Mr. Vice-Chancellor, learned professors & teachers, distinguished guests, ladies & gentlemen, and students of the University of Hong Kong:

What do you look for in a university education?

1. “What do you look for in a university education?” I believe many of you have been asked this question at the admissions interviews. The more orthodox ones among you might have mentioned “knowledge” or “obtaining a good degree so as to get a good job or increase one’s marketability”. The more honest ones might have said “fun”, “the numerous activities only university students will do”, “opportunity to make money by doing a part-time job”, or “finding a girl friend or a boy friend”.

2. Well, whatever you have in mind, the first blow is half the battle. At this the very beginning of your new journey, it is definitely worth spending a moment or two pondering what you really want to get out of your life in the next few years at HKU. My own three years at university have been truly life-changing, although looking back, I wish I could have planned it better at the beginning.

3. So may I take this opportunity to share with you a few thoughts, as someone who has gone through university life, albeit 20 years ago and at a different university, and also as someone who is still benefiting from the desires, discoveries, and discipline developed during those formative years.
Vertical: aim high and go deep

4. R. F. Horton said “Success lies, not in achieving what you aim at, but in aiming at what you ought to achieve, and pressing forward, sure of achievement here, or if not here, hereafter.”

5. I don’t know how demanding you are of yourself. (We are usually more demanding of other people). But I believe a passion for excellence is essential to bring out the full potential inside you. We all have our limits but at this stage in your life you probably don’t know where the limits lie. So why not aim a bit higher. Try moving your goal post outside your comfort zone. Do not be content with just the mediocre. Do not settle for the second best.

6. Yes, you may have to take some risks. But if young people like you dare not take risk, who can? Two years ago, I had the luxury of attending a short summer course in Canada. The speaker of one of the talks was a 60-year old grandmother. She exhorted us, the young ones, to take risks in life. She told us she had just tried bungy-jump for the first time in New Zealand. Why? If you sail too close to shore, you might never see the glory of the real ocean, you might never realise you have the ability to sail round the world.

7. I have taken risks during my university days. The biggest one probably was my decision to become a barrister, rather than a solicitor. To start a career at the Bar meant financial uncertainty. I was also unsure as to whether I could develop the advocacy ability essential for that profession. The decision was decried by some close friends as my parents were then struggling to make ends meet in Hong Kong. Yet, looking back, I am so pleased that I did remain faithful to my own aspirations and interests, and did take the risk and shun the more certain path.
8. In life and in your academic pursuits, there may be times when you have to decide whether to take a plunge of some sort. Faced with the uncertain future, and without any crystal ball, you might never be too sure whether you should take the risk. I am not advocating fool-hardiness, but after you have given the matter your best consideration based on all you can find out, why not look further up and climb another flight of steps!

9. I hope all of you are studying a subject of your choice. Enjoy your study. Cultivate the interest if you still haven’t got it. So that you can work hard naturally, not in the sense of having to endure the pain coming with the endless tutorials preparation, dissertations or examinations, but rather being so immersed into what you are studying that you do not realise you have passed your mealtimes and bedtimes.

10. Having worked as an Honorary Lecturer in the Department of Law here, I do want to encourage you to ask more questions during and after class. Use questions as tools to dig deeper. Ask questions until you truly understand the subjects. Do not be afraid to expose your inability or even stupidity. I remember learning to jump on the trampoline when I was young. I was never good at sports, and I decided to quit because I looked to very clumsy and ridiculous. I was immediately told off by a classmate. “If you are so concerned with your appearance you will never learn”. How very true! Be intellectually honest, yes, your question might be extremely stupid, but having the habit of removing queries as they arise will ensure good intellectual diet and digestion.

11. Don’t take short-cuts. I remember when I was doing law, there were books belonging to “Nutshell” or “Fast Food” series which gave you bullet points of various law subjects. They are the sort of books which you will desperately cling onto if you have not attended a single lecture or read a single textbook or case on the subject. You might just get by so far as examination is concerned, but you will never develop the capacity to use the legal knowledge as a tool to go deeper or the skills to resolve real legal problems.
12. Talking about intellectual honesty, you must never resort to plagiarism. The local universities have encountered scandals about students plagiarising others’ works, resulting in some cases outright expulsion. You may or may not know, plagiarism in the context of some qualifying examination, or otherwise as a means of obtaining certain credentials, is potentially criminal.

13. You will meet brilliant teachers and students. Be inspired by them. You may not achieve what they have achieved, but as the Chinese saying goes, “見人善，即思齊，縱去遠，以漸躋”. (It means whenever you see someone who is good at something, let him be your inspiration and try to achieve his or her standard. However, even if after making all your efforts, you are still miles apart, do not lose heart, but rejoice that you have already made a huge progress in that direction). For my part, I am eternally grateful for some of the role models I have met in Cambridge and in the legal profession, whose wisdom, attitudes and lives have both humbled and inspired me.

14. Do be competitive. But be competitive in an honest and graceful way. I have heard this happening at one of the local universities: a particular reference book, the only copy in the Library, went missing in the bookshelf. It was subsequently found wrapped and sealed in a plastic bag, and hung with a string in a water cistern of a toilet. This was done to ensure no one else has access to this book. It sounds incredible but the motive behind the act is not unfamiliar. The truth is: we learned so much more effectively by sharing information and interacting with one another.

15. Don’t be afraid to fail and do not get bogged down with failures. We learn wisdom from our failures more than from our success.
Horizontal: enlarge your territories

16. So much for aiming high and going deep. If these represent the “vertical” perspective, I urge you to also consider expanding “horizontally”. Enlarge your territories. I remember coming across this quote from Buckland very early on in my legal studies: “A man is a better lawyer if he is also well informed in areas other than the law”. This is so very true for all disciplines.

17. I know that at HKU, the curriculum already ensures you have a minimum percentage of general subjects, other than what you are majoring in. Do take these general subjects seriously. Increase your general knowledge and broaden your experience. Further, there will be many opportunities to go abroad on study trips or exchange programmes. Do consider taking up some. It may seem more sensible to use that vacation time to do more revision or making some money. But in the longer term, the experience outside your own discipline will bring forth benefit to you as a person beyond what you could expect.

18. I was told by some of my friends teaching at universities that some students have chosen to be indifferent to the current affairs. This is very unfortunate. While living in Hong Kong, and bearing in mind in three or four years’ time you will be joining the work force in this community. I urge you to keep abreast of what is going on both locally and internationally. Two weeks ago, I attended the inauguration ceremony of an organization called “Kid's Dream”. They comprise primarily young people aged between 12 and 18, who are committed to upholding the rights of children as guaranteed under the UN Convention for the Protection of Children's Rights. Apart from their enthusiasm and ability, I was greatly impressed by their depth of knowledge and insight in some of the social problems in Hong Kong and in other countries. I don’t think the community will expect anything less from our university students.
19. Another important aspect of enlarging your territories if of course to make
more friends. Make the most of the opportunities at university where
many have found their lifelong friends, some their spouses, too.

20. If you are weak at interpersonal skills, go out and meet people and
overcome whatever shyness or inhibitions you have. I still remember
vividly the first day when I stepped into the dining hall of my college at
Cambridge, where most students are dressed in suits and sometimes 3-
piece ones, chatting on their own, paying no attention to this small
Chinese fellow. I told myself despite my limited English I must kick up
some conversation, to break this British “public school” aloofness. And I
did. I remain very proud and grateful for that courage, as I have gained
so many friends and broadened my circle.

21. So get to know the people you come across on any occasions here, and
learn from their experience. Particularly for fellow students coming from a
different country, culture or background, your friendship will be mutually
enriching.

22. I was so privileged in that regard during my three years in Cambridge.
Apart from my English friends who introduced me to authentic
newspaper-wrapped fish and chips, bread and butter pudding and sherry
soaked trifles, I had an Iranian friend teaching me the Middle Eastern
way of drinking tea (you put the cube sugar in your mouth, rather than in
the cup), and a Russian friend who spoke to me in fluent Mandarin, a
Vietnamese friend who after going through atrocities, arrived in the UK
as a refugee and excelled in his studies to gain a scholarship to read
Mathematics Cambridge.

23. In this respect, I am so pleased to know that HKU is determined to
increase the percentage of its overseas students in the next few years.
This will enrich your campus life and help make HKU a truly world-class
university. And to all of you who come from overseas, a very warm
welcome from all of us!
Concluding: Enjoy your freedom, but handle it with care

24. In concluding, one more word of caution. Some people have complained that the young university students of Hong Kong today tend to be complacent. Because tertiary education is gradually becoming a matter of cause, some do not cherish the opportunities they now enjoy and do not see the point in exerting themselves on their studies. This is in stark contrast with their counterparts in the Mainland where one sees a tremendous “fighting” spirit, driving the young people to achieve greater excellence.

25. Whilst we must not ignore such criticism, I do not think, and I certainly do not hope, that kind of attitude is prevalent. We must realise with rapid globalization and the advancement of the Mainland in all directions, we in Hong Kong are competing against the best talents in the world. Know the truth, meet the reality, so that you know where you stand, in what direction you should move and what degree of diligence you should exercise.

26. Enjoy your freedom, but also nurture your self-discipline so that you would not be enslaved by any pursuits, and so that you would be able to exercise your freedom in its proper course. Being able to act on impulse is never true freedom. In a great court room in Cleveland, there is an inscription over its massive entrance which reads “Obedience to Law is Liberty”.

27. Beware of the Internet. It is of course extremely useful for research and communication. However, Some have allowed the Cyber world to so dominate their source of information that a lot of down-loaded data was just skipped through without in-depth analysis. Worse still, many young people sought sexual gratification through voyeurism and cyber pornography.
28. Finally, many say and believe that “Circumstances make the man”. But circumstances never made a man out of unprepared material. You are now placed in very favourable circumstances indeed. According to this year’s opinion survey on the public ranking of the universities in Hong Kong, HKU was once again ranked as the best performing local university and its graduates continued to be the most preferred candidates by potential employers. You are among the best young men and women we have in Hong Kong. So get prepared and make the most out of it. The future belongs to you.

29. As you enter this new stage of higher preparedness, may I wish you all every success, good health and spirit, and very happy and fruitful university life.

30. Thank you very much.

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