

**Address from Professor Sir David Cannadine  
Manchester Degree Ceremony, Bridgewater Hall, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2016**

Vice Chancellor, fellow graduates, ladies and gentlemen:

I am hugely touched by the warmth and generosity of what has just been said about me, about my life and about my work, and I fear that no words of mine could ever adequately express my gratitude and appreciation. Thank you so much for your very kind remarks, which I shall always remember with pride and with pleasure.

This is -- I hope I am allowed to say -- a great day for me. But it is also -- and this I am determined to say -- an even greater day for all of you. Because unlike me, you have actually earned the degrees you are all being awarded today, and that is truly something to celebrate and applaud, and for all of you, much more than me, to take pride and pleasure in.

As I'm sure you all know, the Open University was founded by the British prime minister, Harold Wilson, during the late 1960s. He regarded the OU as his greatest and most influential and most lasting achievement, which it undoubtedly was and is; and by agreeable coincidence his son, Robin Wilson, would eventually become an OU Professor of Mathematics.

When the Conservatives defeated Labour at the general election of 1970, there were many in Edward Heath's Cabinet who wanted the still-fledgling OUY closed down, because there was a danger of too many ordinary people getting the sort of higher education they should not be allowed to have, for fear that they might start forming opinions of their own. But one minister faced down her colleagues, and ensured the OU survived, and that was the Secretary of State for Education, Margaret Thatcher.

And so, thanks to the unlikely pairing of Harold Wilson and Margaret Thatcher, the OU was established and safeguarded, and it has thrived and flourished ever since -- and in the process, it has transformed the landscape of learning and of higher education, and also the lives and opportunities of thousands of people -- as witnesses so powerfully and so impressively by your collective presence here today.

One way in which the OU transformed higher education for ever and for the better was in overturning the previously prevailing assumption that if you didn't go to university between the ages of eighteen and twenty three, then you would never go to university at all. But the OU changed all that, proclaiming instead that higher education should be available to people of all ages, and it is marvellous to see people of all ages graduating here today.

The second way in which the OU has irrevocably transformed higher education for the better was by offering an alternative to the prevailing practice that you had to go away to university, live in a hall of residence on a campus, and take three years out of your life to study full time for a degree. Instead, the OU offered a very different model: you didn't have to go away

from home, you didn't have to give up work, and you could take as long as you needed to get your degree -- and many of you have indeed worked long and hard for the degrees you are receiving today.

These two fundamental innovations which the OU made possible have transformed the landscape of learning and the lineaments of lives, by making it possible for many more people to obtain a higher education than ever before. And this widening of access, which the OU has done so much to make happen and to make possible, is not only something that all of you embody, proclaim and celebrate, but is also something about which I myself care very deeply.

For perhaps like some -- or like many -- of you, I was the first member of my family to go to university. It was an experience and an opportunity that completely transformed my life, and immeasurably for the better. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that without it, I would not be here today, just as some of you would not be here today. And that is something for which we can all be equally grateful.

One last point, if I may. Do not think that because you have graduated today, your education is now over, finished, been there done that. For the habit of curiosity, and the desire to learn, which have been nurtured and encouraged during your time as OU students, are things that should stay with you for ever. There are always new things to learn, new ideas to engage with, new viewpoints to assimilate and to explore. Truly, learning is a lifelong experience, and as the graduates of the one British university pre-eminently dedicated and devoted to that mission, I hope that is something you will never forget.

Rudolph Nureyev once observed that education was the most important thing in life, because no one could ever take it away from you. That strikes me as a very wise remark and profound thought. But what I hope you will all take away today is a wholly justified sense of pride and pleasure in what you have achieved and what you have accomplished. So while this is an unforgettable day for me, I hope it is an even more unforgettable day for all of you. And I end these remarks of mine in the only way I can, as I say: hurrah for the Open University; my heartfelt congratulations to you all; and my warmest good wishes for the better and finer lives that you will all now be able to lead, and not only to your benefit, but to this country's benefit, too. Good luck, well done, and bravo.

**ENDS**