

Graduation 2012

Oration for Honorary Graduand Dr Tony Rich

Orator: Professor Colin Riordan

Chancellor, the Senate of the University of Essex has resolved that the Degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Tony Rich.

Unlike usual Graduation audiences, the vast majority of this afternoon's audience know our honorary graduate Tony Rich personally. The majority will also know him as an excellent Registrar and Secretary during 12 years of significant growth and development of the University. Tony played a major role in raising the profile and professionalism of the body of non-academic staff so essential for the smooth operation of a University, now known as Professional Services staff. But Tony is not being awarded an Honorary Degree for doing his job as Registrar and Secretary in an exemplary fashion, although I will come back to some of his particular achievements in this sphere. Tony is being awarded an Honorary Degree for the immense contribution he made to the University over and above what might be expected even of the best Registrar.

When Tony arrived at the University of Essex in 1999, it had just one campus, here at Wivenhoe Park, and was perceived as – and probably not entirely unfairly – as being rather distant from Colchester, not just geographically but also in terms of its engagement with the educational, social and cultural life of the town. It was sometimes portrayed as an insular place with the Towers up on the hill, known for its radical past and perhaps for having a large proportion of students from overseas.

Tony's lasting achievement is to integrate the University not only into the heartbeat of Colchester, but also into the life of Southend and, through the development of UCS, into the life of Ipswich too. And he has helped to develop the University's role as an influential participant in the economic and social development of the entire region.

Tony Rich came to Essex from our great rival and friend, the University of East Anglia, where he had served with distinction as Academic Registrar. He had studied and obtained a history degree and his PhD in African politics at the University of Manchester, before working for the Longman Group and the Universities of Warwick and Sheffield.

His first major role in the University's regional development involved overseeing the merger with East 15 Acting School which gave the University its first regional campus. Tony has been a strong supporter of East 15 and its continuing development ever since.

The establishment of the University's partnership with South Essex College and the subsequent development of our own Southend Campus owe much to Tony's tireless work in developing strong links with Southend Borough Council and a wide range of contacts, funding agencies, and organisations with an interest in the economic, educational and social development of the Thames Gateway area. The painstaking work, both within the University and externally, that went into developing the now flourishing University presence in Southend was overseen and nurtured by Tony. He served as a Director of Renaissance Southend, the town's former urban regeneration company, and more recently worked with Southend Council and South Essex College to drive

forward the development of The Forum, the new academic and public library and learning development on which building work will start imminently.

Not satisfied with expanding the Essex Empire to the South, Tony then set his acute mind and passionate commitment to the University's regional expansion to development in the North. Assisted, no doubt, by his previous links with the University of East Anglia, he helped to motivate an even broader range of partners to come together with a common goal of increasing higher education and social mobility opportunities in Suffolk (one of the few remaining blackspots in the country, having already tackled the Thames Gateway) Tony's strong belief in the regional agenda helped to sway the doubters and overcome the many obstacles.

Soon after coming to Colchester, Tony became a Governor of Colchester Institute, another strong link which helped smooth the path to developing the University's academic partnership with the College, established in 2006, and adding more than 1,000 students to those studying for University of Essex awards.

Hand in hand with regional expansion came an expansion of the University's academic footprint, most notably through our external partnerships in the field of health. Supporting the equally tireless work of the late Professor Kimmy Eldridge, Tony actively developed strategic links with health bodies, garnering support from the NHS (even though, by his own admission he sometimes felt they talked in a different language) and championed the creation of the School of Health and Human Sciences in 2002, smoothing the difficulties of accommodating a different type of department within a fairly traditional academic institution.

The spirit of entrepreneurship that infused the University's vision for health also infused Tony's passion for developing a research park at the Colchester Campus. This has involved a significant culture shift for the University and it is a tribute to Tony that we have reached the point of completing the infrastructure for our Knowledge Gateway and are looking to develop the first buildings on the site in the near future.

Covering the extent of Tony's links with local and regional bodies is nearly as exhausting as a typical Tony Rich working day. He served on Colchester 2020, the Local Strategic Partnership, where he significantly developed the University's working relationships with other key organisations in the town. He furthered the understanding between the University and Colchester Borough Council through establishing and co-chairing a liaison group, and with the Garrison through creating a similar liaison panel.

His passion for sport made him the ideal Chair for the Colchester Partnership for London 2012 which set out to maximise the opportunities the Olympics might bring to Colchester. And he played a key role in the firstsite funders' group and partnership board which brought a high quality contemporary art facility to Colchester.

In short, Tony's contribution has helped to make Colchester a better place for its residents and has ensured the University has played a central role in the town's development. Don't be fooled into thinking that while Tony was roaming the region with missionary zeal that he might have neglected his internal strategic role of leading the University's administration. He did so, as all those who worked with him or for him will testify, with customary efficiency and effectiveness. He played a key role in supporting the University's governing body, Council. He developed exceptionally strong working relationships with the Students' Union which helped the University to develop its focus on the student experience.

But one of his greatest achievements was the way he promoted the professional development of staff at Essex, through initiatives such as the Graduate Trainee Scheme, the senior management programme and his unswerving support for the Association of University Administrators (or the AUA). Every new member of the administration – now recognised as the Professional Services

Staff – who had their introductory meeting with Tony was encouraged to join the AUA, and Tony served the maximum two terms on its Executive Committee. He recognised the networking and professional development benefits of such an organisation. And I understand his legendary competitiveness came to the fore at every AUA annual conference on quiz night when he sought to bag a place on the best team, and – as in so many challenges he took on – he usually succeeded. Tony also saw the benefits of networking with the wider community of higher education senior administrators, chairing the 1994 Group of Registrars and the Southern Universities Management Service and contributing to the Association of Heads of University Administrators.

Through all these activities Tony was a pivotal figure in the University's near doubling of student numbers, its multi-million pound capital investment, and nearly trebling its turnover, and its transformation from being the University of Essex to becoming the University for Essex.

Chancellor, I present to you Tony Rich