

## SPEECH FOR A UNIVERSITY VICE CHANCELLOR

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**Client:** UK university

**Project:** Keynote address, graduation ceremony

Ladies and gentleman...colleagues...distinguished guests... and above all, new graduates... I'm delighted to address you on this special day.

A day that not only marks the successful conclusion of studies for more than 200 students, but also the start of what we hope will be fulfilling and happy lives beyond this university.

It's customary at these ceremonies to talk about endings and beginnings, and of course the challenges and opportunities that you'll encounter in the so-called real world.

And if a speaker is feeling particularly clairvoyant, you might also hear some musings on the meaning of life.

That's a grand aim, but I have a more cautious and grounded approach; I'm going to tell you what I know for sure and what I don't know for sure.

Because if the wisdom of age and the voice of experience tell us anything, it's simply this: how little we really know.

Fortunately, I'm in good company. Isaac Newton, who helped to unravel some of the mysteries of the universe, made a humbling admission about self-knowledge near the end of his life. He said:

***"I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then by finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay undiscovered before me."***

Think about that for a second...the *great ocean of undiscovered truth*. What a lovely phrase, what a sobering reflection.

Less poetically, the historian and philosopher Will Durant said that: "education is the progressive discovery of our own ignorance".

Before I revisit that thought and offer a more optimistic interpretation, I'll say one thing without hesitation: graduates, this is your hour. It's the culmination of three or four years of hard work, and the celebration of your commitment, application, and learning.

I'm sure there were occasions when you questioned your decision to pursue higher education, days when the pressure of exams and the routine of books and libraries and lectures all took their toll.

But as I look around this room, I see a shared pride in your achievement. Family and friends, university staff, supporters, distinguished guests – we are all here to applaud and congratulate you.

Above all, you should be proud of your own achievements. Proud of the huge intellectual, emotional and financial commitment that has earned you your degrees and secured you a seat in this room.

So, what next? Here you are, certificates in hand, new letters gracing your names, at the end of the undergraduate road. Where do you go from here?

Yes, it can seem daunting. But never doubt that your studies have been worthwhile. Whatever directions you take, whatever careers and occupations you follow, a good education unquestionably makes you better equipped for life.

Better informed. Better adjusted. Better protected.

Isaac Newton was right to say that knowledge has limits, that however well-stocked we think our minds are, there is always more to discover, more to absorb and process. It's an endless journey.

But ignorance is blight and not bliss, and learning makes us aware of our limitations in a positive and constructive way.

By that I mean critical self-awareness. In other words, perhaps what Newton was saying is that a truly educated mind is always restless, always open to new ideas and possibilities, constantly in search of a more complete and perfect understanding.

His 'ocean of truth' is plenty deep for those with the ambition to do more than skim the surface.

However, remember that knowledge isn't necessarily power, just as degrees don't automatically confer jobs or provide a shortcut to easy street.

What a university education gives you is a perspective on life, a sharper and fuller set of intellectual tools, and a wealth of experiences – some good, some bad, but none wasted.

Now it's up to you to take the next step, to apply what you've learned and profit from your time here; and the good news is that there's no core curriculum in the outside world – the choices are all yours.

I began with some philosophical words from Isaac Newton, and now I'll close at the other end of the human spectrum.

Woody Allen once said that: "80 percent of success is just showing up." I've often wondered what that glib, frequently quoted, phrase means. Now I think I know.

It means taking the first step, being committed, having personal resolve and determination.

I might question the percentage, as there's far more to success than just *being there* and showing your face. But once you've committed yourself to a goal, things often start to move in your favour – a law of motion that Isaac Newton would have appreciated.

You've shown up, you've studied long and hard, and today's ceremony is proof that you've succeeded. So be proud of yourselves and your achievements, and now build on that success in whatever paths you take from this university.