

HKU Centenary Ceremony
Speech by Lord David Wilson
August 18, 2011

Vice Premier Li, Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a very great pleasure to be here with you today and to be asked to join the Centenary celebrations of this great university – the University of Hong Kong.

It is a very great personal pleasure.

I first came to Hong Kong University as a student – just over 50 years ago in the autumn of 1960. It already seemed a long established and well-established, institution. Indeed it was. In Hong Kong terms it had ancient buildings like the Loke Yew Hall where we now are. Or the Fung Ping Shan Building, a few hundred metres away, where I studied Chinese.

I little thought then that, 50 years later, I would be back here again to celebrate the Centenary. Or that, in the intervening period, I would have been Chancellor for some five years.

I little imagined too how much the university would grow in those 50 years. That little patch of grass just down the hill, with a stream running through it, where I used sometimes to relax and eat a sandwich at lunchtime. It's gone. Instead, all around us we have splendid new buildings. And there is the massive extension of the campus into Pok Fu Lam with the Li Ka Shing Medical Faculty and all the other facilities there.

Then there is what I might call a great institutional pleasure too in being here. That is – to be able to represent the University of Aberdeen as its Chancellor. That has historic as well as present-day significance. Historic, because the origins of this university go back beyond the Centenary we are now celebrating. They go back to the Hong Kong College of Medicine founded by Dr Patrick Manson (Sir Patrick Manson) in 1887. He was an Aberdeen University graduate. One of the first students (there were only two) was Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhong-shan – Dr Sun Yat-sen).

One of Dr Sun's teachers was Professor Cantlie (Sir James Cantlie). He too was an Aberdeen University graduate. Much later it was Cantlie who almost certainly saved the life of Dr Sun Yat-sen. He managed to get him released when, in 1896, as a person considered to be a dangerous radical, he was kidnapped by the then Chinese Legation in London. It is perhaps stretching a point. But let me say it. Aberdeen University has made a significant contribution to Hong Kong and to China - by one graduate contributing to the founding of this university and another graduate contributing to the success of the 1911 Revolution, the Xinhai Geming, by saving the life of Dr Sun Yat-sen.

That is all history, important though it is.

What matters as much, and more, is the present. What Aberdeen University treasures - as do universities in Britain that have special links - as do universities round the world - are the academic links they have with the University of Hong Kong. In the case of Aberdeen - exchanges, joint research projects and even a joint Masters Degree programme. What is also a matter of great pleasure for the University of Aberdeen is that both the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Lap-chee Tsui and the Chairman of the University Council, Dr Leong Che-hung, hold Honorary Degrees from Aberdeen.

These international links are of huge importance to all the top-ranking universities in the world. Great universities are not just local universities. They are world universities. League tables of universities are rightly looked at with some scepticism. Nevertheless, it is a matter of great pleasure and pride that the British journal Times Higher Education ranks Hong Kong University as 21st in the world and 1st in Asia. That is a great achievement.

When Dr Sun Yat-sen came back to visit Hong Kong University in 1923, he used a phrase from an 18th century English writer, Jonathan Swift. He said: "The person who makes two blades of grass grow where only one grew before is a worthy citizen." How proud he would surely be of Hong Kong University and the way it has grown since then - in size and in reputation.

How proud and pleased he would surely be to know that Hong Kong University is rated right at the top of the league table of universities in Asia. How pleased he would surely be too that this university plays a significant role not just in Hong Kong but in the whole of China. How proud he would be of its international reputation. Surely he would join us all in praising what has been done by many "worthy citizens" and by many generous benefactors.

Hong Kong University has a pool of outstanding alumni who will, I am sure, continue to support it. It has high quality students here now, both from Hong Kong and elsewhere. They are fortunate to be here. Certainly I count myself as fortunate to have studied here and to be a member of the University family as the holder of an Honorary Degree.

This celebration of the Centenary of the University is a special and joyful occasion. Long may the University of Hong Kong continue to be a powerful influence and a source of academic excellence in Hong Kong; in the whole of China; and in the world as well. May the next 100 years be truly excellent years for this great university.

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