

Speech for graduation ceremony
Richmond, the American International University in London
May 14, 2009

I would like to start by saying that receiving an honorary degree from Richmond means a tremendous amount to me. Why? Because of the University's mission, its students and more specifically the 'cosmopolitan vision' which exists there and has such resonance now.

May I start by congratulating each and every one of the graduands on their achievement. Today we follow the pattern and tradition of many such ceremonies all over the world in a long historical arc which both connects us with the past and primes us for the future. It is interesting to note that graduation processions in Europe date back to the 12th Century. At the first baccalaureate ceremony at Oxford University in 1432 each graduate processed and then delivered a speech in Latin. So you have really been let off the hook today!

And it's you, the Richmond graduands, whose achievements we celebrate. My remarks will focus on the value of internationalism and in the fundamental potential of the Richmond graduate. Now in a general sense I believe in the intrinsic power of education – of the extraordinary capacity for education to “take us into the future that we can't yet grasp” (to quote Ken Robinson) – that is beyond the imaginings of the mind.

We know too that during times of economic downturn people turn to education - in the US over the last 40 years, enrolments at universities rose during periods of weaker economic growth. We see this trend again in our own time. In fact, this was the subject of an article in the New York Times on Monday (May 11).

More specifically my remarks point to the significance of the Richmond mission. You are graduating at an interesting and difficult moment in time and at a time when a number of the processes of globalisation – certainly those of economic globalisation and monetarism are under scrutiny.

But if we are now a little hesitant about some aspects of globalisation and the manner in which cultural globalisation can lead to a cultural sameness –

a homogenising of culture, none but the most cynical would want to speak out against internationalism.

The reach of Richmond's international community speaks eloquently to the multivalent nature of internationalism which can and should also embrace the local, the diverse and the different between and among nationalities. Richmond is at the vanguard of this with as you all know, nearly forty years experience of educating its students (potentially tomorrow's leaders) from over 100 countries, together with a mission which not only asserts the international and intercultural (as nearly all modern universities do now- just look at their websites) but *practices* it.

The student experience centres around the University's innovative liberal arts curriculum with its lateral spread that includes cross and intercultural connections into the core curriculum for all students - not just the arts and humanities and social sciences, but also computing and business. You know this and you have experience too of the extraordinary skills which this faculty bring to enabling the university's mission.

The genesis of Richmond's internationalism is integrally connected to the multinational nature of its student body. Over the years this has in turn helped to define the Richmond mission in a process which is both circular and cyclical. A fundamental aspect of the Richmond experience is what you, the students bring to it in your discussions in and beyond the classroom, in your networks and friendships.

Defining the typical Richmond student is a complex business. Atypical Richmond student may be transnational. S/he may have an Italian father, a Brazilian mother, have grown up in Morocco and been educated in the US and UK. This too, complicates any essentialising notions of nationalism. Professor Alex Seago suggests that a defining quality of the Richmond student is as a cosmopolitan individual. Now initially (and perhaps superficially) the notion of the cosmopolitan person may suggest a person who is able to drink cappuccino in twenty different world capitals in a kind of George Clooneyesque fashion (although that's good too!).

However as many of you know, cosmopolitanism, the idea that all of humanity belongs to a single community, has long been inscribed within the academy and is the subject of vigorous interpretation and debate -

particularly in the social sciences and humanities. In its most positive manifestations (as for the writer Martha Nussbaum) the cosmopolitan is “the person whose primary allegiance is to the community of human beings in the entire world”. The opposite of the cosmopolitan, or the non-Richmond individual is the provincial and the narrowly national individual.

The Ghanaian philosopher and novelist, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes of the possibility of a cosmopolitan community in which individuals from varying locations enter relationships of mutual respect, despite their different beliefs be they moral, religious or political. This acceptance of the other as different but of equal standing is a process which calls to mind the dynamics of the model Richmond classroom.

Who is the cosmopolitan person? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “cosmo” – world and “polis” – city (or more properly a city state) Means the following: “someone belonging to all or many parts of the world”- “not restricted to any one country or region”, “free from any national limitations or attachments”; “having characteristics suited to or arising from an experience of many countries”; “containing people from many different countries”. All of these characteristics speak eloquently to the Richmond experience. A Richmond student typically is or becomes a cosmopolite as a result of their education there.

This is a timely moment to reclaim Cosmopolitanism beyond academic discourse. Where better to put this into practice than at an international university?

In the Richmond context this feeling at ease in the world and the sense of confidence that you have in your relationships in the world is critically important today. I would suggest that the “cosmopolitan ideal” is already in operation at Richmond and is both embedded in the culture and in the interactions between students. I am honoured to be included in your world.

The Richmond student understands that the modes of working and relating are familial, social and cultural. Your cosmopolitan skill sets are needed today and in the future. I have confidence that the work you will do in transnational organisations and communications, international corporations, non government organisations, charities, small businesses, the media, in education, health and other professions will all make a difference. This is the future and you are the future.

