

I should like to thank the governing body, staff and students of TVU for the great honour you have accorded to me.

It is a privilege to be associated with this University

- with its unique mission to be a different kind of education provider, genuinely seeking to encourage progression from FE to HE
- its impressive achievements particularly in the fields of diversity and widening participation
- its ambitions to enhance the social, cultural and economic lives of the communities and businesses throughout the Thames Valley

It is also a huge pleasure to be taking part today in this graduation ceremony today alongside so many successful and inspiring students.

I extend warmest congratulations to you all – and to your families, friends and tutors who are sharing this important day with you, as I imagine that for most of you, you would not have achieved your own success without their support.

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to address a few remarks to you.

When in 1975 I took part in my own graduation ceremony in the Philharmonic Hall Liverpool, I scarcely imagined that thirty years later I would find myself on the stage of the Barbican Hall London in receipt of an Honorary Professorship

This just goes to show that we do not write the scripts of our life single-handedly. Other people – our families, our friends, our communities, our workplaces – together with our own actions - play a significant role in making us who we are.

It is on this theme, drawing on examples from my own life that I would like to speak for a few moments.

I am the elder of two children of working class and under-educated parents, born and brought up in inner city Manchester in the fifties.

Thanks entirely to a state-funded education, I was the first person in my family to obtain a university degree and join a profession - teaching. The environment in which I grew up was one of cautious parental aspiration and not infrequent familial opposition.

'Hasn't our Ann got a proper job yet?' exclaimed my bewildered grandfather when in my early twenties, having already spent four years at University, I undertook a higher degree at university in France.

Negotiating the social, cultural and psychological transition that this involved required determination, sensitivity and a measure of independence – characteristics that I am sure each of you graduating today will have displayed at some point on your own journey so far.

When I (eventually) started work, I chose to return to the north of England to embark upon what became a (working) life-time career in public service – a far cry from the sawdust and meat hooks of my father's butcher's shop in Moss Side where I had lived, played and learned in my formative years.

At least that's what I thought.

As my career developed in my thirties and forties, I became more and more aware that it was precisely this connection with my roots – with my early life and family experiences – added to by the gift of education that has sculptured

- the activities I chose to become involved in
- the working practices I encourage
- the style of leadership I exercise
- the shape of my achievements

In the same way that growing up as a white child in a multi-racial inner city community galvanized my own commitment to the promotion and celebration of diversity, so the experience of working in Derbyshire and South Yorkshire at the time of the miners' strike in the eighties had a profound effect on my professional perspectives and subsequent career choices.

Promoted at the age of 30 to a Head of Department post in a close-knit coal mining area, I discovered how to use the authority of leadership and the power of managerial responsibility to make decisions that could also transform people's lives.

I had known for myself that learning leads to liberation and had chosen to be a teacher so that I could enable others to travel this road for themselves.

Now I experienced first-hand the effects of managerialism on motivation. As the *boss* I had to account to the *workers* for the consequences of my decisions on their lives – in a local and national

atmosphere of rage and hardship throughout a period of bitter industrial relations.

In such a climate, education was one of the few safe routes through the mire of disputation - and I am proud to have been responsible for introducing a range of innovative training schemes for the unemployed of all ages and for women in particular.

I consciously used my personal skills and my own example to ignite and support the ambitions of people from the pit villages of South Yorkshire - with whose working class roots I closely identified.

Exposed at close quarters during that period to intense local political activity - and not finding that route attractive - I have subsequently chosen to use my energy primarily in social, voluntary and educational contexts. Focusing on what I felt to be my vocation, I left the urban and industrial heartlands of my formative years and at the age of 35 became the youngest principal in the further education sector nationally.

Although by then my grandfather had died, there remained no doubt in my family's mind that I had at last got a proper job!

For the last 20 years therefore, I have tried to use my time, understanding and experience to act as a catalyst for positive change - locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

I would not claim to have achieved anything astonishing - and certainly nothing that is beyond the grasp of all of our graduates today. Out of all the work in which I have been engaged, I am proud however of what I believe to be my most visible contributions to national life: the establishment of the social enterprise, the *Network for Women Managers*, and the founding of the independent educational charity the *Helena Kennedy Foundation*.

Both these endeavours embody the values of social justice and equity that have infused my life and guided my career.

The Helena Kennedy Foundation in particular offers support (both financial and emotional) to seriously disadvantaged students. Their extraordinary stories completely confirm my own belief in the capacity of all of us to achieve our goals, to make a worthwhile contribution, and to help our society develop in a fair, open, safe and sustainable way - if we have access to opportunities and we receive support. The students I meet through my work for the Foundation, like all of you here today reinforce my trust in the potential, integrity and essential

goodness of the human spirit – a trust on which I have based my career and my life.

These are, I believe, principles that also guide this University and the staff, students and stakeholders associated with it – and it is therefore a privilege to receive this honour from you. Thank you.