

**Nick Richardson**

Mr Chancellor,

I stand before you as a Professor who owes the very existence of the Chair he occupies (when seated!) to the activities of the University's vigorous Alumni Association. Had it not been for the highly professional manner in which the University now maintains contact with its many illustrious alumni around the world, the concatenation of circumstances which led to the founding of the HSBC Chair in Energy and Environment simply would not have occurred.

It was not always thus. Back in the 1980s when I graduated from this University, I was oblivious of the existence of any kind of organisation which sought to reciprocate my affection for my *alma mater*. In fact I never even heard the term '*alma mater*' until the following year, when I was ensconced in an American university, where alumni relations have always been a priority.

Unbeknown to me at the time, there were two slender lifelines by which an alumnus of Newcastle University might have maintained their affiliation to our institution. One could become a Life Member of the Union Society, or one might join the nascent Newcastle Graduates Society. Most Life Members of the Union Society were former Sabbatical Officers of that student body. As for the

Graduates Society, it had come into existence at the time this University was created out of the former King's College, essentially by re-labelling of the former "King's Old Students Association", or KOSA. "Old students" has a different ring to it these days, when lifelong learning is increasingly becoming the norm. At the time that KOSA morphed into the Graduates' Society, the "old students" were for the most part really rather spritely: most of them were locally-based graduates who had performed admirably in student sports teams and wished to retain their fitness. In short, back when I graduated, alumni wishing to retain links to this University had two options, one best suited to former sabbatical officers of the Union Society, the other best suited to accomplished sportsmen. In case you haven't already guessed, I belong to neither category.

The prospects for alumni had been no different in 1977 when Nick Richardson graduated in Zoology. Unlike the idle layabout who now stands before you, however, Nick qualified easily for either of the two alumni lifelines: he had not only been a sabbatical officer in the Union Society, he had served as President. As he'd also participated in student squash and boating societies, he was also a natural for the Graduates Society – at least as long as he remained in the North East.

Nick was brought up amidst the verdant charms of the Middle Thames Valley, where to all accounts he made a lasting contribution to local culture by determinedly lowering the tone of the Henley Regatta. Unlike the 'Freshers' of today, who can hold us to a commitment to provide all first-years with University Accommodation, when Nick arrived in Newcastle in the early 1970s he found himself billeted with the winner of the Whitley Bay Miserable Landlady of the Year Award, in a depressing bedsit with weeping windows. His spirits undampened, Nick proceeded to fall in love with Tyneside, Newcastle and this University. He became a true 'Born Again Geordie', long before that happy phrase was ever coined.

After completing his degree Nick initially stayed in Newcastle, entering management training with Marks and Spencer. He could already see that something was amiss in the way the University dealt with its alumni. Remaining very active as a Life Member of the Union Society, Nick first tried his best to expand uptake of that option. It proved difficult to expand membership beyond a dedicated circle of former Union Society officers. He also opened dialogue with the Graduates Society, patiently making the case to them for a more open, outward looking organisation catering for all graduates, rather than just the fortunate few capable sportsmen who remained in the local area.

It eventually dawned on all concerned that the problem did not simply lie with the attitude of the graduates: Why wasn't the University interested in the hundreds of thousands of its graduates who were now scattered around the world? Even if it wasn't willing to recognise that staying in touch with its alumni was intrinsically worthwhile, could the University not at least see that our alumni represent a major potential asset?

Suddenly the challenge facing Nick and his friends had become significantly greater: it amounted to nothing less than "Turning the University inside out" – getting the institution as a whole to replace its customary introspection with a new, outward-looking attitude, embracing its alumni and accepting their assistance in improving its interactions with the wider world.

Nick led the assault on University introspection. It turned out to be a war of attrition: progress was at best incremental in the early years. At times Nick felt more hapless than the god-forsaken Sisyphus of Greek legend: At least the stone which Sisyphus rolled to the top of a mountain fell back down under its own weight; every time Nick reached the summit with his own stone it didn't so much fall back under its own weight as begin to roll after a hefty kick from the hidden boot of campus cultural inertia. Colleagues still marvel at Nick's resilience; at the innumerable occasions on which he dusted himself off and began to strive again.

Eventually, Nick, Dominic Pinto, Jack Jeffery, Mark Scrimshaw and other die-hard enthusiasts for the cause of alumni engagement began to find powerful allies. The earliest of these was former Registrar Roy Butler, who first seriously entertained their proposal for a dynamic Alumni Association. The University did in fact have a formal mechanism for involving graduates in the life of the institution: Convocation, a statutory body of which all alumni of King's College and Newcastle University are automatically members. However, the formal proceedings of Convocation take place only once a year: there was clearly a need to establish an alumni association which could serve as the operational arm of Convocation year-round.

By this time, during the economic downturn of the early 1980s, Nick and many of his allies had moved elsewhere for work. Nevertheless, they persevered in their enthusiasm, establishing a London Branch of the Newcastle Graduates Society, which by then had subsumed the former Union Life Members. Momentum began to build for a reinvigoration of Convocation, with the enthusiastic support of successive Vice-Chancellors and Registrars. By the late 1980s, regular meetings were being held at the request of VC Laurence Martin to make progress towards re-orienting both Convocation and the Graduates Society. Held on Saturday mornings, the principal officers of the University

would all be assembled in business suits when Nick would breeze in from London, a flowing mane of curls surmounting a cherished rugby shirt.

Despite being busier than ever in his day job, which over time has spanned the worlds of marketing, IT and consultancy, Nick has never flagged in his energy and has never been short of bright ideas. Working with the subsequent VC James Wright, and Registrar Derek Nicholson, the dream edged ever-closer to fulfilment. Eventually, around the turn of the Millennium, the dream was finally realised, when the Alumni Association was formally re-constituted, with elections for principal officers, an umbilical link to Convocation, and lively engagement in the work of the University's Development and Alumni Relations Office.

It would be remiss of me to close without mentioning another major success to which Nick has greatly contributed. Given that he hails from Henley, it is natural that Nick has a keen interest in rowing. In the City of Newcastle, he found an adoptive home which can boast an historic rowing heritage second to none, in the achievements of 'Hadaway Harry' Clasper, 'Honest Bob' Chambers, James Renforth and other world champion oarsman of keel rowing stock. These oarsmen were the Alan Shearers of their age: Tyneside sporting heroes of immense popularity. Yet that golden age was more than a century past when Nick first came to Tyneside. As a student, Nick gave of his best at the oar

in the cause of restoring lustre to the rowing tradition of Newcastle. More recently, he became one of three major benefactors of rowing in the University, whose generosity enabled the recruitment of Angelo Savarino, who previously coached the Italian Olympic rowing squad. The result is a Newcastle University rowing team literally wreathed in success, improving its annual scoring rate by a factor of almost thirty, winning 6 gold medals, 5 silver and 5 bronze in this year's regattas of the British Universities Sporting Association, and supplying the two-man team who won Great Britain the World Universities Rowing Championship in Lithuania in August.

Mr Chancellor, Nick Richardson has long rowed against the stream, firmly persisting in the cause of bringing our great University to its senses over the way it relates to its family of alumni throughout the world. In view of his extraordinary efforts and accomplishments, I now ask you to bestow upon him an Honorary Fellowship of Newcastle University.

**Citation by Professor Paul Younger**