

Reply to Laureation: Dr Paul Rennie OBE

Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh.

Tuesday 19th June 2019

Learning To Fail

Chancellor, distinguished guests, parents and friends, but most of all the class of 2019.

My name is Paul Rennie. A British Diplomat who has been honoured for my work by the Queen and now by this prestigious institution, yet I am, in a great many ways, a failure.

A failure who began the first of many failures pretty early in life with a really spectacular flop in my Higher French Exam. I have a pretty vivid memory of it: after a brief surge of confidence in correctly answering the first question: which was in English, and asked me to write my name in full. I swiftly tumbled into an abyss of prepositions, subjunctives, and any number of irregular verbs. I would conclude that exam with '*nul points*' – ironically the only French I had really picked up was watching the Eurovision song contest and films by Luc Besson.

And that failure would have a profound impact on my life. Not only leading to a particularly grumpy French teacher, but it meant I would end up short on the grades I wanted for my first-choice degree in Law, and leave me instead studying Economics & Politics.

But why, when we are at a ceremony dedicated to celebrating so much success, am I talking so openly about my failure? It's because the irony of so much of education is that it doesn't always teach us that the most important lessons often have nothing to do with success.

Of course I am not the only British failure. There is one chap I know who managed to fail in the same task a mind numbing 5,126 times. Can you imagine that level of incompetence, 5,126

failed attempts spread over the course of fifteen years. You would kind of assumed they would have given up and tried something else.

But I'm glad he didn't. Because if he had, that certain chap by the name of James Dyson, now Sir James Dyson, would never have invented the bagless vacuum cleaner – or the airblade hand dryer, or supersonic hair dryer (it will come as no surprise I make a lot more use of his hand dryers than hair dryers).

Which is really the most important lesson of failure - resilience. Does failing at something make *you* a failure, well only if you let it. Was James Dyson a failed inventor, or was it only his inventions that failed? If he had given up at attempt 5,126 then he would have slipped into obscurity. But with one last attempt he finally cracked it he became a success, and every other failure in his past became just a failed *attempt* of a *successful* inventor.

Failure can also show you are really testing yourself, pushing your limits, or the limits of engineering, and trying something new. Much like this University has done. Which is why you graduate today as part of a cohort from a *Global* institution, not just an Edinburgh institution. And I would hazard a guess, Chancellor, there have been a few failures along your path to success. Because failure, if properly understood, could be the greatest opportunity that ever presented itself.

I failed my French exam, which meant I failed to get into Law – a subject which I would later realise would absolutely not have suited me, while economics ignited a passion. I failed in my first round of job applications, which meant I ended up applying for the Foreign Office – had things gone to plan, I would have been an accountant in Edinburgh, not travelling the world, not talking to you today.

Even with French. I failed my French exams, and six years later I sat in the United Nations negotiating international resolutions entirely in French – it may well explain some of our problems in the modern world

You graduate as a group of outstanding young men and women. Inside each and every one of you is the power to change and reshape the world in any way you might choose. But you can only do that if you push yourselves, if you push the boundaries of what people tell you is possible, and if you are prepared to try and to fail. And in failing, to get back up and try again.

The future may be built by those who have succeeded, but I believe it can only be truly appreciated by those who have failed. So embrace life's failures for what they are, just an alternative path to your final success.

Thank you.