



Address by Professor Ruth Hayhoe

Professor Morris, colleagues at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen,

This is a unique and special occasion for the Hong Kong Institute of Education, as the first group of students to complete the four-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) programme graduate today. This is also the first graduation ceremony for the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Education), the first degree programme in this field ever run in Hong Kong. I am thus deeply honoured to be present today, and to receive an honorary doctorate of education from the Institute.

I would like to begin my remarks today by asking "What is so special about the Bachelor of Education?" As an internationally recognised university degree, it is a programme that gives equal importance to high standards in specific knowledge areas, such as mathematics, Chinese or social studies and in professional knowledge areas such as educational psychology and curriculum. For most of Hong Kong's history, primary school teachers were trained in certificate programmes which were recognised only locally. With the coming of the knowledge society and increasing awareness of the importance of basic education to the health of society, there has finally been a recognition of the vital contribution of teachers at the basic level. They should be fully qualified professionals holding a university degree.

The term "bachelor's degree" has been associated with the university since its founding in medieval Europe. Traditional Chinese society also had recognised degree qualifications for scholars, with the highest level being called the *jinshi*. Those who attained university qualifications were recognised not only in their home region, but internationally through the conferral of a Papal charter on universities in Europe, and through the high prestige of China's scholarship in the East Asian region. Thus the fact that primary school and kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong are now expected to have university degrees gives them an entirely new status. Their academic standards are at the same level as university graduates around the world, while their professional knowledge and skill enables them to identify and develop the potential of each child in the schools of Hong Kong.

Primary school teachers in the United States and Canada, in Japan, in Korea, in Taiwan and in most parts of Europe, have had to reach this level of qualification for many years. We are thus delighted to see HKIEd raising the status and quality of primary and kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong in this important way. It is also a harbinger of the future for Mainland China, where new Bachelor of Education programmes for primary school teachers have been launched in recent years in Beijing, Shanghai and Nanjing.

In June of this year, I had a wonderful opportunity to meet about 12 of this year's BEd graduates. I asked them what was the most memorable aspect of their experience in the four-year degree program. Several of them told me that the most exciting aspect of their studies was developing an ability to reflect on what they were learning. It was not just a matter of memorising, or learning techniques for teaching, but rather of thinking in a critical and holistic way about how their knowledge of mathematics or of history, could be applied to children's learning.

Others told me that their experience of language immersion – in England, in Canada, in Australia, also in Northeast China – had been the most exciting aspect of their study programmes. It had opened their eyes to different societies, different ways in which classrooms were organised and children learned, different cultural experiences. This would enable them to be innovative and try out new and different things in their classrooms in Hong Kong.

Yet others told me of their experience of receiving visitors from other countries who came to Hong Kong. One mentioned the international Mathematics Olympiad and the excitement of welcoming young teachers from the Philippines to the HKIEd campus, and showing them around.

One student said the most rewarding experience had been organising an art exhibit in which students presented works of art which they had created during their years at HKIED.

It was a joy to meet with these students as they were about to join the teaching profession, and learn about their most memorable experiences. Now it is an even greater pleasure to be here with all of you to celebrate your significant achievement, in being the first cohorts to complete the four-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) and the Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education.

In conclusion, I would like to share a piece of advice and a story which I hope will encourage you. The advice was given to me by a senior woman leader in Hong Kong, who has had several distinguished careers, as a teacher, as a lawyer, as a banker, and as a university leader. She told me that she feels it is not possible to plan one's life, but it is important to be open to every opportunity and experience that comes along. "Embrace life with passion" – whatever you do, do it with your whole heart and commit your utmost effort to it. Probably you have guessed by now that this advice comes from Dr Alice Lam, Chairman of the University Grants Committee.

Now for the story, which comes from Mainland China, and is a true story of a woman I had the privilege of meeting in 1993 and again in 2001. Margaret is a Cantonese who grew up in an English-speaking environment in Shanghai. In 1957, when she was 16 years old and just finishing secondary school, she was called on to join a group of young people being sent to the remote Northwestern region of Xinjiang. It was supposed to be a revolutionary effort to develop the border regions of China, but it was also a kind of punishment on those young people who were considered to have bad family backgrounds.

After 30 days in a rough and exhausting truck ride of several thousand miles, she reached the far Northwest city of Urumchi, where she was able to find a job in a factory. There she also met and married her husband. Later the factory was shut down, and she and her husband moved to Alatai, a remote northern town many hours by train from Urumchi. There her husband found work in the oilfields, and she brought up their two children. Once the children were grown she was eager to contribute to society. She offered her services to the local secondary school, explaining that she could give English lessons in native English, as she had grown up speaking the language. Grudgingly they allowed her to do some part-time teaching. She became fond of the students, and worked hard to learn all she could about pedagogy and lesson preparation. However, no one at the school had any idea of the quality of her English or her ability to teach it. They did not value her work and she often felt discouraged.

In 1978 Deng Xiaoping came to power, and announced China's education should open up to the world. Margaret decided there must be a better way to contribute. She wrote a letter to the Dean of the Foreign Languages Department at Xinjiang University in Urumchi, telling him she was fluent in English and would love to help China's opening up by teaching English. When he received this letter from the remote town of Alatai, the Dean was amazed. He could hardly believe there was someone with such a high standard of English living in that region. He sent her a telegraph, asking her to come to see him immediately. She bought a train ticket for the long journey to Urumchi, and as soon as she had met the dean, he appointed her as a lecturer in English. Over the following years she worked very hard, teaching and studying, and became promoted to associate professor and then professor. She focused on teaching English to university scholars who needed to pass the TOEFL examinations and be prepared for study and research abroad in English speaking countries. Now she is recognised as the person who did most to help universities in the region to open up to the world, through her classes in English! What a wonderful example of someone who overcame many difficulties, and embraced life with a passion! When I last saw her in May of 2001, she was looking forward with excitement to the visit of a high level Hong Kong delegation. She had been invited by the region's leaders to assist in receiving them because she had done so much to help the region open up! She is also one of the few people in the area speaking fluent English, Cantonese and Mandarin.

I hope you have enjoyed this true life story, and that you will give your whole heart and mind to the development of the children or young people you teach, and "embrace life with passion!"