

Speech by Sir Graeme Davies, Vice-Chancellor, University of London at the 2010 Queen's Anniversary Prizes Banquet at Guildhall, City of London

Your Royal Highness, Excellencies, colleagues, my lords, ladies and gentlemen. First I must thank President Levin for his very thoughtful and thought-provoking address. Highly appropriate on a night when we wish to celebrate innovation and creativity. For all of us I am sure you are pleased to be here to acknowledge what has been achieved in this, the Eighth Round of The Queen's Anniversary Prizes. For me it is of course a special pleasure since three of the colleges of the University of London are among the 21 prize winners.

As you've all heard, it is very widely recognised that these are important prizes. They are held in the highest of esteem. In fact it is really admirable the way in which The Royal Anniversary Trust has gained such prestige in the further and higher education sectors since it started down this complicated route in 1993. As President Levin emphasised, looking at the details behind the awards tells us quite a lot about our sector and the quality of commitment that comes from those of our colleagues within this sector.

But there seem to be signs of storms ahead and there are people both inside and outside our two sectors who have I think adopted a rather unfortunate, somewhat Jeremiah-like stance towards the future in the light of what they see as really quite difficult and devastating financial stringencies. I must say, in a rather hackneyed way, this rather reminded me of that hoary old story of Mark Twain's response to reading about his obituary in the New York Journal: "The report of my death has been greatly exaggerated!" And I feel that this is certainly the case with further and higher education in this country.

In the more than 20 years that I've been a vice-chancellor, I have seen financial stringency in almost every year. There are problems but what has always impressed and pleased me is the skills and ingenuity with which the sector has managed itself. Some of you in this room may even remember the serious issues of 1981 when universities faced cuts of up to 20 or more per cent. All of them are still here. All of them are still thriving. All of them have been through difficulties but they've come through those difficulties and they have taken forward their commitment to excellence and achievement in teaching and research without reservation. There is no doubt

that our further and higher education institutions are important and fundamental parts of the landscape. I judge them to be managed effectively and efficiently and very, very well led in almost every case. It's interesting to note, and sadly often forgotten, that we are acknowledged in the top levels of government – despite some of the things that are said – as being of basic importance to the country. Higher education is the second biggest earner of foreign exchange in our economy.

Some wee while ago I was put on an economic committee in London, along with basically industrialists and commercial people, and I went to my first meeting and I know that I would be asked to say something about higher education. Perhaps, I anticipated, even in a slightly patronising way. So I thought about that and recognised – and please forgive me those of you who are from commerce and industry – that sometimes their concentration spans are not what we might want, so I had to get two or three small bits of information across about the sector that they could take home and mull over and perhaps even use again. So I looked at London. And London in this sense is a little microcosmic example of the sector in the United Kingdom.

The first thing I pointed out to them was that the 300,000 or so students living in London spend a great deal of money in living. They spend two thousand million pounds. And I watched one of the senior commerce people look at me with some surprise, raise his eyebrows, take out his notebook and write that down. I then went on to point out that if, again, taking London only as a microcosm, that higher education through the 42 institutions in London represents 5% of the GDP of London which is, give or take, 1% of the GDP of the United Kingdom. Which, to my total surprise, proved to be more the total contribution of agriculture to the GDP of the United Kingdom. And if you put that in perspective it does make you realise how critically important you are as a sector.

But as you heard a moment ago, you're not just an economic force, you're also a social force, and here I would like very much to associate myself with Rick Levin's comments about the advocacy of learning as an activity in its own right. And also with his comments about not just worrying about the immediacy of impact but recognising that much of what you are doing and will do will really only come to fruition in a time scale which is slightly longer than that we are sometimes pressed to fulfil.

As I said, I've been a vice-chancellor for quite a long time. It is a wonderful and

privileged activity. You work with intelligent and committed students; you work with intelligent and committed staff. This can on occasions be exasperating and I thought I might draw my remarks to a conclusion with a little anecdote about an experience I had when there was another bit of stringency going on.

Some of you may recall the Jarrett Report on the Cabinet Office in the late '80s. The universities were told that they should take Jarrett as a model and they should make themselves terribly efficient. One of the efficiencies we were encouraged to pursue was to take out committees – very bad things, waste a lot of time. Get on with the serious work of teaching and research. And my observations showed me that in the main universities approach this in two ways. The wise ones started with a blank piece of paper and said well if we're starting again, what will we end up with? Mapped out their futures and then one day scrapped the old system and put in place the new system. I happened at the time to be in a university where a decision was made by a very senior administrator that he would wish to indulge in a little of what I might call academic topiary. He would take the committee structure and he's snip a bit off here, and he'd snip a bit off here and slowly and cleverly and craftily he would shape this wonderful new future. And he went to the Senate – intelligent and committed people – and he told them what his intentions were. And he said, "I'm going to begin by looking at which are the effective or non-effective committees. And let us begin with the committee of deans. I have looked closely at our committee of deans and I have realised that it hasn't met for three years so I'm going to abolish it." And he drew breath to go on and a hand came up in the body of the Senate and the professor of philosophy stood up and said, "Registrar, if I may just ask. Could you explain to me how you can improve the efficiency of a committee structure by abolishing a committee that never meets?" Many vice-chancellors will realise what was going to happen next. And it was like the pursuit of the fox. Off went the Senate and for 20 minutes they debated this philosophic proposition. And to the total consternation of the Registrar at the end of the debate they voted to keep the committee of deans on the condition that it continued not to meet.

But that is much of the pleasure of being a vice-chancellor, and it's much of the pleasure of being in a society, a community, a group of individuals who care about thought, who care about the future, who care about students, who care about each other, who care about the wider communities.

To return then to this evening's event and to tomorrow's ceremony I would like you all

to join with me in congratulating yourselves and all of the others who are sitting in this room and not in this room who've contributed so wisely and effectively to the success of our higher and further education sectors.