

Patrick Deane
President and Vice-Chancellor, McMaster University
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Graduates, it cannot have escaped your notice that you are leaving McMaster at a time when the value of a university education—and by implication the obligations of institutions like ours—is being hotly debated, not only in Canada but elsewhere in North America and Europe. Broadly speaking, the argument one hears in Ottawa, Queen’s Park and the mainstream media is that universities need to be more responsive to the policy-driven demands of government, that they need to be focused above all else on preparing young people to enter the workforce, and that they need to concentrate on the immediate needs of the economy as well as the short-term career aspirations of the graduate. Its critics dismiss this as a “narrowly instrumental” approach to higher education and argue for a much broader view in which the aim is not merely to train but to educate the student.

As you leave the university today, I hope you feel prepared to take up the cause for that latter view. A university is a university precisely because it does *not* exist exclusively to serve short-term societal or economic goals. Institutions like ours “operate on both the short and the long horizon. On the one hand, they train students to go out into the world with both general and specific skills necessary to the well-being of society; they work with contemporary problems and they render appropriate the discoveries and understanding that they generate. On the other hand, they forage in realms of abstraction and domains of enquiry that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit.”¹

Those last words come from a document issued nearly a decade ago by the League of European Research Universities, but their equivalent is to be found in the *Magna Charta Universitatum*, which McMaster University signed in 2014. There we are told that “Freedom in research and training is the fundamental principle of university life, and governments and universities, each as far as in them lies, must ensure respect for this fundamental requirement. Rejecting intolerance and always open to dialogue, a university is an ideal meeting-ground for teachers capable of imparting their knowledge and well-equipped to develop it by research and innovation and for students entitled, able and willing to enrich their minds with that knowledge.”²

You have demonstrated yourselves both able and willing, and you have undoubtedly been enriched in ways that are apparent to you today; and will be in other ways of which you are possibly unaware, for many years to come. But in the context of the present debate about the purpose of universities—narrowly instrumental or broadly educational?—I wonder how many of you are aware that behind the program of study each of you has pursued—however professional and narrowly

¹ Geoffrey Boulton and Colin Lucas, *What Are Universities For?* League of European Research Universities (LERU), September 2008, 4.

² This is the third of the Fundamental Principles of the *Magna Charta Universitatum*.

defined that program may at times have seemed to you—stands not a consensus curriculum developed by ministry bureaucrats, indifferent to the intellectual assets and missions of individual institutions, but instead a record of research and reflection particular to McMaster University and the scholars who work here, both to educate you and to advance their disciplines through research conducted to the highest standards?

At McMaster, as at any research-intensive institution, we regard the work of educating students, and of extending the boundaries of knowledge through research, as inseparable and mutually-reinforcing activities. However much we may endorse the notion that institutions like ours exist for the advancement of the nation's well-being and must be key contributors to societal and economic development, we demur at the narrow or reductive application of this idea. We do not accept, in other words, that the value of the university consists entirely or even principally in its ability to deliver outcomes as mandated by government from time to time.

This is not to say that we are indifferent to those outcomes, or that we will not work to deliver them. Instead it means that we are—and must always be—focused on the bigger picture of the individual and the longer view of our society. We offer education, rather than job training; we are interested in asking questions as well as applying the answers we have found; we strive to maintain dynamic connections between theory and practice, wisdom and technical knowledge; and we approach the world with a desire to see and understand it *whole*. Coincidentally that means that universities are exactly what a knowledge society needs, and the outcomes mandated by government will in all likelihood be delivered. But that does not mean that the value of universities is reducible to the sum of social, economic or governmental needs at the present time.

You will each have had experiences during your time at McMaster that opened a window on the kind of place this is—on the kind of activities, above, beyond and yet integrated with your experiences in the classroom—that define us as an institution and that proclaim us as a university. You may have watched an intervention in a clinical setting that was original, effective, and clearly influenced by your professor's research. You may have visited or even worked in your professor's laboratory and imbibed first-hand the patience and discipline required to conduct meaningful inquiry, as well as the excitement of discovery. You may have sat in surprised astonishment as your instructor in English or sociology ascended into the intellectual stratosphere, the issue or text then under discussion having intersected with his or her decades-long mental engagement with a particular aspect of the subject.

These are the epiphanies by which the research life of the university discloses itself to its members every day—even to those of you whose degree requirements do not allow much lateral investigation, whose focus is comparatively narrow, prescribed by accreditation, or simply very technical. But were you to set out to explore that life in all its richness you would discover why it is that McMaster has for years been

consistently ranked as one of the top one hundred universities in the world, and why your degree from this institution will bring you respect, recognition, and yes—the things we all want from our lives: the potential for a successful career and a lifetime of learning and discovery.

Even if you are not always aware of it, or able to articulate what it means, you *are* the product of a research-focused institution, and one no less student-centred for being so. And the ethos of such an institution, with its focus on curiosity, investigation, evidence and analysis, is precisely that which equips you for long-term success in your life beyond this ceremony.

If, prompted by those in-class epiphanies which I mentioned, you were to begin more systematically to probe the research dimension of McMaster, where would your journey take you? It might take you into any one of our more than fifty research institutes and centres, from the Michael G. DeGroote Institute for Infectious Disease Research to the Brockhouse Institute for Materials Research, from the CanChild Centre for Childhood Disability Research to the Centre for Functional Genomics, from the Centre for Peace Studies to the Farncombe Family Digestive Health Research Institute, from the Gilbrea Centre for Studies in Aging to the Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition, from the McMaster Centre for Software Certification, to the McMaster eBusiness Research Centre, to the McMaster Centre for Music and the Mind, or the Origins Institute, or the McMaster Palaeogenetics Institute, or the Offord Centre for Child Studies—and I could go on. You might want to investigate such facilities as the High Throughput Screening Laboratory, the McMaster Nuclear Reactor, the Nursing Effectiveness, Utilization and Outcomes Research Unit, the William J. McCallion Planetarium, the Canadian Centre for Electron Microscopy, the Public Economics Data Laboratory, and the Geographical Information Systems Laboratory.

Do you know that in the basement of the Mills Library can be found one of the most outstanding scholarly resources in Canada, the William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections? There you will discover manuscripts, radio and television scripts and correspondence by the Irish playwright, Samuel Beckett; the papers of Canadian historian Pierre Berton; 36.5m of manuscripts, diaries, and other materials relating to Vera Brittain, the British writer, lecturer, pacifist and feminist; the papers of Farley Mowat; eighteenth-century British military manuscripts, journals and newsletters, and a host of valuable and illuminating documents vitally important for primary research in literature, history, music, cultural studies, business and many other fields.

And occupying pride of place in the basement of Mills Library are the Bertrand Russell Archives, an unparalleled collection of primary and secondary materials relating to Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, logician and essayist who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950. Visit Mills and you can sit at Russell's desk, peruse his library, admire the wing chair in which he sat to read, and explore the world of twentieth-century literature, philosophy, politics and culture. The Russell archive is a priceless resource for research in the humanities, history and politics,

and like the labs, centres and institutes which I mentioned, it stands as testimony to the seriousness with which McMaster University has committed itself over the last 128 years to the discovery of knowledge. It embodies, facilitates and testifies to that broader view of the university's mission to which I referred at the outset, insisting by its presence that we not concede to the narrowly instrumental role governments and our society would, from time to time, seek to impose on us.

The Russell Archive literally *does* testify to the importance of that broader view, for in Russell's writings you will find a description of the goal of the university which I hope you will always remember, and which I hope you will seek to uphold as you establish yourselves in your careers and claim your rightful place as leaders in our province, our country, and beyond. In an essay from the late fifties entitled "University Education" he wrote this: "Truth is a shining goddess, always veiled, always distant, never wholly approachable, but worthy of all the devotion of which the human spirit is capable."³ Your university education may have trained you in specific skills, but its unique and longest-lasting gift to you will be to have kindled your curiosity about truth and your joy in discovery.

It is important to say these things—and to *know* these things about the university—because outside of the university family the benefits of this unique milieu are not well enough understood. Indeed, even when they are understood they are sometimes also feared, and there is no better explanation for the cause of that fear than this observation, again by Bertrand Russell: "Men fear thought as they fear nothing else on earth—more than ruin, more even than death. Thought is subversive and revolutionary, destructive and terrible; thought is merciless to privilege, established institutions, and comfortable habits; thought is anarchic and lawless, indifferent to authority, careless of the well-tried wisdom of the ages. Thought looks into the pit of hell and is not afraid. It sees man, a feeble speck, surrounded by unfathomable depths of silence; yet it bears itself proudly, as unmoved as if it were lord of the universe. Thought is great and swift and free, the light of the world, and the chief glory of man."⁴

You are all the products of an institution devoted above all else to thought; and paradoxically your ability to shape a stable, healthy and equitable nation in the future will depend on the degree to which you have learned and internalized the corrosive, subversive power of that supreme faculty.

That's my message. I hope you will turn the power of your own minds on it and on the prospects for us all in the future.

Congratulations and my warmest best wishes to you.

³ *Fact and Fiction*, 1961.

⁴ From *Why men Fight: A Method of Abolishing the International Duel*, 1917.