

Graduation 2011 Acceptance Speech Honorary Graduate Sir John Ashworth

Chancellor; Vice-Chancellor; Public Orator; Fellow Graduands.

Thank you Public Orator for those kind words. There is nothing quite so satisfying in life as public recognition from your peers. That is what economists call a “Positional Good” and it is, quite literally, beyond price. Of all the positional goods open to an academic an honorary degree is the most cherished and so I thank you, my former colleagues and the Senate, for the honour that you are bestowing on me this morning.

My fellow Graduands, though, have been awarded real, not honorary, degrees. This is your day. A chance for you, and your parents and friends, to bask in the glory of three years well spent and a degree well deserved. You will look back on your time here, I hope with pleasure, and I am sure with gratitude for the education you have received and for the friends you have made. Now you stand on the threshold of your career and whatever that is to be I know that your time here will stand you in good stead and give you a great start in your life to come. The future has always belonged to the young, of course, but never has it been so obvious that all our futures now depend on those fortunate enough to have been educated in the Biological Sciences. If the C19 was a time when industry depended on mechanical engineering and the C20 a time when the key underpinning sciences were chemistry and physics the C21 will be when biology comes into its own. The only way in which we can build an infinitely sustainable economy on this planet is for us to utilize the biological sciences, and the systems they describe, to the utmost to sustain us. You and your colleagues will be the key to establishing and developing those industries and the economies that they will underpin. By the time you're my age, at least some 10 billion people are going to depend on you getting it right.

The ability to sequence DNA cheaply has opened up possibilities of exploiting and controlling biological systems in ways that we can still only glimpse – personalized medical procedures so we do not subject those who are ill to inappropriate and sometimes dangerous treatments; novel food crops able to grow with fewer adverse environmental side effects; farming rather than destroying the seas and, tantalizingly close, that merger of microelectronics, material science and biology that will produce products and prosthetics that will dominate your lives if not mine. Like all fundamental changes these are not without their moral and ethical dilemmas, of course, and here you, having received your biological education in one of the UK's premier social science universities, should be able to guide us through the crises that will arrive rather better, I trust, than my generation, who coped, or rather did not cope very well, with the early days of what was then termed “genetic manipulation.”

When I first came to Wivenhoe nearly 40 years ago to establish the Department, Biology was still finding its feet as a discipline distinct from Botany and Zoology. We thought ourselves – and we were right - pioneers in that regard here at Essex. But none of us really envisaged the new industries that have grown from the advances that have been made in our understanding since that time or of the important role our students would be playing in the C21. So it is wonderful to see that over 300 of you graduated here this morning. In 1974 when I sat in an office in the then Chemistry Department on Square 3 planning our first courses and preparing to welcome our first couple of dozen students to the converted stables behind Wivenhoe House, I could not have imagined that in 2011 that there might be so many Biological Science students getting their degrees here today. That this is so is a great tribute to my then colleagues; to all of our successors and, of course, to all of you graduating today. I am honoured to be here with you and to be able to share this day with you. Graduands: I congratulate and salute you. Well done!