

The speech by HKU President Professor Peter Mathieson at the Inauguration Ceremony for New Students 2017

August 30, 2017

Distinguished colleagues and guests, new students of the University of Hong Kong:

Good morning and welcome to HKU, whether you are here in this magnificent Grand Hall or upstairs in Lecture Theatre 2, or indeed watching online.

First, to our new students: a warm welcome to you all. You are joining an illustrious university - the only English-speaking comprehensive university in China, one with a distinguished history and an excellent international reputation. You will become valued members of our over 199,000 strong HKU family: that is the staggering number of alumni that HKU already has around the world. Next year that number will exceed 200,000. I tell people that students are not just students, they are future alumni: our completion rates (i.e. the proportion of students that complete their courses to graduation) are extraordinarily high at 98.5%. This means that although today you see a long path ahead of you and a lot of hard work to ensure that you do indeed complete your studies and graduate from HKU in 4, 5 or 6 years' time, statistically you are almost certain to do so. This doesn't mean that you can relax and do nothing, what it means is that you have to follow the path of your predecessors, work hard to keep up the standards of HKU and ensure that you capitalise on the opportunities that being a student at HKU will bring to you: if you do so, you are very likely to succeed.

Many of our alumni are leaders in their respective fields, and we pride ourselves on providing an environment where future leaders will develop and be nurtured. Congratulations also go to your parents, teachers, family and friends for supporting you in your efforts so far. With their help, and your hard work and dedication you have earned yourselves a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Let me tell you how I see the potential outcomes of that opportunity. Universities are places of transformation: the changes that you will experience in the next few years are twofold.

The first aspect is the personal: you will gain new knowledge, make new friendships, have new experiences, enjoy much greater freedom than ever before. We will treat you as adults, capable of thinking for yourselves, making tough choices, learning from mistakes. In return, we will expect you to behave as adults: respecting the views of others even if they are very different from your own. You will need to make decisions about your studies, your extra-curricular activities, your social lives and your personal lives. Learning to weigh up the pros and cons of any given situation, deciding what you want to do, understanding and accepting the consequences of those decisions, are very important life skills which will develop your character, integrity and values by which you wish to live your life. The University is dedicated to helping you to succeed.

We are very concerned about the pressures that young people in Hong Kong feel. Whilst an element of competition is undoubtedly healthy, we know that you have high expectations of yourself and that there are high expectations from families, teachers, friends and indeed from society generally. Sadly, in recent years some young people in Hong Kong have been driven to contemplate committing suicide: when they do so it is a tragic waste of young life and future potential and we want to do everything we can to prevent any student from reaching the point

where they see no other solution. We have information services, counselling and support structures, mentorship schemes and intervention mechanisms to help students in distress but these are not effective unless people know about them and are prepared to use them. Remember that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of strength! Understanding ourselves and enhancing our resilience can be effective in facing daily challenges. Remember you are not alone in facing difficulties, you are a member of the Hong Kong U family. You can yourself be very effective in detecting signs of distress: in yourself, in your friends or classmates or in other students that you meet. If you see these things, please take action on them. The University can and will help: together we can ensure that the pressures that young people feel are not overwhelming and can be successfully managed.

One thing I remember being told when I arrived at university myself was that since university entry is highly competitive, I would now be surrounded by high achievers and it would be harder to “stand out from the crowd”. We know that it is difficult to get into HKU: that’s why my main message to you today is one of congratulations. Well done on securing a place here, be very proud of yourself. However, you might be accustomed to being at or near the top of your class at school but now you are surrounded by others with just as much ability. University can sometimes make you feel as if you are out of your depth. See this community of excellence as a positive not a negative, a plus not a minus: enjoy it, benefit from the excellence of the people around you, make the most of your potential. And please remember: it is important that you understand that it is perfectly acceptable to ask for help, a sign of strength not a sign of weakness.

The second aspect of university is much wider than the personal: through your time at this university you can contribute to making the world a better place. We aim to equip you to be a significant contributor to society. The University of Hong Kong has brilliant teachers and talented researchers that are contributing to new knowledge, we have wonderful facilities for teaching and learning and for research. We will also help you to capitalise on opportunities outside Hong Kong: these may be study exchanges, experiential learning or internships, they may be in Mainland China or overseas, they may be short-term or long-term. They will take you outside your comfort zones, allow you to make new friends and contacts in very different parts of the world from those with which you are familiar. You will have the chance to find something which really interests you and captures your imagination. We will encourage entrepreneurship: maybe you will start a new business and become rich and famous, maybe you will do something on a much smaller scale which doesn’t make you rich but gives you rewards and satisfaction in different ways: it doesn’t really matter what you do, just that you seize the opportunities to make yourself the best you can be, to improve your own world and the world of those people around you.

You are joining the University of Hong Kong at a very exciting time in its 106-year history. The University has always played an important role in the history of Hong Kong itself, and this has certainly been true in the time I have had the privilege of being President. I take it as a sign of the significance of the University of Hong Kong that people in Hong Kong, and not only those directly connected with the University but also the media, politicians and the general public are fascinated by what happens here. These are signs that Hong Kong U matters, now and into the future, and this is a big responsibility for all of us. As HKU students, you may at some point be surprised to find that total strangers who may have nothing to do with the University will now be very interested in you. Always remember that Hong Kong U is a publicly funded university. That means that in some way, those strangers are in part paying for your tuition. It also means that, in

turn, you are an ambassador for HKU. And just in case you feel that's a lot of pressure on you, remember that it applies to me too! So remember, you and I, we all have a responsibility to do justice to that trust that the Hong Kong people have in us.

Our guest speaker today is Mr Carlson Tong and in many ways he holds the cheque book that pays for everything you see here today, including me and all the staff of the University. He is chairman of the University Grants Committee, the UGC, which is the body that administer the government funding that underwrites the eight public universities in Hong Kong. So he also shares that responsibility to the public to ensure that the money is wisely spent and that the strategic plans of the universities are aligned with their mission. University presidents like me don't always agree with the UGC but we do understand and respect the reasons for their policies and procedures. We regularly have the opportunity to discuss and debate issues with Carlson and his colleagues and it is a sign of the respect that I have for him and the difficult job that he does that I suggested we should invite him to be our guest speaker today. Mr Tong, like some of you, is a graduate of St Paul's Co-educational College and after a distinguished career in accounting including becoming chairman of KPMG in Hong Kong and the Asia Pacific region, he has devoted his considerable energies to education including a period as chairman of the English Schools Foundation, important work to support children with special educational needs, a leading role at the Hong Kong Sports Institute and now chairmanship of the UGC. I am very grateful to him for joining us today and I look forward to hearing his words of wisdom in a moment.

My job is to ensure that the University provides you with the environment to unleash and maximize your potential: teaching and learning that is responsive to your needs and wishes, research to push back the frontiers of knowledge, extra-curricular activities that allow you to pursue your ideals and develop your skills. HKU is a great place, doing well in all the world's major rankings, actively modernising and planning for the future, never resting on our laurels or being complacent that our history ensures our future without continuing development and hard work. My colleagues and I in the senior management of the University are aiming to make HKU even better. We are committed to providing an environment where you can further improve yourselves and your prospects in the world. As you do so, you will help us all to make the world a better place.

Let me close by saying once again: welcome to the University of Hong Kong! Thank you for joining us, and all the very best for your futures. I envy you: I wish I was young like you and just starting out on my university career. Today's world is a very exciting and stimulating place. We know that you have the ability to succeed: if you didn't you wouldn't have been able to secure a place here against such strong competition. Now you just need to capitalise on the openings that will come your way in the next few years. I am very confident that in the audience today are future leaders in all sorts of areas of endeavour: will you be one of them? There's only one person who can make it happen. That person is you.

Thank you very much.