Honorary Fellows Dinner 2015

Chair of Council, Honorary Fellows, former Principals, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to welcome you to this year’s Honorary Fellows dinner and to update you briefly on College developments.

But first, let me add my congratulations to our new Honorary Fellows.

You are a very special group of people who, along with our other Fellows and Honorary Graduates, are recognised not only for your achievements, but for your continued commitment and support of the College.

To you all, welcome and thank you.

Last week’s General Election reminds us of two themes that I want to touch on in my address tonight.

The first is the unpredictable nature of events.

This and past elections, remind us how much things can change and in my recent addresses at this dinner, I have reflected on the challenges that this brings….the financial burden placed on students and their families, the cost pressures facing our staff during a period of pay restraint and the shifting educational and training needs of organisations competing in a global economy.

Whilst presenting challenges, change has positive impacts too.

Indeed, it is our changing environment, perceptions and knowledge that is the lifeblood of our academic disciplines, presenting new challenges and problems for our world class academics to tackle.

It was in this context that this year we looked forward to the outcome of REF2014: the UK government’s periodic review of the quality and impact of research in our universities.

This nationwide exercise is a reflection of our ability to respond to the challenge of change: testing the extent to which each discipline has conducted world-leading research, breaking new ground and developing new understanding.
In a highly competitive research environment, this College held its own, with stunning results across many of our departments.

REF2014 showed our departments of Geography, Earth Science, Psychology, Economics, Music and Media Arts, to be amongst the leading departments in the UK.

It recognised our excellent work in Mathematics and Information Security, Modern Languages and Drama…and our remaining departments all delivered credible results that showed outstanding research work of international standard.

These are good outcomes, but in a competitive world, we need to reflect on how we can further improve.

Analysis of the mass of detail surrounding our REF results shows that our research outputs – that is the research papers, journal articles, monographs, conference presentations and artistic performance –produced by our academic staff, places us 15th in the country, sitting firmly amongst the best research universities.

Over the coming years, we will need to continue to nurture the talent that creates this research, whilst resisting the temptation, followed by some vice-chancellors, to confuse nurturing with micro-management.

It will be important also to ensure that our talent is built on a sustainable basis.

Buying-in talent doesn’t always give the best long-term results.

The tradition of ‘growing our own’ has proved a long-term strategy that delivers, perhaps much like a well-known football team in my former home town in the north-west!

The core of our research output is grounded in excellent staff, recruited and developed on a sustainable basis.

Where we need to direct our future efforts is in improving the impact that our research makes, this now being an important measure in the most recent and future research assessment exercises.

In REF 2014, we had some strong impact across the humanities and sciences, but not enough.
We need to learn from the very best examples we have and spread good practice across all our departments.

For this reason, our Research and Enterprise office will be investing more effort in supporting our academics in this area.

I am confident that with these changes, together with the continued support of our honorary fellows and graduates, our REF 2020 result will place us in the top universities across all measures of research.

Both the general election and these REF results highlight my second theme tonight, the cyclical nature of much of our lives.

Our College calendar is heavily driven by the academic year, the cycle of student recruitment and events like the REF.

But beyond these annual and five-yearly cycles, there is a much bigger cycle that spans generations and often reminds us of, and draws upon, our historical roots.

One example, is our recent #votebecause campaign, designed to re-engage young people in politics and in the exercise of democracy through the ballot box.

The campaign, supported by our students’ union, staff and our local MP, Philip Hammond, played to our deep-rooted history of fighting for women’s rights and universal suffrage.

The campaign impact was seen in wide media coverage in national newspapers and on the BBC.

As well as this theme of equity and fairness, College life is often dominated by the sense of ‘place’.

At both Royal Holloway and Bedford colleges, physical surroundings have always played an important part in daily life, as well as reminding us of the magnificent legacy of our founders.
Today’s campus has been built by cycles of development, from the original Founders Building, through the merger years of the late eighties when buildings like Queens, Wolfson and McCrea were built and the expansion years of the nineties with the building of the Bedford Library and later, the Windsor building.

Following the adoption of our strategic plan in 2013, in which we seek to modestly grow our student numbers, we have now designed and are launching the next phase of our campus’ development.

Yesterday, at the May meeting of Council, we finalised the financial arrangements that, together with our own reserves, will support a £150m campus development programme, the biggest and most comprehensive to take place since the building of Founders itself.

Celebrating our heritage and physical assets, the programme will see the construction of four major buildings over the next few years:

- A 600-bed student residence, built in town-house style on the north side of the A30

- A stunning new library and student service centre, built alongside the Windsor building, complementing Founders and creating a wonderful courtyard and garden space between what will be three iconic buildings

- A new science building that will house our proposed electronic engineering activity, as well as expansion in our science portfolio, and

- A new music and media building to house these two world-class departments in contemporary and practical space that meets the modern needs of these disciplines.

In addition, enabling projects will see improved parking provision, a better, more user-friendly entrance to Founders, a new multi-faith prayer room, new student launderette and completion of the boiler house development.

Refurbishment of buildings and consolidation of departments into contiguous space, will follow, all of which are designed to provide world class facilities for students and staff, as well as supporting new programmes such as our LLB in Law, our new dance programmes and growth in existing popular subjects across our three faculties.
At a time when, sadly, some of our universities are having to retrench and consolidate after rapid and over-optimistic expansion, we at Royal Holloway are enjoying an optimistic future that builds upon our strengths and seizes the opportunities afforded to us in a changing world.

Many things will change in the years ahead, but with these long-term plans and the solid support of our fellows, graduates and friends, we can remain on track to deliver world-class research and an excellent student and staff experience...something that our Founders and predecessors would be proud of.

Finally, all of this would not be possible without the guidance, support and encouragement of Council, our governing body.

It is they who have had the foresight, like our Founders, to act boldly and decisively entrusting to our staff and students the creation of a legacy that I hope we can all be proud of.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention and please now enjoy your dinner.