# Essex Degree Speech

For health reasons I could not be present to receive my honorary Doctorate from the University of Essex on July 16, 2015, but I wrote the following speech of acceptance, which was delivered at the ceremony by Deirdre Serjeantson.

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I am proud and delighted to receive this honour from Essex University, and I am also a bit guilty. All of you here today have worked hard in the last few years for the degree that you are now receiving, and on the very same day of well-earned rewards I am receiving my degree without having attended a single class. But I have given my guilt a lot of thought and I have decided to forgive myself.

Early on in my career as a student, about sixty years ago, I did a lot what the British call skiving and the Americans call goofing off. The Australians have a whole set of even more vivid terms for the same activity, or lack of activity. Some of the Australian words for the lazy student can’t be used in such a polite company as you see surrounding you today, with almost everybody in gowns and hats. But one word, the word “no-hoper”, can perhaps stand in for all the other words in the same descriptive range. At Sydney University I was a bit of a no-hoper. I dodged a lot of lectures about poetry because I thought it was more important to be off at the pub with my fellow would-be poets, drinking cold beer in the hot sun, and even writing the very occasional actual poem

This unreliable behaviour may or may not have been of benefit to my intellectual development. Naturally, when I look back on my almost fanatical determination to read everything that was off the course and almost nothing that was on it, I try to see myself in a good light, and to dignify my feckless malingering as the necessary preparation for a life of bohemian creativity. But there can be no doubt that the university had good reason to feel angry. I got through my exams by prose style alone, and they didn’t confer my degree so much as transfer it to me with a pair of tongs.

Later on, in Cambridge, I repeated the same scenario. Really I should have received a diploma in extra-curricular activities at the very most. But once again, at the end of it all, I was given a degree instead of being arrested for fraud. My only excuse for myself, if I had been obliged to make it at the time, would have been that I really had done an awful lot of reading. Little of it, however, was on the actual course. For several years, in the spare time I had left over from Footlights and student journalism, I had sat in the coffee shops memorising the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Although I managed to teach myself quite a lot about the connection between British analytical philosophy and the German aphorism, I was really being unforgivably rude to the dedicated and responsible academic who was delivering, every week, a well-crafted lecture about the development of the English novel in the early nineteenth century, while also recommending that the novels under consideration should actually be read.

Whoever he or she was, I might have turned up occasionally so as to learn to recognise him or her; and indeed vice versa. But until the day of the examinations, nobody on the lecturing staff knew what I looked like. They all soon knew, however, that I was the examinee who answered a question about *Pride and Prejudice* by doing nothing except quote the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus.*

And so I went on for another half a century, always reading what wasn’t on the course. But I did read that, and what I learned from being a perennial bad student I put into my own books and essays. It’s the one hope of the life-long no-hoper, that all his false trails eventually lead somewhere. And not even a good student can be sure that he won’t learn something even more vital in a late-night conversation than he learns from actually trying to write his latest essay instead of pasting it together from a Google frenzy. Ed Miliband might even have leaned something from talking to Russell Brand. He might have learned that it’s not necessarily good for the political credibility to be seen consulting the opinion of a bearded transgender Eurovision Song Contest winner.

The universities are much more efficient nowadays than they were when my generation was starting off. They have to be; there is more at stake, and any student who lacked the sense to listen to the lecturers would be a liability to himself and everybody else. The day of the campus no-hopers is over. They are still being born, but they go straight to gaol, or they become co-comperes of BBC television programmes about fast cars. Yet I still can’t help feeling that there ought to be room in the system for just a few examples of the kind of student who skives, goofs off, screws up and drives his teachers to distraction on those rare occasions when they ever see him, but who still somehow manages to live for learning.

I would like to think that the University of Essex thinks that about me; and hence I have been given this honour. In one sense, I didn’t work seventy seconds to deserve it. But in another sense, I worked for seventy years. And all that work was no hardship, because I was mad about the books really; mad about the prose, mad about the poetry, mad about the lot. That was my problem. A university is supposed to make you want to find out everything: that’s why it’s called a university. But I overdid the initial enthusiasm, and took a lifetime to calm down. I take this honour as sign that I, like all of you graduating today, am finally ready to begin. Lately I have grown old, and quite ill, and lost much of the strength that I once could squander as if time would set no limit.  But I loved being a student, and I still do; because I still am one. And now I’ve got this certificate to prove it.