

Graduation 2009

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Neil McArthur

Goodness me, good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, honoured guests and of course our fellow students. I first of all thank Professor Walker for those very kind words. I am honoured and actually a little shocked to be standing before you today. Its some 30 years ago this month that I attended a graduation ceremony at Essex, then as you folks here, a new graduate.

Recently, I had the opportunity to return to the University in the School of Computer Science and Electronic Engineering and meet some of the staff. What a wonderful feeling to have studied here and still be working in an industry that Essex is still so closely involved in. I came here as a student in 1976 and had what I consider to be, the 3 most influential years of my life and please bare with me while I explain.

Home for me in the 1970's was Earlham in Manchester. Earlham was a steel town, situated on the North bank of the Manchester ship canal, some 10 miles west of Manchester. Steel dominated both employment and indeed life in Earlham. Expectations of education in Earlham were not high and it was by no means given that I should opt to stay on at secondary school to take O-levels. Far from being a natural academic and more of a tortoise than a hare with my studies, my interest with engineering, although intense, was more practical than theoretical. Top of the class in Metal Work and bottom in English, really sums me up.

In 1972, having gained a few O-levels, it was time to find a job and by this time the steel works was unnoticed with closure. I was lucky enough to be accepted for an apprenticeship with British Nuclear Fuels. Now here was a company that invested 4 years into my training and had the patience to add academic content to my practical engineering skills. It's now only looking back, I realise just how generous they were. The qualifications gained in those 4 years were to put me on a road to Essex and change my life forever.

And so to Essex, and the year was 1976, arriving at the University having been brought up in a steel town with little ethnic mix, trained in the nuclear industry where extreme politics were a complete no-no, you can imagine arriving at Essex was a bit of a culture shock. The late 70's were an interesting time in UK politics; the tail-end of the labour government, the emergence of Margaret Thatcher, the winter of discontent, the grummitt picket lines; everyone had an opinion on politics and they were impossible to avoid. At Essex political debate was never far away; as a student I recall being dragged from the lecture theatre for wanting to go and listen to Sir Keith Joseph, who was then Shadow Secretary for Education, debate the future of education in the UK; such was the student passion of the day. It was therefore good to see here on my last visit, students projecting their views in Square 4 on the repressions currently in Tibet.

Putting aside the academic reason for being at Essex, the experience of being in such a hot-bed of political debate and also immersed in a wide mix of multi-national, multi-cultural students left a good and lasting impression upon me. However, I was at Essex to study Telecommunications. Essex was well-placed being only 15 miles from Martlesham; the main research centre for the Post Office which of course is now BT. The first fibre-optic cable in the UK was laid between Ipswich and Colchester, the first generation of digital switching was just emerging down the road. Essex was probably the best university in the 1970's to study, what's to become, a life-style changing technology that today touches everyone. I left Essex in 1979 with more than just a degree in Telecommunications, also with a respect for multi-racial, multi-cultural society and a tolerance for

the opinion of others. Most important of all for me, if ever I'm asked what university did for me; my reply would be that Essex University had taught me to think.

So 30 years on, on graduation I returned north. I have and continue to enjoy a career in Telecommunications; as an industry it has developed from the simple telegraph, the humble phone through to broadband and the internet. Mobile communications abound, we're on the cusp of internet multicast TV. What developments I have seen, and yet how much still lies ahead.

But what of Earlham; the steel works closed in 1976 and with it, the companies supporting it. The area's had its challenges, the steel works long-gone replaced with a modern industrial park. Today this industrial park is the maternal home of the engineering and technology division of the Talk Talk group for whom I work. Telecommunications has replaced steel, fibre-optics and protocols have replaced railway lines and iron ore. This is something that would not have happened without the University and something I'm immensely proud of.

In summary, I have many people and organisations to thank; so had mum not convinced me to stay on at school and had not BNFL invested 4 years in my training, had not the University tolerated me for 3 years, without all the help from family, colleagues and friends, I would not be standing before you today.

So when I meet young, enthusiastic engineers at the very start of their career, I think back to as how much help I had had and how lucky I was. You are the future, I wish you all well and I hope you enjoy your careers as much as I enjoy mine.

Finally, I must thank my wife Anne and my family for their unwavering support of my career, colleagues in the Carphone Warehouse group, with whom together we have built a huge business in Talk Talk and also my colleagues in the Hamilton Davies Trust. I am humbled and honoured to be here with you, my fellow students and delighted to accept this degree. Thank you all.