

“Why the World Needs the Arts and Humanities Graduates”
Adapted from an Address by Professor Kalpana Shankar at the BA Conferring
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Dear guests, colleagues, family, friends – and most of all, our new graduates whom we are all here today to celebrate. Cead mile failte roimh Colaiste Oscail Baile Atha Cliath. A hundred thousand welcomes to UCD.

Please bear with me for the next few minutes while I take advantage of this rare opportunity to get on my favourite soapbox with a captive audience: Why the world needs the Arts and Humanities, and why the world needs you.

But before we get there – what does a university education mean? Michael Oakeshott was a 20th century English philosopher and political theorist who wrote widely about many of the topics you BA graduates have spent your years here at UCD studying: philosophy, history, religion, classics, and aesthetics. Oakeshott wrote that the central gift that universities provide its students is the “gift of the interval”. In his words: a university education is “ a period in which to look round upon the world without the sense of an enemy at one’s back or the insistent pressure to make up one’s mind“. In other words, a university education provides a gift of space and time where one can explore, learn, decide, and become.

So what does that “gift of the interval” mean for you, you who have explored, learned, decided, and have now become Arts and Humanities graduates? It’s worth thinking about this question because, graduates, you will be asked many times. “A BA? What are you going to do with THAT?” It’s a question you will need a good answer to. You may have noticed that that policy makers, media, politicians, and business leaders seem to be clamouring for more Science/ Technology/Engineering/Maths graduates. I won’t pit one set of disciplines and ways of engaging the world against another. Instead, I would say that when we look at all of the challenges facing Ireland and indeed the world, it’s clear we need MORE smart, educated, talented graduates of ALL kinds, people with knowledge and skills and experience who can help us tackle the many thorny issues that confront us as a species and as a planet. These issues transcend disciplines and degrees.

So back to that gift of the interval. What does a university education in Arts and Humanities, that “gift of time and space”, do for you and the world?

First: Arts and Humanities give us a sense of moral imagination and empathy by teaching us where we’ve come from and where we’ve been. So many of the challenges we are confronting as societies are ones that derive from diminishing global resources. Thanks to our Arts and Humanities graduates, we can understand how earlier societies faced (or didn’t) challenges of climate change, migration, war, and famine, to name a few. They help us address the implications of science and technology by giving us “tools to think with”. Whether it’s human cloning or Facebook, we need your guidance to help us think critically about the implications of

our creations. To paraphrase a meme that keeps making the rounds: “Science can tell you how to clone a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Humanities graduates can tell you why that’s a bad idea.”

Second: Arts and humanities teach us how people have created their world and in turn are created by it. They help us to remember. Language, literature, religion, the visual and performing arts give us a wide variety of ways to understand how people have envisioned and shaped their societies all over the world (and how those societies shape them). The arts and humanities disciplines also give us ways of communicating across barriers and boundaries through creative expression. Writing and oral culture, of course, but music, film, dance, art, and others. These creative practices are cultural and social memory practices.

And yes, I am getting there – Employers LIKE Arts and Humanities majors. They value the knowledge and skills you bring to the table. In 2013 the Association of American Colleges & Universities, a leading voice for Humanities education in the United States, commissioned a survey of 400 US based employers of college graduates. 91% of these employers agreed that for career success, ““a job candidate’s demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than his or her undergraduate major.” 96% agree that “all college students should have experiences that teach them how to solve problems with people whose views are different from their own.” 78% agreed that all university students should gain intercultural skills and an understanding of societies and countries other than their own.” Critical thinking? Communication skills? Complex problem solving? Intercultural understanding? I would guess that these requirements are not limited to American employers. They also sound very much like UCD Arts and Humanities graduates’ skills to me.

However, well-meaning (and perhaps not so well-meaning) people will still ask you “What are you going to do with that degree?”. So tell them. Tell them all of these things you have learned to do – research, write, think, communicate, understand people and cultures and societies and why not to clone a T-Rex. Tell people you will solve wicked problems, you will build bridges among people, you will create new works of art, and will change the world with your words and images and movement and music. Sounds like a tall order, but why not? You have the experience and knowledge of thousands of years of human society to build on!

Once you tell them all this, you have to put it into practice, right? So what’s next then?

One: Keep learning. Always. You know how to learn. And put your learning out there. Read, discuss, find your own voice in blog/book/story/art/music/whatever medium captures your imagination. And yes, I’ve heard there’s this thing called the Internet. You can find online classes, discussion groups, blogs, and all kinds of resources for learning about topics that are new to you. The Internet is also a great place to find real-space communities and groups to learn with others. Use it wisely.

Two: Speak up for the voiceless and the marginalised. That moral imagination and empathy for other cultures and ways of knowing? Time to put it to good use. That critical thinking we all go on about so much? Use it to be a force for good in

your communities and your world. This is where you get to put those communication skills to use. Now's the time.

Three, Plan for things to not go to plan, but be persistent. Many of you have overcome extraordinary obstacles to get here today. Many of you will face extraordinary obstacles in getting to where you want to go. Be confident that you have what it takes to plan, to work through a plan, and to succeed – even if that plan wasn't the one you started with. In fact, I can almost guarantee it won't be. But that's ok. You've done a lot of the hard work of learning how to succeed. In the words of civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. (who wrote at the ripe age of 18), a "complete education" gives "not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate."

Lastly, develop the habit of gratitude. For your family and friends and classmates and lecturers, an unexpectedly generous stranger you encounter, a warm sunny day in Dublin, for the resources at your disposal, for time well spent at UCD, for a life in this beautiful and peaceful country.

From now on, your education is in your own hands. Take advantage of that autonomy and opportunities that life will present you with. Comhghairdeas agus go raibh mile maith agaibh. Congratulations, and thank you.