

Graduation 2012 Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Dr Tony Rich

(Read by Mr Chris Rich)

Thank you Chancellor. Unfortunately my Dad cannot deliver this response himself so he has reluctantly allowed me to do it under his watchful eye.

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen, I am deeply grateful for the honour that the University has bestowed on me. For the first time, my father is attending one of my degree ceremonies today and I know that he will have greatly enjoyed Colin's oration. Had my mother been with us, she might even have believed it. I'm so pleased that so many of you have managed to make this occasion. It's great to see you all here.

I would like to dedicate this award and the renaming of the Teaching Centre to all my former colleagues in the Professional Services. Although very much working as a partnership with the academic community, the Professional Services are the unsung element of the University who help to keep everything running smoothly and enable our academic colleagues to conduct the first rate teaching and high quality research that makes this institution such a successful university. The Teaching Centre is a fine example of this partnership – a project conceived within Estate Management to address an academic need, making creative use of a large redundant space (the old boiler house) in the centre of the campus. I hope all my Professional Service colleagues will feel that they too are participants in the receipt of this award.

One of the University's great strengths lies in its people and the organisational culture that has evolved over nearly 50 years. What are the features of this organisational culture? In part, I believe, they stem from the original vision of founding Vice-Chancellor Albert Sloman in his seminal 1963 Reith Lectures, *A University in the Making*. Strikingly, the values that Albert Sloman declared half a century ago remain central to Essex today:

“the really fundamental problem is the kind of university [the new institution] is going to be. In face of the pressures for large-scale research, for increased numbers, for more vocational and specialist training, it must continue to be a place of intellectual rigour, a teaching institution of the highest quality, a community committed to the pursuit of learning. It must stand for excellence. And this means change.”

Sloman's words resonate with the issues that Ivor Crewe and Colin Riordan have grappled with and will continue to face Anthony Forster when he arrives in the summer. A sense of community is critical, but the physical nature of the University has also played an important role in shaping its culture. The very fact of its geographical layout mean that departments and schools live alongside each other and the professional services very much cheek by jowl and I believe that this has contributed to greater interdisciplinarity and mutual respect than is the case at many institutions. The physical integration of the Students' Union is also a contributor to the strong relations that exist between the SU and the University. The sense of friendship, community and collegiality at Essex has been further emphasised to me by the very warm and considerate support that I have received during my recent illness. I have been greatly touched by the kindness of so many friends and colleagues here today.

All universities have important roles to play within their localities – as was evident from the outset with the great civic universities, but perhaps less so with the 1960s institutions. However, this

attitude has changed over the past decade or so and I believe Essex is now much more firmly established as a key player at local and regional level, whilst also pursuing its national and international agenda. The exciting developments in Loughton, Southend, Suffolk and on the Knowledge Gateway here in Colchester have taken the University in a different direction to many of its peers, but they have allowed Essex to grow and to cement a range of regional partnerships that have proved important in widening the social intake into UK higher education, providing opportunities to people for whom there would otherwise have been none. I am very grateful to the support provided by local authorities, politicians, FE and HE partners (especially UEA) and many others throughout Essex and Suffolk in helping to bring our plans to fruition. Much remains to be done, but a huge amount has been achieved.

I would like to reflect on the role of universities in today's society. Reverting again to the Reith Lectures, Albert Sloman set out his view almost 50 years ago:

“For a university ... is a community where the student is guided in the first stage of a life-long task of self-education, a community whose concern is not just with the pursuit of learning but with the fulfilment of lives.”

Recent governments have concentrated on HE's role within the economy. There is nothing wrong with that, but it should not be the sole objective of Higher Education. The new fee regime introduced by the Tory-led Coalition Government has placed a very considerable financial burden on the student. I believe that this balance has shifted too far and that, when public finances allow, we should redress this situation and view higher education as more of a public good and less of a private good.

We must be wary of the short-termist approach of politicians. Harvard President Drew Faust eloquently emphasised in Dublin in 2010 the long-term perspective offered by HE:

“As stewards of centuries-old traditions of higher learning, we must [ensure] that the understandable effort to promote what is valuable not eclipse our support for what is invaluable. When we define higher education's role principally as driving economic development and solving society's most urgent problems, we risk losing sight of broader questions, of the kinds of inquiry that enable the critical stance, that build the humane perspective, that foster the restless scepticism and unbounded curiosity from which our profoundest understandings so often emerge. Too narrow a focus on the present can come at the expense of the past and future, of the long view that has always been higher learning's special concern.”

I have always believed in the power of education to liberate minds, to open up opportunities and to change lives. This University has a proud record in that respect, particularly in terms of its research and its widening participation programme – which genuinely has opened up opportunities for families with no previous HE experience and which has changed lives. I feel very proud to have been part of such a university for a quarter of its history. And I expect the University to move on to greater achievements in the future.

I would like to offer my profound gratitude to the University for its generosity today – both the honorary degree and the renaming of the Teaching Centre. I am deeply moved. I have been very fortunate to have worked in a job that has been so enjoyable for more than 12 years. It has been a real privilege to have worked with so many talented, stimulating and committed colleagues across academic departments and Professional Services.

Thank you all so very much.