

*This Keynote Address was delivered by Kamal Ramkarran at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Convocation Ceremony of the University of Guyana to the graduands of the Faculty of Social Sciences and the School of Entrepreneurship and Business Innovation on 10 November 2018*

It is my great honour and privilege to offer you, today's graduands, my heartfelt congratulations as you prepare to receive your diplomas and degrees.

As you come up to collect your certificates, I hope you will think about what it is that you really receive today.

One way of looking at it is that you receive a very special certificate and some letters behind your name.

But certificates can be lost or ripped to pieces or burned in a fire. Hopefully none of that will happen to yours. But if it does, you'll still have your degree.

And when people put those fancy letters behind their name when they write something, the letters don't make what they're saying better, do they?

I think that your real achievement here today is one that we can't see or touch. If we don't take the time to think about what that achievement really is, we risk having it pass right by us without us ever noticing it.

Think about the person you were when you first travelled along that road that curves gently to the right just past the University's gates. Maybe your heart was racing a little because you didn't know what to expect.

Now think about the person you were earlier today when you walked through those doors to come here to collect your diploma or degree.

Your real achievement today is the difference between those two people. And there is no ruler on earth that can measure that difference.

What you receive today is already part of you. It is something that no one can ever take from you and it will stay with you for the rest of your days.

Your achievement that we celebrate here today is a combination of all of the ideas that you have received and developed in and out of classrooms.

It is the things you have learned in your study of technical subjects: financial accounting, econometrics, human resources management, the law of tort.

It is the things you had to learn about yourself and other people – the things you will never forget – the things that no one ever teaches in a classroom.

Each of those things – and others which you know – is part of the education you've earned, which is symbolized by the diploma or degree that you will collect here today.

Think about what it is that you have really achieved here today and celebrate and cherish those things equally with that certificate and those letters you add to your name tonight.

During the time you were at University, I am sure that there were things that you put off, sacrifices that you made, things you said you'd do when you were finished studying. We always do that. We think that real life is going to start after that next thing on the horizon.

But there are so many opportunities all around us, so many things we can do, and what do we do? We take them for granted and wait around for something to happen – for life to start.

Well, life starts today. Today is your graduation and you have good reason to take stock. Take all of your opportunities from tomorrow, even the ones that you don't really think are opportunities.

Like reading every book you can put your hands on: when you wake up, at lunch, before you go to bed, in the toilet;

Like starting to learn a different language: Spanish, French, Portuguese – there's an app for your phone, it's easier than you think;

Like walking a lap in the Park – before you know it, you'll be running six laps;

Like saying something today to someone that you're too shy to say it to. Time will pass you by and you'll never say it. Now's the right time to do it.

Like asking questions. You might be surprised at how much you learn from just two or three questions. Don't keep them back because you're worried about the reaction you might get. You might be surprised by that as well.

Life is happening all around us, every day. You don't need to wait until the day after your graduation to start life, but since tomorrow is the day after your graduation, now's the right time to take those opportunities – to start doing the things you think you'll do sometime later.

Where is it that you'll be taking those opportunities though? Will it be here or somewhere else? We all know what the statistics say about this University's graduates. Most of them migrate.

But it isn't really fair to look at the graduating class and put you all together. You're not statistics. You're real people. Each of you has different issues that you have to deal with.

Some of you have to join the rest of your family in another country. Some of you want to do postgraduate studies out of Guyana because your courses aren't offered here and when you finish your studies, the jobs you need will also be there. Some of you want the best opportunities for your children and must take them elsewhere. And some of you just want to see the world.

I could not in good conscience stand here and ask you to stay in Guyana to make your mark in the world. I know that those who must leave have good reasons for going somewhere else.

What I will ask of you tonight though is that you always try to think of Guyana as a real country. It may sound strange. Of course, Guyana is a real country. But so many of us, too many of us, dismiss it as a place where nothing works and nothing ever will.

Why should this be so? Is it not up to all of us to make things work? To ensure that they work?

Too often we live our lives as though we were in-transit here – waiting here – on the way to somewhere else. On the way to the starting of our real life.

Look at the way people drive here. The way we all drive. We can't slow down to let someone else out or else they'll win and we'll lose. The Government doesn't make us do that. We choose to do that. We choose to accept it. Do we really have to go to someone else's country to be courteous because the people there are courteous?

But imagine what would happen if we all got up tomorrow and said that we each individually need to make a change.

If everyone here spent just one minute tomorrow being courteous on the road tomorrow, Guyana would be a different place for a little bit. Don't think that courtesy comes naturally. You have to choose to be courteous.

Just like you have to choose to take Guyana seriously and decide to make things work. Because there's no reason we should live in a country where things don't work. When people take their country seriously and decide to make a change, things change. So, from tomorrow, let us all think of one or two ways each of us can make things work here.

We can take our example from the Vice Chancellor. He's doing just that to the University. He's transforming it because he believes it's a real university: one that should be able to hold its own with any other university in the world. And it will do that. Look and see.

Transformation is a word you often hear used about what the Vice Chancellor is doing. And it's the right word. He didn't just come here to run the University the way he came and found it run. He transformed it.

Let us all take an example from him and tomorrow we won't just go out and run Guyana – or whatever we have influence over – the way it's being run. Let's transform it.

If we live our lives and do our work to the highest standards that we can, I believe that we can reach much further here in Guyana than we can reach in someone else's country where we'll always be a foreigner.

You might be surprised at the amount of influence you can have in Guyana in your areas of expertise if you are diligent, if you research carefully and if you work things out intuitively.

Because we have a small population here, it really is possible to make yourself into an expert in your field quicker than you can elsewhere. You generally have the power to apply to your work whatever principles and theories you think are most appropriate and fitting.

When you do your work properly and consistently, people will notice and it is possible to make a real difference through what you have done.

As an example of the influence we can have over our work in Guyana, in the years that I've been a lawyer, no one has ever told me how I should do a case. I get suggestions when I ask for them but I am always free to do what I want.

Whatever principles of law I can imagine apply to a particular case, whatever arguments I feel are available, I can take them and apply them as far as the case can go.

Arguments which are properly constructed, and carefully presented, and this is applicable in every field, can truly influence the outcome you seek.

But in other countries where the population is larger and denser, the reality is that you lose that flexibility, that power to imagine and apply the principles you feel are right.

In those countries, I'm sure that I would have to report upwards to three or four other people, each more senior than the other, and they decide what the case is about and how it should be done.

No longer would I be able to depend on my intuition and imagination in applying the principles of law I thought most fitting, except perhaps in the tiniest cases of municipal violations concerning garbage bins or something like that.

So, Guyana can offer you a place to shine if you really want it to. And don't believe anyone who says that the only people left in Guyana are the people who can't go anywhere else, as I once heard someone say. Many Guyanese working and living here have achieved regional and international recognition.

This country of 750,000 people, the size of a small city in America, has given the world a Commonwealth Secretary General, Sir Shridath Ramphal, and a judge of the International Court of Justice, Dr Mohamed Shahabudeen, and they both spent the majority of their careers right here on Carmichael Street at the Attorney General's Chambers, where they moved up the ranks by diligence and hard work.

Justice Desiree Bernard who spent her career in Guyana as a lawyer and Judge was Guyana's first female Chief Justice and Chancellor of the Judiciary and she was the first female Judge on the Caribbean Court of Justice.

Consider that there are five and a half million people in the Commonwealth Caribbean, with the majority coming from Jamaica and Trinidad, and a Guyanese woman was the first female judge in that Court.

Dr Patrick Gomes, went from being Guyana's Ambassador to the European Union to being the Secretary General of the ACP – the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States – an international organization made up of 79 States. He serves there today.

Dr Toussant Boyce, a graduate of the University of Guyana and of Cambridge and Harvard, is the head of the office of Integrity, Compliance and Accountability at the Caribbean Development Bank. He started his career at Republic Bank right here.

Each of these people have had extraordinary accomplishments but I am sure that if you ever spoke to any of them, they'd be the first to admit to you that they were each just ordinary people – ordinary Guyanese – like you and me: eating pepperpot at Christmas and flying kites on the seawall at Easter.

And just like them, I hope one day I'll hear and read about your achievements, nationally and internationally, so that the list of people who transformed the world from right here in Guyana will grow ever longer and more distinguished.

And when your names are mentioned in the press and by people talking about your achievements in shops and bars and offices, I trust that they will also say 'oh, but, of course, that was expected, he or she was from the class of 2018'.

My best wishes to you all, today and for the future.