

Acceptance Speech
by Former Federal President Horst Koehler
On the occasion of the conferment of an Honorary Degree
University of York, UK

19 January 2018

I would like to thank the Vice Chancellor and the University of York, especially the Faculty of Social Sciences, for this great honor. Thank you, Professor Matravers, for the kind words about me.

I was given the difficult task to say something in only three minutes that would leave you inspired. My first reaction was: “Wow, I’m not sure I can do that”. Then I remembered that this was exactly what I felt when I graduated from University, almost 50 years ago. Of course, I was elated and relieved and full of ideas, but there were also some doubts nagging inside me: Am I good enough for the “real world”, am I ready for the life of an adult, will I find a job that challenges me? And, most importantly: Will my girlfriend marry me?

Well, she did, and she has been a most amazing wife ever since. Also, I did find jobs that were exciting and challenging, and I got opportunities to serve my country and the international community in ways I would have never dreamed of. One of the most important things I learned in those five decades after graduation: It’s ok to have doubts; doubts about yourself, and doubts about what’s happening around you.

In fact, all progress humanity has ever made is rooted in doubt – we as a human race have ever only moved forward because someone, somewhere had the courage to question the status quo.

I am convinced: never has it been more important to fight for the value of *doubt* as a catalyst for change. The growing fascination for authoritarianism, visible not least in some of the world’s oldest democracies, is worrisome. There are those who want to make us believe that the world is black and white, yet difficult decisions can rarely be taken with a simple yes or no. There are those who want to seduce us with easy answers, yet our interdependent world needs complex, if imperfect, solutions. There are those who brag that self-criticism is a weakness, but we as a society will only learn and grow if we can confidently question ourselves. *This* is the exciting and challenging paradox of democracy in the 21st century.

I hope that one day, when you will look back on your time here at York, you will realize that the most important thing university has taught you might not be those formulas that you have memorized or those laws you know how to dissect. I hope that the most important thing you have learned here is the *ability to deal with ambivalence*, that is to accept contradictions as an inescapable part of our human existence. Discover ambivalence as a source of vigor. Do not let uncertainty paralyze you, but energize you. For all the great things that you have learned in the past years, be driven not by what you know, but by what you don’t know. Let all those doubts about yourself and the world be the engine that pushes you into the open. It’s when we

feel uncomfortable that we start to move. Progress is not made in certainty; change does not emerge from comfort. The awareness of our shortcomings as human beings and as a society is the fuel of our ambitions to make this world a better place.

So, however you might feel today, be it confident, be it proud, be it happy, be it doubtful about your future: dare to question yourself and dare to question the way things are being done. [In case you are a stable genius, keep it to yourself. For all others:] Beware of the numbing effects of overconfidence or easy answers. This complex age of ours needs you, the young people, to transform your doubts into solutions. I have no doubt you can and will do that.

Thank you.