

UCM 2019 Summer Graduation Dean's Opening Speech

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Dear Graduates, dear parents and friends of the graduates, dear alumni, dear UCM fellow staff members. Welcome to the UCM 2019 Summer Graduation! What an exciting day for us all!

When I was asked to give this speech, my first thought was, "What would Michelle Obama say?" After all, she is so quotable that the current First Lady, Melania Trump, thought Michelle's speeches were worthy of repeating. But, my second thoughts were, *seriously*, what *would* Michelle say in her own commencement speech to our UCM graduates? Let's imagine, if she had a tour of our cozy building, what would she find? How would she describe it to others?

As an American, she would be familiar with the Liberal Arts and Science concept, something I am sure each of our graduates spent time explaining to friends and family on more than one occasion. She would also applaud our endeavor to foster a civic sense of duty. She would find that in the tutorial rooms, in the green hall, in the Common Room and even in the outer-rim that a *sense of purpose* permeates—a sense that we at UCM have internalized the true purpose of a university in today's society.

When I first informed a friend of mine that I was going to give this speech, he sent me an opinion editorial on what the ideal university looks like because, he said, "You've always spoken so proudly of the *community* you work in." The editorial said that the *ideal university* is a community where nobody is left out. Where there is passionate debate at dinner, where there are many societies to join and where there are friendly lecturers whose doors you can always knock on when you feel down. The writer indicated that such communities no longer existed in the UK, where instead universities have become lonely, soulless places in his estimation. The author further provided several reasons for what he termed the *erosion of community*: first, because growth in student numbers has trumped quality in education for executive boards; second, because research was stressed at the expense of teaching (with UK government funding allocated on certain *types* of research output); and third that universities there today offer modular specific degrees, which give student-consumers ready-made skills at the expense of building an *esprit de corps*.

I think on all three of these factors UCM is bucking the trend, perhaps Colleges in the Netherlands in general, which is why Professor Teun Dekker will tell you that Liberal Arts and Sciences has become the 6th most popular program in the country (ask him about it! He is very proud of this fact).

However, let's go through each of the points raised and see *exactly* what UCM is doing that bucks the trend. The first one, **growth in student numbers over quality of education** is key to who we are. Although, the Executive Board wants to capitalize on our success, we have resisted, arguing that we will not remain an intense, close-knit international academic community, if we grow too much and too quickly. Instead, I believe that we should continue to pursue what the great educational scholar John Dewey labeled a "student-focused educational system"—a system that encourages students to interact with their curriculum and encourages

them to take part in their own learning. A student-focused education is effective because content is presented in a way that the information the student is learning is actually connected to his/her prior experiences. A student-focused education allows those partaking in it to advance their understanding of the world and their social roles far more effectively. A student-focused educational system allows students to become far more engaged with both what they are learning and with society as a whole. It should come as no surprise to you, dear audience, that Dewey's ideas directly contributed to the development of Problem Based Learning.

What about the editorial's second point, that today's UK universities **stress research over teaching in the outputs that are valued**. Let me first say to you as the Research Director at UCM (one of my hats at the college) that I think that innovative, cutting-edge research is *essential* to the future success of the college. It will help differentiate UCM from the other colleges and other programs in more traditional faculties—it will help us keep an edge. However, it requires us to be innovative in the *way* that we fully integrate research back into the UCM community, back into tutorials and back into our skills training. This firstly means letting our passionate researchers inspire the students in their courses, whether it is through course activities or extracurricular activities. Graduates, I am sure that each of you have an episode where a UCM teacher's research motivated you—that eureka moment that both you and your teachers felt like “that's what we are here for!”

It secondly means that we must be vigilant in facilitating the development of student-centered research through projects like Think Tank, MaRBLE, the Applied Research & Internship Project (ARI) and most recently Inge's fascinating Research Studio project—we must be vigilant in facilitating their development in order to advance exciting and meaningful undergraduate research.

Thirdly, we must offer more time and support for our current staff to be researchers—time and support are preconditions for proper, innovative and original inquiry. We cannot live off the fat of prior research; we must allow our researchers to refill their bellies with the fire that they can transmit to you as students.

The third point raised in the editorial, that **universities offer modular degrees to student-consumers without building a sense of community**, is the most important of all when evaluating the true purpose of a university in today's society. Those that have taken my *Introduction to Political Science* course know that I am an evangelist on the value of social capital—that social networks have value for society. This is because high levels of social capital increase the levels of trust and cooperation in a society. This is because social *connectiveness*—the number of networks, norms and regimes that promote civic engagement—relates to the overall effectiveness of society. At UCM, we are building social capital, which means that the college is a social institution that can and should serve to create a better society.

The importance of building a sense of community at university is not a new idea. In fact, in 1852 the Oxford academic and clergyman John Henry Newman gave a series of lectures reflecting on the purpose of a university that was published as *The Idea of a University* in 1852. For Newman, the ideal university is a **community of thinkers**.

Newman further envisaged a broad, liberal education, which teaches students “to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyse.” Newman held that narrow minds were born of narrow specialization and stipulated that students should be given a solid grounding in all areas of study; for him the power of a university education was that it developed the individual in ways that far exceed the narrow limits of academic ability.

Certainly, Newman’s ideas resonate with me; I believe that a true university education nurtures individuals’ ability to make good judgements, to learn a sense of responsibility, to find a passion and to find an *inner sense of purpose*—that thing that I said Michelle Obama would find at UCM.

Similarly, for the educationalist John Dewey, universities were not just places where students learned facts and numbers, but places where students learned how to live, no matter what profession he or she ended up in. For Newman, the *soul* of the university was the mark left on the alumnus's mind, which stayed with them all their lives. A true university has a greater role than just doling out qualifications—it shapes the whole individual.

Dear graduates, that is what I hope that UCM gives to you—the mark on your mind as you leave us today—but that stays with you for your whole lives and indeed brings you back to future graduation ceremonies to celebrate your fellow UCM graduates and their like-minded trajectories forward.

Indeed, please all come back to our next graduation on 31 January 2020. More importantly, come the day *before* and attend my inaugural lecture, to which I now invite you all. Perhaps, I could even be a bit crazy and send an invitation to Michelle Obama—why not, she is sure to like what she sees inside Zwingelput 4. See you all in 2020!