

'Like' does not equal right



Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.

LAST WEEK, HKUST had its 24th graduation ceremony, and we had the privilege of conferring honorary doctorate degrees on six outstanding individuals – tech investor Morningside Group chairman Gerald Chan, Lenovo founder Liu Chuanzhi, Harvard China expert Elizabeth Perry, MIT bio-engineer Robert Langer, UC Berkeley physicist Luk Kam-Biu and Duke mathematician Ingrid Daubechies – all of whom are eminent role models for our graduates.

This year, I took the opportunity to address the importance of critical thinking to the young graduates who will go out into the world, filled with opportunities, excitement and important choices to make. Serendipitously, a survey by *The Times* of London on global employability just came out the day before and HKUST ranks number 13 in the world, a result that all our graduates and alumni should be proud of.

I believe the topic is timely, as the world today, as well as Hong Kong, face many issues – extreme ideologies included – which threaten to change our society profoundly.

While “critical thinking” may sound like a cliché, it is as relevant today as ever. As many around the world have noted, the commitment to reason, facts, logic, and truth, is now increasingly a minority viewpoint.

We have seen recently in the turmoil and the outcome of Brexit, the refugee crisis in Europe, and the US election, this

trend can sometimes lead to astonishing, unwise, or even regretful results.

Technology today has brought us many conveniences, including feeding us, in loads, information, news, and ads which we are interested in, but we must always beware of the risk of developing a tunnel vision. Ironically, as we are bombarded with data and quick opinions in the age of the internet, it has become more difficult for the young today than for their parents to seek the truth. But having many “likes”, “shares” or “views” does not make an opinion right. We must remember that truth needs to be established, not claimed.

It is sometimes easier to follow a trend than to chart a course of one's own, but that is dangerous. We would be doing our future generations a great disservice if we do not form our opinion and responses carefully and critically.

Some may ask, how do we teach our young to make independent but wise decisions? I believe that the purpose of a university education is to broaden one's horizons through knowledge pursuit and exposure to diverse thinking, and expanding views and perspectives. More importantly, graduates should have learned much more about who they are, what they stand for, and form an opinion of their own.

By choosing to attend an international university such as HKUST, our graduates have also chosen to be part of the global community. They must participate in the process to find solutions to the problems that face their generation, while holding firm to the principle that knowledge, facts, and judgement do matter.

As former US president John F Kennedy warned, we must not “enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.” As a select member of society and a uni-



versity graduate who has received so much education, our graduates should have acquired a critical mind and know not to follow blindly. Choose your own course, march to the beat of your own drum, and take responsibility for your decisions and actions. For they will not only have an impact on the current generation, but also on the many generations to come.

I concluded by reminding the graduates of HKUST's “can do” spirit: “Aim high and never concede that something is beyond your reach. Your character will be defined by what you could do, instead of what you should do. Do what you love to do, and do what you are passionate about.

“Life is full of surprises, and sometimes the greatest achievements in mankind come in the most unexpected way. In the years ahead, you will soon learn that what matters, ultimately, in your lives and careers will not be your technical skills or your degree. Your view, your opinion, and who you are, will determine how far you go. Your road ahead will be full of challenges. Always have confidence in your capabilities, and tackle the challenges head-on.

“Be prepared to make a positive difference in this world. Go where there is no path, and leave a trail. Good luck!”