University of Edinburgh Welcome Week 2016
Principal’s Welcome Ceremony

[Bagpipe music 00:00:11 – 00:03:00]

Tim O’Shea: Good afternoon, I’m Tim O’Shea, I’m your principal. Great pleasure to welcome you to the ceremony, please sit down. I’m now going to ask the senior vice-principal, Professor Charlie Jeffrey, to give an opening reflection.

Charlie Jeffrey: Students, today you begin the next phase of your life. You have the opportunity over the next few years to immerse yourself in your chosen subjects, to work with each other and with your lecturers to master those subjects, and in that process to further the fundamental mission of this university; that is the discovery and application of new knowledge for the benefit of the community around us.

When I say, “community around us”, I mean of course that in Edinburgh, Scotland, and the UK. Yours is a university with a proud civic tradition in this city and in this country. But our community is also a global one. You’ll find students from around 160 countries here on our campuses. Few other of the world’s leading universities have such a diverse student population as we do. That gives you the opportunity not just to learn about your subjects, but to do so alongside colleagues of different backgrounds and cultures, and to learn and benefit from their experiences. You will find that a tremendous advantage as you move through and beyond your time with us here.
A university with a global reach has an obligation to address the challenges that face us around the world. Nelson Mandela famously and rightly said that education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. You’ll see opportunities in what you study to understand better the challenges that face us: war and conflict; healthcare and new technologies; climate change; poverty, and what might be done about them. Mr Mandela also said, “A good head and good heart are always a formidable combination. But when you add to that a literate tongue or pen, then you have something very special.”

We hope that you can use your time here to build that something very special, as you wield your tongues and your pens on your subjects.

We commit to giving you every support that we can. You will encounter lecturers who are among the leading figures in their fields and passionate about their subjects. You can count on their commitment to your success. It is the mix of that and your own commitment, your own passion for learning that builds such success.

Being at university is a team game. We the academic staff, and you the student, are both key parts of that team; we each depend on the other.

As you embark on your studies, do reflect from time to time on all those who helped to get you here; your families, your friends, your teachers. You will of course see less of them, but do remember to include them and to keep in touch. They will still be rooting for you, and will want to know the experiences you have and the friends you make.
My final word is about the scope of what you can learn about here. Most of you will have the opportunity to step outside your chosen subjects and take courses in other subjects in other parts of the university. Do take up that opportunity. Our knowledge of the world is often advanced most quickly through the creative interplay between different academic disciplines. Not knowing precisely where the pursuit of new knowledge will take you has to be one of the most exciting things about being at university.

So welcome to the University of Edinburgh. We’re delighted you’ve chosen to study with us, and have fun.

Tim O’Shea: That was very good. Thank you very much, Charlie. So, great pleasure for me to welcome the new students in this hall, welcome the new students who are looking at us online, welcome the new students who are located in the George Square Lecture Theatre looking at us now, and welcome students who will be looking at us online in the future. You’ve got a magnificent welcome party; you’ve got our rector, you’ve got two regents – the regents are the ones who look a bit Harry Potter-ish with the weird gowns. You’ve got [EUSA 00:8:08] officials who are also a bit Harry Potter-ish looking; general counsel officers, university officers, and representative colleagues.

You have joined one of the world’s greatest universities. You’ve joined a very large community. More than 35,000 students, nearly 15,000 staff, so a community of about 50,000. That’s an awful lot of people to get to know, and to start with you will turn to the person nearest you and tell them one interesting thing about you. Do it.
Stop! Stop. You may continue that interesting conversation, but be aware: 1 down, 49,999 to go, so you will have to work hard in your 4 years.

You should be very proud. You're in a cohort of about 5,500, but there were 58,000 competent applications; 58,000 who had the minimum to get in, so the odds... You've fought very, very tough odds to get here, and be very proud of that. Be very proud of your university, founded in the second half of the 16th century. We started with the parish curriculum, one of the reasons we have the 4-year degree, a very strong emphasis on philosophy, a very strong emphasis on being broad-based, and then augmented by the Leiden and the Dutch School of Medicine, which gave the university such a strong empirical flavour.

But one very special thing about us is the way we're integrated into the city all over the place. If you look at the contributions different people have made: Joseph Black founded large chunks of chemistry, trained as a medic; Charles Darwin did evolution, trained as a medic; James Hutton literally created geology, worked out the earth had a molten core, worked out about sedimentation, again trained as a medic, because we had a very, very empirical style of medicine which we took from the Dutch.

Arthur Conan Doyle also trained as a medic; did something a bit different, created Sherlock Holmes. Lots and lots of writers. There isn't a subject in the university where you can't go sideways. Walter Scott trained as a lawyer; became a

Very appropriate, because Hugh Blair, in your university in the 18th century, founded the study of literature. He was the first person to suggest that it would be reasonable to take works of fiction and start studying them. So if you’re studying English Literature or Literature, this is the university in which that idea came.

Obviously prominent in the enlightenment: David Hume in philosophy; William Robertson in history – in fact, created the way that moderns started writing history books; Adam Smith lectured in economics, and with visitors like Voltaire and Franklin. Currently in the world top 20. So I’m going to ask you 3 questions, in each case if the answer is ‘yes’, put your hand up.

Have you ever used an antiseptic? Lister, at this university, in the history of medicine, anaesthetics, antiseptics came from here, as well as more recent attractive things like the very concept of neurosis was developed in this university, and Dolly the sheep was cloned here.

Anybody ever use Google? Thomas Bayes, who has established Bayesian statistics, probably most famous for being used to establish the relationship between lung cancer and smoking tobacco. But Bayesian statistics is what makes Google work, it’s what makes Google Translate work, and Bayes is a very interesting person educated in this university, in divinity, became a minister – and this will be interesting for Richard – and his objective, as you would expect from a
clergymen, was to improve his performance at gambling. He wasn’t successful; he actually had to work quite hard as a minister in Tunbridge Wells, but he did leave us his theory, without which none of the search engines you use.

Anybody here ever watched a television, or used a washing machine, or used any sort of electrical device? Very good. James Clerk Maxwell, of course, developed electromagnetism. More recently, Peter Higgs got his Nobel Prize here for establishing, through the Boson, a new structure matter. So you’re in a place where people do big stuff. They don’t just make discoveries, they make world-changing discoveries; they create new subjects like geology or literature.

You’ve got a most wonderful students’ association. You’ll be told about it. It had the first purpose-built student union in the world, the first student newspaper. Currently a tremendous tradition of volunteering. The question is, why was the students’ association in Edinburgh so successful, and one of the reasons was the students lived in the town. They had to look after themselves. The university did not provide catering facilities. Until the 1920s it did not provide accommodation. So they were very self-organising.

I encountered a wonderful encyclopaedia entry for the 19th century. It talks about the students at Oxford, and Cambridge, and St Andrews and places, and it explains all about the rules, and the gowns and everything. And then it says of this university, “In Edinburgh, the students stay in the town and do as they please.” Don’t do too much as you please, but you’ll see there are five students, obviously… For centuries there have been attempts to get students of our university to wear red gowns. As far as we can tell, the only way to do it is to ask
them to come on a stage to get a cheque. Otherwise, you won’t see… None of you appear to be wearing red gowns.

Very, very autonomous students. Very successful in sports. Obviously I’m your principal, you want me to give you instructions, of course, so I will. Instruction one: work hard at your subject. Instruction two: broaden your interests. Instruction three: take intellectual risks. Instruction four: enjoy Edinburgh. And instruction five: get diverse new friends.

I’ll expand “work hard”; find out what is required, and then do more. Don’t do less, do more. Read around a subject, broaden your interests. This city is full of inaugural lectures. You might be studying philosophy, but you can go to a medical inaugural lecture. You might be studying geography, but you can go to world class concerts 00:15:34. So broaden your interests. Do take intellectual risks. When you’re offered a choice of essay topics, choose the one that looks impossible. Don’t choose the one that looks easy, choose the hard one. Ask, “Can I go further?”

The folks on the stage who are academics, how did they get to be successful academics? The only way you get there is by taking risks. The only way you get there is by trying to do the thing that is harder than the thing the other people are doing. So if you want to really succeed, you must take risks. Enjoy Arthur’s Seat and the rest of Edinburgh. We are very, very lucky, we’ve got a mountain based on a volcanic plug. Go up the top of it before breakfast; I do.

Eat haggis or vegetarian haggis. Go Cèilidh dancing and do enjoy all the other facilities. And friends, as the senior vice-principal said. There are 160 countries represented here. Make friends from other countries, make friends who are
studying different subjects, and make friends who have got different personalities. If you’re an extrovert, then make friends with some introverts. If you’re studying physics, make friends with some people studying philosophy or veterinary medicine.

The thing that we have to be honest with you on this stage, is challenges. Will you face challenges as a student in your four years here? Yes, you will. Bound to. They may be financial challenges, they may be academic challenges, they may be social challenges, they may be medical challenges, they may be challenges to your confidence, but you will face challenges.

The thing to be aware of is, this is a community now of 50,000. It is more than 400 years old. Whatever challenge you face will not be new. Whatever challenge you face, there will be experience of it amongst the immediate community in the staff. There are no new challenges. So you may feel awful about something, whether it is, “Oh, look at my bank balance.” or, “That was a rubbish essay I just turned in.” Whatever it is, that is not new.

So the key point of this introductory talk is to ask you to ask for help. If you feel the need, ask for help. When should you ask? Well you should ask sooner rather than later. Who should you ask? You have massive choices here. You have got the academic staff you’re in contact with who want you to succeed; the administrative staff you’re in contact with who want you to succeed; the other students; and then the organised services. EUSA has a wonderful advice place.

We have a wonderful chaplaincy for students of all faith and none. A wonderful counselling service, a wonderful careers service. Lots and lots of people, some who have a formal role, because they’re in counselling, in chaplaincy, in giving you
support and help, and some of whom have an informal role. Who would you ask first? Well maybe you should ask different folk. Much better to ask too many people for advice than too few. So my conclusion is, what do we want from you? We want you to be happy, we want you to be successful. To do that, you need to work hard, you need to enjoy the city, and you need to ask for help when you need it. Thank you very much for your attention.

The university has a wonderful endowment from Sir William Darling to give prizes to students who have done the most to increase the reputation of the university. This can be in sports, it can be in terms of charitable work, it can be in terms of intellectual work. The problem we had this year is we have too many wonderful nominations. It was an extremely hard job to whittle them down to five, but we did, and I’m going to tell you a little bit briefly about each of them, give them their cheque, and God bless to William Darling for providing the money for that.

So the first person I’m going to talk about is Alice Jenkins from the Royal Dick School of Veterinary Studies. Stand up, Alice. So Alice is a very successful vet student. She also qualified in the triathlon. She was working very hard to establish herself as a top international triathlete. Her first race was the 2015 age group European championships where she won silver in Geneva. She then won gold in the British championship. She was named female age group athlete of the year for 2015 by Triathlon Scotland, and this weekend she will be competing in the world championships in Cozumel, Mexico. So let us congratulate her. Well done. A hearty congratulations.

Our second award winner is Saskia Hagenas. Saskia works in the Centre for Cognitive Aging and Cognitive Epidemiology,
and as the people on the platform are very aware, and you’re probably less aware, healthy aging is a big issue. We pretty much are all bothered about it. Saskia is doing her PhD in that, doing ground-breaking work in the molecular genetics of cognitive functions and personality traits, and their relationship with psychiatric and physical illnesses.

Although she’s not finished her PhD, she already has two papers in molecular psychiatry, one paper in the international journal of epidemiology, and is the core of a team of five other post-doctoral colleagues, doing amazingly well, achieving the sort of recognition that one would expect somebody 10 years older and further in their career to be achieving. Achieving it while being a PhD student, and while being a driving force in one of our most important centres. So please join me in applauding Saskia. Well done. Hearty congratulations.

So the third person that we’re going to award is Jasmine Paris, so Jasmine, stand up. Jasmine is also studying for a doctorate. Like all the students we’re awarding prizes to, massively successful academically. Doing her doctorate in the Centre for Regenerative Medicine. She smashed the females’ record for The Bob Graham Round, a fell run. Some of you may not know what that involves. What it involves is running through very rough territory, going up and down. The Bob Graham Round is 62 miles, and it involves change of height of 8,500 metres while you’re doing it, over incredibly rough terrain. Running it in late April, not only did she take 2 hours and 42 minutes off the record - that meant she achieved this amazing run in 15 hours and 24 minutes, so that’s 2 and a half hours faster than any woman had ever done it – she also came very close to the male record for it.
So that is quite an extraordinary achievement. It brings tremendous credit to her, tremendous credit to the university, so join me in applauding Jasmine. Well done.

And then the fourth person that we want to honour is student Giadita Pavesse. She’s not shy at all, actually. She’s also doing a doctorate on the synthesis and characterisation of new materials using high pressures and temperatures. A very productive members of our very important Centre for Science at Extreme Conditions. But in addition to doing this, she’s been massively successful in leading and participating in outreach projects and initiatives.

She led a team as part of an explorathon to the Edinburgh Zoo; delivered talks on symmetry, asymmetry, and life; participated in the Harwell Laboratory open day with some 16,000 attendees at the end, and there I think demonstrating a lack of shyness, was illustrating pressure with marshmallows, balloons, and nails. She is a key participant - and again this is a student we’re talking about, not a member of staff - a key participant in in the Edinburgh International Science Festival; worked with Doors Open Day and took a key part in our celebrations for the International Year of the Light, participating both in the Scottish opening and closing ceremonies. So please join me in applauding Giadita. Well done. You’re doing incredibly well.

And then last, we are going to honour Daniel Felipe Mullen. Daniel has graduated in international relations. In his second year in the university he cofounded the Sustainable Development Society, serving as its treasurer and vice-president, and it won a business and sustainability event. In his fourth year he was elected president of the Latin American Society. He’s done tremendous things, organised really
powerful seminars. Again, doing the sort of work that one would expect an experienced lecturer to do; bringing really high profile people to the university to contribute to contemporary Latin American studies discussions, to discussions about sustainability. This has left us with a tremendously successful pattern of work, both with regard to Latin America and in regard to sustainability.

He was awarded the Global Impact at Home award by Eusa. So join me in congratulating him. Well done, congratulations.

And now, there’s going to be a reply, and I’m just finding out which of the two of you are going to reply. Will the two winners who are going to reply come and do that.

Giadita Pavesse: Hello everyone, and thank you principal for the award. I just wanted to come here and follow the vice-principal’s advice in making everyone understand that we don’t do everything we do alone, and as such I want to acknowledge the incredible effort that the public engagement team of the School of Chemistry or the University of Edinburgh does in organising all of these activities, and in particular our public engagement and outreach coordinator Dr Jenny Bos for providing these environments that really thrive on contribution and passion. So just make sure that you’re passionate and your knowledge does not [illegible]. Thank you very much.

Daniel F Mullen: Good afternoon, everyone. First of all I would like to thank Sir Timothy O’Shea for presenting the award, to Fiona Mackay for such great guidance and four years of university here, and to my family who are very diligently watching the online streaming of the ceremony in Colombia. But my advice for you
is to get involved as much as you can. The university offers so many opportunities, infinity opportunities that you should capitalise on and to create future ones. And I think you should aim at having an impact, a transformative and positive impact in society and the world. So you should aim at that goal. And that’s all I want to say. Thank you.

Tim O'Shea: It’s now a great pleasure to call upon our rector, Mr Steve Morrison.

Steve Morrison: Good afternoon. I hope you can all see me. I am standing up. Thank you very much, principal. May I add my welcome to all of you today. You join a great university in a great city. Embrace the enlightenment and the self-development your time here can bring you. Fifty years ago I sat in your seat as the 1960s brought in the flowering of social liberation. It was a very exciting time. One minute we were isolated individuals coming up to university alone, the next we were propelled into a radical student movement.

My contribution was to suggest that a student should be elected to be the rector of this great institution. The rector is the person who presides over the universities highest body: the universities court; in fact, its board. This was too radical, even for the 60s. But it paved the way for two students to be later elected. One became the editor of the Shetland Times, and the other the Chancellor of the Exchequer. So you could say I became the warm-up man for Gordon Brown.

It only took me 47 years to be elected rector, and the rector here is elected by all the students and the staff of Edinburgh University, and I regard it as a great honour to be adding my
words of welcome to you. Tomorrow belongs to those who can hear it coming, so said David Bowie. He was probably encouraging his followers to be more experimental. Today, if we listen to the soundtrack of the future, we could become its architects, not its victims, to paraphrase the great Buckminster Fuller, an architect himself.

So what are the key disruptors coming down the line towards us, and how does this great university help you deal with them? Well the first one is obviously Brexit. Some of you I know are European students. What difference will Brexit make to you? Well I’m delighted to be reassured by the secretary of the university that this university has been able to guarantee any European starting their course today a place here on the same conditions for the full duration of their course.

And for the many students who wish to study for a year abroad, I’m sure Edinburgh will want to continue to make available exchange study programmes. Edinburgh is a great international university, and students and staff from every country will always be welcome here.

The second disruptor could be automation. We hear various forecasts anticipating millions of jobs being lost to computers and other artificial intelligence machines. Some people say that up to two thirds of current jobs are at risk of automation, whilst 50% of work tasks will change significantly because of it. Well we are very fortunate that we have a world class informatics department in Edinburgh, one of the best in the world, specialising in areas like artificial intelligence and data mining and management, and many other disciplines.

I am delighted that the university is encouraging an option of informatics for all, subject to unavoidable clashes in the
timetable of course, so that all students can learn digital literacy as well as their own core courses.

It will likely be the creative professions that will escape the remorseless march of automation. So fusing creative skills and tech ones will be very important. The informatics department and the Edinburgh College of Art already do a joint course in design informatics.

Edinburgh also has access to one of the biggest computer centres in the country, and through its participation in the Alan Turing Institute, is developing its own new big data centre.

If you get a chance to go around the informatics department, you'll also see the giant robots the department is working with thanks to an agreement with NASA.

The third potential disruption of future society could be our aging population. Those over 65, the number will grow by 33% by 2030, and 1 in 3 babies born today will live to be 100. Meanwhile, our 16 to 64 year old working population will only grow by 2 or 3%, unless there is a continued influx of working age immigrants. Thus the balance between those who contribute to our economy and their dependence is changing. There will be more older dependence in proportion to younger contributors than we've had before. This will put great pressure on the budgets of health, mental health, and social care, particularly at a time when some people wish to reduce the size of the state and the relative spend on public services.

Here again, Edinburgh has world class medicine and veterinary medicine departments, and this year the Edinburgh Centre for Cardiovascular Science won a prestigious Queen’s Award for their research into preventing heart attacks, including courses such as air pollution. And of course we also
specialise in regenerative medicine, as the principal said, healthy aging is a big issue.

Another disruptor of course will be climate change. Edinburgh has long had a distinguished history of looking at climate change and sustainability with its Centre for Carbon Innovation. We will need to radically transform how we produce and consume energy and how we pay for it by 2030.

Well I think that’s enough talk of major disruptors. I really don’t want to depress you, rather to inspire you and encourage you, whatever your course is, to visit these crown jewels of Edinburgh research and teaching, and many, many more, so that you’re aware of how the university is tackling the main issues of our time.

As well as our three faculties and all our different individual schools, Edinburgh also has global academies on health, justice, development, and environment and society. These are virtual departments where you can engage with others and learn more about these important subjects. The university has a vice-principal of international, James Smith, and you can hear more from him about what the global academies do.

In my view, it will become increasingly important for universities to warn us about what may happen in the future. There are likely to be serious disruptions to our societies and economies, and we need to know what we can do about them. So don’t hide yourself away. Shake yourself free. Whatever the issue you’re interested in, there are people here who know about it and who will be very happy to talk to you. You are now about to hear from our student presidents that there are also ways to have a lot of fun, both in the university and in this wonderful city.
I found when I was here, that when they finished their courses, nobody would ever leave Edinburgh, they liked it so much.

There are student-led courses, opportunities to volunteer in local and international projects, hundreds of student societies, and the most up to date sports facilities. I understand that 17 to 18,000 students use our sports and exercise centre every year, so congratulations to those running in the sports union.

I don’t want to steal their thunder. They will tell you all of this in detail themselves. I just want to end by repeating what everybody has said: enjoy your time at Edinburgh. It’s very exciting. I look forward to meeting many of you in your time here. Thank you very much.

Tim O’Shea: Thank you very much, Steve. We do have the best students’ association on the planet, and it is a great pleasure to ask its president, Alec Edgecliffe-Johnson, to address it.

Alec E-J: Hello everyone, welcome. Welcome to Edinburgh. Welcome to the students’ association. We are 35,000 members strong, a 35,000-person family, if you will, with a tonne of things to get involved with. You’ve heard from quite a few people here that you need to get involved, and that is imperative. There’s peer learning and support to help you with your studies. There are societies, 250 societies and volunteering groups. There are plenty of events and week-long festivals that you can get involved with, spend your time in, all that sort of thing. But you’re going to hear a lot about that, and you’ll see the student association logo everywhere over the next few weeks. So I’m going to give you three bits of insight that I wish I had had back on my first day.
Number one: learn how to learn. The most effective people here at Edinburgh are not any smarter than their peers – you’re all brilliant. What they have is, they have mastered the tools of learning. They know how to use the Feynman Technique. Proper nutrition, nootropics, memory palace, all of these tools to supercharge their learning, so they can get a better degree, they can retain more information with a lot less time.

The second little tip, and perhaps this is not a secret to some, but to me it was: we’re not here for a degree – we’re here to create a person with a degree. And you’ll soon see that everything in Edinburgh is in line for you to do that. I think you’ve all been given a pledge card, or you will be given a pledge card after this. Please take this exercise seriously. Reflect on something that you would like to do over your next four years, and do it. This is why we come here, to create better people.

We don’t have a top 20 piece of paper; we have top 20 in the world people that come out of here. And that brings me to my next point. But actually, I’ve been sitting here for too long. Can you raise your right hand, and make an ‘okay’ sign, please, everyone in the audience. Brilliant. Okay, now watch me closely. Put it on your chin. Very good. Now, I hear snickers around the room, but you all put it on your cheek. That’s because we are fundamentally visual creatures. We do as people around us do.

So here’s the third insight: you really have to be selective with the people that you spend your time with. You’re the best and the brightest, the pick of the litter here at Edinburgh. Make sure you take advantage of that. Culture yourself, stimulate
yourself, challenge yourself with the people that you surround yourself with.

If in six months you take stock of your friendship group and they’re all from your halls, or they’re all from your course, they’re all from your home town, reassess. There are so many different interesting people here.

Now I’m going to turn you over to our sports union president. But actually, before we do that, I thought this would be a bit cheeky, I haven’t told any of them; let’s take the largest selfie ever taken at the Edinburgh University. So could everyone please stand?

Tim O’Shea: Alex, we have a wonderful sports union, and it is a great pleasure to ask its president, Robin Drummond, to address you.

Robin Drummond: Before I begin, I’d like to address something the principal mentioned earlier, that quite a few of us look like we’ve walked out of Harry Potter. If you’re interested, there is a quidditch club. They train twice a week on the meadows, and you’re all welcome to come along and get involved.

So good afternoon, my name is Robin Drummond, I’m the president of the Edinburgh University Sports Union.

Welcome to the University of Edinburgh. You sit now in one of the greatest universities in the world. A truly outstanding institution and a seat of knowledge. Last year we arrived in the top 20 universities, and it’s now your privilege and our honour to have you join us. It is your duty during your time here to ensure that you make the most of the opportunities, the
expertise, and the facilities that are offered to you here in Edinburgh.

And it’s my job, along with my Eusa colleagues, to make sure that you have those opportunities.

Sport and physical activity is perhaps the greatest opportunity that you will have here at Edinburgh. There are no fewer than 63 sports clubs, everything that you can imagine. From wakeboarding, jiu-jitsu, archery, tennis – if you name it, we have it – and if we don’t, start it.

All of this is yours. Sport here at Edinburgh is run for students by students, with the support of a fantastic staff team. We’re a union which prides itself on turning no-one away from sport or physical activity. There is something here for everyone. If you’ve never played sport, don’t worry. We offer beginner-level sport in everything we do.

If you don’t want to commit time, or you want to enjoy just for fun with some friends, we have an extensive intramural sports programme aimed at doing just that. You can play intramural sport, like myself, with people from your course, people from your halls. You can make friends doing that.

If you want to do competitive sport, we offer that as well, of course we do. And in fact, we’re ranked third in the UK, and we sit quite a distance ahead of the rest of Scotland, just so you know. Glasgow are, like, 25th.

Whatever level sport you play, whatever sport or activity interests you, come along and meet the students who make it happen. The Edinburgh University Sports Union Sports Fair is on a Wednesday and Thursday this week in the gym on Pleasance Hill, between 11:00am and 4:00pm. You’ll find it on
any campus map or a quick Google search – and since we invented Google, you better use Google.

Everything that we offer will be showcased, and the passionate students from every club will be there to answer any questions that you have.

If you don’t already know, you’ll soon find out that this university, your university has a rich and powerful history. This is again replicated in sport, and our alumni lists many of sports’ greatest names. Eric Liddell, the men’s 400m gold-winner medal at the 1924 Olympics in Paris, a true icon of track and field. But he’s not the only icon we have. Sir Chris Hoy, until recently, the most decorated Olympian in British history.

Alongside Chris, in the modern era we have Gemma Fay, the most capped Scottish footballer, male or female. Ellidh Doyle, a bronze medallist in Rio. And in our current students, Grace Reid, who represented Team GB as a diver in Rio. Polly Swann, who brought home the silver medal from the women’s eight boat on the rowing lake. And another rower, Katherine Grainger, provides perhaps the greatest sporting story that we have here at Edinburgh.

Katherine arrived, like you now, a wide-eyed fresher, taken aback by all the opportunities and experiences that were on offer to her. She attended her sports fair, as you all will on Wednesday and Thursday, and walked around the hall, considering all the sports and activities on offer. She decided, “Oh, I fancy trying the boat club. I’ve never rowed before. Why not? I’ll take a chance.” And the rest, as they say, is history.

I stand here being able to talk about her six world championship titles, her four silver Olympic medals, and a Gold from London 2012. We’re not, however, a union nor a
university who rest on our laurels. We continue day in day out, year in year out to strive for more. We may be third just now, but we have our eyes set on hunting down Durham and becoming the second best university in the country this year.

We also have a new chapter to add to one of our greatest strands of history. And on the 24th September we face St Andrews… You're supposed to boo. We face St Andrews – that’s it – in the Scottish Varsity Match, the oldest varsity in the world. Last year 10,000 fans turned up to see the finale. Two exhilarating rugby matches at Murrayfield, the home of Scottish rugby. With over 2,000 tickets already claimed this year, this year looks to be even better.

You can be there for free by signing up for a ticket today. Just Google search it, or catch it on Facebook. Did we invent Facebook? No, Harvard.

Internally we strive for a better future, one where students remain at the heart of what we do. Our mass participation events, like intramural sport, and this year’s launch of rec sport, through programmes like Sports Box will offer the best student experience that we’ve ever had here at Edinburgh.

Our diversity and equality campaigns under the banner of One Edinburgh will see us challenge inequalities in our sporting and wider communities with a participation officer in every club to ensure that our sports clubs are the most welcome sports clubs they can be.

They’re a place for all, and I mean all. This is your university, these are your sports clubs, and your sports union. We will do all we can to ensure that you have the opportunities available to make the most of your time at university. If you ever feel like that’s not the case, I invite you to come and speak me, to
challenge me, to make sure that I’m doing my job on your behalf.

Finally, let me reiterate the welcome that’s already been extended to you all, and leave you with one final anecdote.

Today I was having my breakfast. I had Kellogg’s Coco Pops. On the back of the box it said that Kellogg’s were proud to support Team GB in the Olympics and Paralympics, and that from a great start, great things can be achieved. But I would contest that slightly. As Katherine Grainger proves, you don’t have to be great to start, but you do have to start to be great. So get along to the sports fair. Thank you, and enjoy your time here at Edinburgh.

Tim O’Shea: Thank you very much. Continuing the Harry Potter theme, hands up anybody who’s been to King’s Cross Railway Station. You will notice that the original, old 19th century station has been beautifully restored. On the side of it there’s an incredibly wonderful modern space, and there is of course Platform 10 and ¾, or whatever, for the Harry Pot- The person, the architect who made King’s Cross, who revitalised it, made it so beautiful, it happens to be one of our regents – it’s Dr John McAslan, who is now going to address you. John.

John McAslan: Okay, thank you very much. I must be getting old, because this wasn’t sweaty when I came in today, but it now is rather sweaty. I think the ink might have slipped, so apologies if words slur.

The first thing I have to ask you is, who has heard here of Talking Heads, the band? Oh my goodness, that’s worrying.
Exactly, well that explains something. The people in the posh seats have heard of Talking Heads, and there’s quite a lot in my 10 minutes or so today about Talking Heads, so if you haven’t heard from them, a good friend of mine was the singer, David Burns, so please go out and buy, if you can find, if they still sell CDs, Talking Head CDs. The whole point of my talk is around Talking Heads, so it’s going to be completely lost, except for this group, which shows how cool they are, but.

Okay, so. Principal and vice-chancellor, ladies and gentlemen, many thanks for inviting me to contribute to this afternoon’s welcome ceremony with my speech to the new students.

I’m here to provide you with whatever words of wisdom I can possibly muster. Forty-four years to the very day – not quite as long as the rector – from the start of my own fresher’s week at the University of Edinburgh. So, freshers, how are you? Happy? Settled? Unpacked? Made your beds? Well I hope so. It took my son a term to put his sheets on at Pollock Halls, which I don’t actually ever recall him washing until the end of the year. But I’m sure that you’re a lot more organised than my son ever was, and certainly a lot fresher. That’s a joker, a lot fresher…

Right. I suspect getting into university is probably a lot harder now than it was in my day. Competition is so fierce. You are likely to have seen and experienced far more in your 18 or so years than in my generation. You’ve also been spoilt for choice. Like sensory spinning tops, your generation all seem to go from one place to the other in the blink of an eye, travelling at the speed of light 24/7 I really don’t know how you stay on top of it. I only recently mastered how to send a text message; hardly blazing a trail through cyberspace, you may think.
But hold on, I haven’t yet congratulated you for making it to university. Your hard work has been rewarded with a place here, so well done.

That’s enough, thank you. Thank you. You should be very proud of what you’ve achieved. Isn’t it pretty amazing to think that your dedication has been recognised with a place at this renowned and learned institution that dates back almost half a millennium? A glorious university in this world city that celebrates the past, whilst embracing the future. And I don’t know if you want to hear it, but you are the future.

So let me tell you a little bit about me, and if you get bored, you can wave a handkerchief and I’ll stop. Having come from Dollar Academy, across the fourth, to the University in September 1972 – yes, that was in the previous millennium – I was, like you, wide-eyed and fresh-faced. I arrived with bags of enthusiasm, but very little clue of what lay ahead. I didn’t realise, as in the words of the great 1960s American singer-songwriter Sam Cooke, that a change was going to come. Which it did for me, making my journey from school days to university life so fulfilling. This change is also going to come to you, and I promise you, when you embrace it, this will be the most exciting thing that will happen to you in your time here, with your university days becoming the bridge to your future life.

And I also speak to you today about something that will be made available to you at the university, maybe for the first time – it certainly was for me. Something that will stretch out in front of you over the next few years, and that you need to grasp and learn to use well, and that is time.
If I may, I’d like to quote from one of my favourite bands from my university days that you’ve all heard of, Talking Heads, who incidentally, like me, studied architecture, but changed midway to become musicians. By the way, just for accuracy, they studied at Rhode Island School of Design, not the University of Edinburgh. But the main singer, was from, the most famous person, from Dumbarton, David Burn.

Talking Heads, who incidentally, like me, studied architecture, but changed midway to become musicians. They offer up a valuable lesson about time lost, in the opening spoken lines from their epic track, ‘Once in a Lifetime’. You may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile, you may find yourself in a beautiful home with a beautiful wife, and you may ask yourself, how did I get here? While on the surface this track may appear uplifting – after all it’s catchy, and it’s pulsing, and it’s edgy, and it’s funky – and the lyrical content may appear to be about wealth and success. But it’s not about that at all, it’s about someone who has let time slip without noticing.

Yes, things have happened to our narrator, but he hasn’t really made them happen. He doesn’t know what he’s been doing, why he’s done it, or what he’s done with all the time he once had. He’s wasted time, and that he can never recover.

So using time effectively in your new learning and social environment will be a key element of your life here in Edinburgh. What do you think you want to be? Is there something that you want to do more than anything else?

People often suggest that you go to university to find yourself, but I believe that you go to university to develop yourself. There’s plenty of building to be done, plenty of doing to get on
with, but it’s all part of the process of progress, and this takes a while. So don’t worry too much. It will come with time.

My advice is also to try to identify who you want to be, what you want to work towards, and try to get there one stage at a time. Once you have a direction in mind, even if it isn’t fully formed, even if it’s just a rough idea, don’t stop trying to move forwards. Some days you’ll make progress, others not. Some days you’ll have to address setbacks, but it’s all good stuff.

The truth is, you won’t find your direction overnight. Anyway, that wouldn’t be fun. Also, your aims and ambitions are likely to change through and beyond your university days. Consider that your generation, unlike mine, may well have more than one career in your working life.

Referring to time and in the context of finding a direction for yourself, perhaps you might also like to take inspiration from ‘The Universal’, a song by the band Blur, which I presume you have heard of; which my son – that was the one with the unwashed sheets that I referred to earlier – assures me is relevant to you in the context of this address, and on my focus on time. I’m not going to sing, thankfully.

Yes, the universal’s here, here for everyone. Every paper that you read says tomorrow’s your lucky day. Well, here’s your lucky day. It really, really, really could happen. Yes, it really, really, really could happen.

In this verse, frontman Damon Albarn urges us not to let our todays become our tomorrows. So please, grasp your time and use it well.

For now I think I’ve banged on enough about time and embracing change and setting yourself a direction. So what about your experiences? Central to this I suspect will be some
first times for you. As young men and women of today, the world glows, beats and pulses with the strange and surprising, the curious and confusing side-by-side. You will enjoy success, and you will learn to bear failure, and it will be important that you experience both in order that you grow.

You will have plenty offirsts ahead of you in Edinburgh, lots of them. Of this, I am sure. Your life here will also embrace intellectual and social strides. You may meet the love of your life, you might have already; you may not. You may decide that you don’t actually want to be an architect, or you really, really, really do. You may wake up in the middle of the night and decide that the voice in your head that tells you to follow your dream and become the next Talking Heads is the voice of reason. So allow yourself to listen to that quiet voice, and consider carefully alternative paths, if they present themselves. And define yourselves by what you do, rather than allowing yourself to be defined by what you don’t want to do.

Because this university is the place to do stuff, so do it all. Do everything. Extract all you can over the next three to four years. Take this opportunity by the scruff of the neck, and take advantage of everything on offer, because there is so much to do in Edinburgh.

Imagine the best all-you-can-eat buffet. You’re sitting at the head of the table, and it’s open all day and all night. And of course, there’s all the other elements of university life, like respecting one another, keeping the noise down, getting involved with the charity, doing sport, not drinking too much, and washing regularly.

But of these things, you know.
Returning to the theme of time, I’d like you to consider a further thought. When you leave Edinburgh, you will, I suspect, often have a glance back at your life here. What this looks like will be down to your individual experiences and the contribution that you choose to make here. But when you look back, I suspect you’ll ponder on a few things: how you made it through the Edinburgh winters; how many wonderful friendships you made, and regret those that you might’ve lost; and how you might’ve gone to more classes; and for a brief moment you might ask yourself, did I do everything I could’ve done? Did I really make the best use of my time? Well, you all have the potential to answer this final question with a resounding yes, scoring at least 8.5/10.

So in closing, the world is a very different place now than it was when I studied here four decades ago, but much remains true. It is full of opportunity. The gift of time is yours, so make the most of it. Consider your paths. Be prepared to embrace a shift of direction here and there to accommodate a change. And crucially, grasp the future. Well done.

Tim O’Shea: Thank you very much indeed, John. For me, the most beautiful church in Edinburgh is Greyfriars Kirk. It’s in a beautiful setting; it has a wonderful peace-making interior. Inside you see the university coat of arms. The reason for that is that the first minister of Greyfriars was also the first principal of the university, so it has a very important historical relationship with the university, and that is currently maintained by our honorary chaplain, the minister of Greyfriars, the Reverend Dr Richard Frazer, and it’s a great pleasure to invite him to make some closing remarks.
Richard Frazer: Well you’ve had a lot of words, so what I thought I’d do is just really say some words… I’ve been asked to say a blessing, say a benediction at the end. And a benediction simply means a good word.

So what I thought I’d do is, I would say it in one of our indigenous languages, the Gaelic language.

[Gaelic speech 01:02:08 – 01:02:17]

Richard Frazer: Now, you’ll be glad to know that not all of your lectures will be conducted in the Gaelic language.

But the gist of those words, the gist of a benediction is a greeting of peace, of contentment, of friendship, of love, of goodwill. So whatever path you follow, spiritual path or otherwise, I hope, and it’s my prayer, that your time as a student of Edinburgh University will be filled with many good things. Grace and peace be with you all. Amen.

Tim O’Shea: Thank you very much, Richard. That was a beautiful benediction. The party is now going to leave, so please stand.

***end of transcription***