

Sir Eric Thomas

President, Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues,

Today we are honoured to welcome Eric Thomas to a Fellowship at Birkbeck. Education education education: Sir Eric's contributions to education in the UK and internationally are the reason we have invited him onto the stage this morning.

He is a remarkable man, whose entire career has been dedicated to the service of others. Prior to his life as one of the UK's foremost promoters of higher education, Sir Eric was a physician. In an interview published many years ago, he reminisced about being a final year medical student, faced with a man who was admitted with a dissecting aortic aneurysm: "As I passed the end of the bed", he recalled,

I glanced at him and saw in his eyes that he clearly understood his position and was very afraid. In that moment I realized the holistic challenge of being a doctor and the real responsibility of the job – to be a friend and a professional.

These are haunting words – appropriate to a man who cites Primo Levi's The Periodic Table as his favourite book.

So, who is the man? Sir Eric – or just plain Eric Thomas at that stage – was born in Hartlepool in County Durham, one hours drive away from the Benedictine school, Ampleforth College in north Yorkshire, where he was educated. He then graduated in medicine at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, eventually specialized in

obstetrics and gynaecology. In 1991, after stints in Sheffield and Newcastle, he was appointed Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the University of Southampton.

This was when his dazzling rise began: Head of the School of Medicine in 1995 and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Biological Sciences just three years later. His energy, hard work, and vision proved transformative. Laboratory space witnessed a massive expansion. Its research profile dramatically intensified. In 1991, the faculty had won new research grants worth £3.1 million; in 1995, this had escalated to £14 million.

This was also the time when Sir Eric recognized the importance of mature students to the educational system. The numbers of mature students enrolled at Southampton grew dramatically. As he put it at the time, "Mature graduates are usually highly motivated and well-focused. The down side is that they can be self-critical". He set out to provide not only the infrastructure necessary for this cohort of students, but also to encourage their self-confidence.

It was not all hard work, either for him or them. There was fun and celebrations as well. Sir Eric presided over the School's 25th anniversary, not only with the usual round of prestigious lectures and speeches, but also with dance and music.

Then, his life took another twist: he became Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bristol in September 2001 (although the news was rather over-shadowed by other events that month). The university was literally transformed under his leadership, becoming one of the leading universities in the world. Sir Eric presided over the university's greatest building programme in its history. He tackled the gender pay gap that had meant that the average salary of male professors were 4.7 per cent

higher than their female counterparts. He vowed to increase the number of local and state-educated undergraduates. It is no wonder they hung on to him, and he became one of the longest-serving Vice-Chancellors, although here at Birkbeck we are confident that our own loved Master will, one day, out-rank him in this regard.

In speaking about Sir Eric and reading about his ideas it became clear that he is enemy of anything “fuddy duddy” (a favourite word of his). Elitism, too, he implies, is for cowards. Throughout his career he has championed fair access to higher education, especially part-time education of the caliber that we provide here at Birkbeck.

But if universities have a duty to expand access and provide the highest level of education to their students, so, too, graduates have duties towards their alma maters. This is well understood in the United States, where more than one-third of employees make charitable donations compared with just two per cent in the UK. So, when Chair of the government’s Taskforce into Increasing Voluntary Giving in Higher Education, Sir Eric established systems (including tax relief, matched funding, and pump priming programmes) to increase donations to universities from alumni. He observed that alumni prove themselves to be “very willing to support their institutions especially if the university has created an environment where giving is regarded positively by both the donor and the recipient”. Take note, graduates!

Indeed, in 2009, Sir Eric decided to lead by example. He contributed £100,000 from his family savings towards a centenary fund for improvements at the University of Bristol. Perhaps he should have first consulted his wife and daughter (the fund had been earmarked for her), but he was unrepentant. As he rather ruefully admitted, “I felt I could not go around asking other people to give significant amounts to our appeal if I’m not prepared to do it myself”.

Throughout this time, he held numerous national, regional, and international positions. He championed diversity at The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. He is a leading proponent of MOOCs, on the grounds that they give institutions opportunities to advertise their excellence as well as enriching people's lives.

He is the chair of CASE Europe (the Council for Advancement and Support of Education) as well as the Worldwide Universities Network. He served on the Board of the South-West Regional Development Agency, the Bristol Partnership Executive Board, as well as being a trustee of the Greater Bristol Foundation. He was Commissioner of the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission, which brings the best American scholars to British universities.

In 2011, he became President of Universities UK. This position is crucial if we are to protect British universities as national assets that contribute £73 billion to the economy each year, drive innovation, and enrich the lives of people worldwide. Universities UK are committed to supporting UK-based research as well as transnational research projects. It emphasizes that international students are a vital and valued part of the UK economy and cultural life. They bring cultural and political benefits to the UK, and they act as cultural and economic ambassadors for the UK when they leave. Universities UK is about excellence. As its president, Sir Eric set about ensuring the these aims and objectives are fulfilled many times over. On 15 June 2013, he was appointed a Knight Bachelor for his services to higher education.

Crucially, he is an advocate of Birkbeck's mission. As he eloquently put it, "The reality is that the UK needs more graduates and relies heavily on part-time higher education to meet these fast changing skills needed in a fast changing world. We ignore part-

time study's transformative power for individuals and society at our peril". Stirring words.

But let's not forget the personal man: He is married, with 2 children. Although he obviously enjoys "thinking big", he is also man who claims to love "daydreaming" (although how he fits it in, I don't know). He has some very bad habits – including supporting Newcastle United, although he consoles himself after games by playing golf. Notably, when Sir Eric was asked whether he ever broke the Ten Commandments, he boldly confessed: but "I can't remember the Ten Commandments".

What he always remembers, though, is the need to be true to what he believes in. Throughout his life, Sir Eric has given his all to succeed in whatever challenge has been put in his path. He is incredibly hard working: for him, there are "no magic recipes.... leadership, investment, professionalism and hard work are the orders of the day". In the context of education – as in the context of medicine, his first love – he has accepted, nay, embraced, "the real responsibility of the job – to be a friend and a professional". We are honoured that he has agreed to be a Fellow of Birkbeck.