United Kingdom is perhaps not surprising, knowing how sparsely universities were distributed across England, in particular. But the fact that, by 1865, we had our first examinations in Mauritius – and if you just think for a moment about the problem of getting the examination papers to Mauritius in 1865, sat, getting them back, marking them, getting the results back to Mauritius – clearly we had a group of students at that time who were immensely patient.

But over the years, as you can see from the displays and from the history which you are invited to take with you, you'll learn that the External System has proven itself to be just amazingly flexible. And when Christine Kenyon Jones wrote our history she turned up all sorts of information which was sort of hidden in the background – we had a vague feeling it was there, but we hadn't really looked at it very systematically. And that history brings that out very clearly and puts the lie to what is often a common notion that distance education is really quite a new invention and that without the World Wide Web and Virtual Learning Environments there would be no distance education.

Almost every university in Britain owes some small debt to the University of London's External System because we always bridged the gap between conception and royal charter and, in a number of cases of very important institutions – Exeter, Hull, Nottingham, Leicester – we really were the degree-awarding body for a great many years until they matured and became universities in their own right in the latter half of the last century.

So, the footprints of the University of London External System are all over the world. And, therefore, it is a great pleasure, Chancellor, to have you with us today to unveil our armillary sundial and to say a few words. You have been an absolute stalwart. I know from my predecessors that your commitment to supporting the External System – particularly through the degree ceremonies – has been monumental. So, thank you very much for being with us and thank you all for being with us to share the honour of this occasion. It's now my pleasure to invite the Dean of the External System, Professor Jonathan Kydd, to say a few words.