

Graduation 2010 Oration for Honorary Graduand Hanif Lalani

Chancellor, The Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Hanif Lalani.

Hanif Lalani was born in Uganda in 1962. Both Hanif's parents were successful entrepreneurs there and perhaps that is where the first seeds of his flair for business and finance were sown. But in 1972 however, the family had to flee the regime of Idi Amin in Uganda, and they came to the United Kingdom.

To move from an affluent household in Uganda to a council house in the UK, with just one suitcase of belongings, was perhaps the first of many challenges and the first of many personal successes that have made Hanif the man he is today.

As a young boy in a strange country, Hanif was quick to integrate into the new culture, and he soon established himself as a good scholar and keen sportsman at Wetherby High School in Yorkshire. In 1990, he became a student here at the University of Essex, where he studied Mathematics, Operations Research and Economics – another challenge in itself, I think you will agree!

On graduating in 1983, Hanif joined British Telecom as a graduate recruit in the International Division, and duly embarked on his next challenge – to contribute to the birth of the new, commercially competitive British Telecom that was created in 1984. With his unflagging energy and enthusiasm, Hanif worked his way through a series of management and financial roles within the company, helping BT to become a world-renowned business and brand. Then, in 1988, seeking a yet greater challenge, Hanif moved with his wife, Sharmin and their young family to become Finance Director of BT's operations in Northern Ireland. His proven ability to drive up revenue and profits, whilst cutting costs, was duly rewarded in 1999, when he was promoted to Chief Executive of BT Northern Ireland and appointed also as Chairman of Ocean Communications, BT's subsidiary in the Republic of Ireland.

In 2003, Hanif was recognised for his tremendous contribution to business and the economy in Northern Ireland, and was duly awarded the Order of the British Empire for his service to the country.

As one can imagine, despite his success when living in the Emerald Isle, Hanif did not want the grass to grow under his feet. So, after 14 years, he returned to London to take up the post of Chief Finance Officer for BT's Wholesale Division – the sector of BT responsible for all telecoms infrastructure. Here he built up BT's strategy for the development of 21CN – the UK's new network for the 21st century and the future Internet.

Continuing his chase for challenge, Hanif took over as Finance Director for the whole BT Group in 2004, following in the footsteps of another high flyer – Ian Livingston (now Chief Executive of BT). Applying his business skills, finely honed in Ireland, Hanif streamlined the complete operational structure at BT and reduced costs by £65 million during his tenure.

In 2007, Hanif was named 'Finance Director of the Year' by CBI, the Confederation of British Industry, another most deserved accolade.

Hanif Lalani's work ethics are couched in his following quote:

“If you rise to a challenge and have a habit of delivering, people can see the capabilities you have and they will find you if there’s a job to be done”.

Having thus tempted Fate, in 2008 he was parachuted in to save BT’s ailing Global Services Division which had been forced to write off more than £2 billion because of over-optimistic assumptions made on large international contracts.

Once again, Hanif rose to this challenge and turned the Division’s financial prospects around with quarter by quarter improvements over the year, whilst also overseeing the £35 billion BT pension fund and forging a new ‘regulatory compliance’ policy for the whole company. What possible challenges could remain therefore for this remarkable industry leader?

Hanif Lalani left BT earlier this year and has stepped down from the Board; but he is, as always, working on new and even greater challenges – some personal and some business! I have no doubt he will continue to deliver and continue to succeed.

Despite his busy life, he finds the time to give encouragement and support for developing young people’s interests in enterprise activities. Recently, for example, Hanif helped fund the student business incubation centre in the Research and Enterprise Office at the University, by way of a personal donation. This facility helps the students to develop their own business ideas in a risk-free environment, and prepares them for the challenges of the commercial world outside. For our students, Hanif provides a great example of the success that they can aspire to, after their graduation from this University.

Hanif Lalani returns to Yorkshire five or six times a year, where the kindness and warm welcome afforded to him and his family when they arrived from Uganda those many years ago means so much to him. And here perhaps lies Hanif’s greatest challenge – he is an ardent fan of Leeds United Football Club.

Chancellor, I present to you Hanif Lalani.