

**Sir Peter Gluckman's acknowledgement on behalf of the conferees of honorary doctorates  
by the University of Bergen  
15 October 2019**

Rector, fellow honorees, members of the University:

Let me greet you in Māori, the original language of my country:

*Tena koutou tena koutou, tena koutou katoa*

A proverb of a 19<sup>th</sup> century female tribal leader says:

*He aha te mea pai o te Ao? He tangata! He tangata! He tangata!*

This translates as: What is the greatest good of the world? Humanity. Humanity. Humanity.

And that is why we are here today – to celebrate the many aspects of humanity that this University represents. I have been asked to speak on behalf of those whom the University of Bergen are honoring today. I suspect that is because I come from furthest away – just a mere 17,282 kilometers. We are a diverse group: scholars from the natural sciences, data sciences, medical sciences, social sciences, humanities, a diplomat and a musician; there are very few direct connections between us, but we are brought together by this University, and for that we are all very grateful.

That we are such a diverse group reflects on the qualities of this and other world-ranked research-focused universities. For the strength of a university lies in its diversity – what Bartlett Giamatti, a former president of Yale, called “a free and ordered space.” But while Universities like other institutions evolve, its core role of being the champion of liberal education, dedicated to learning for its own sake, and to the development of knowledge and understandings and their translation to cultural, social, economic and environmental good remain critical. The research university remains and must remain a bastion of knowledge and learnings free from the menace of ideologies. And at its heart is its diversity – a diversity of its epistemologies, cultures and knowledges. And that is both its strength and its challenge.

And the importance of the university's core role grows as we look at the issues of today and tomorrow. The world is undergoing transitions with speed and pervasiveness that has not been seen before in our 500,000 year history as a species. Humans uniquely evolved with capacities to cumulatively learn and innovate, to collectively develop and store knowledge and to make technologies. Our big brains, language skills and technological capacities allowed for a form of

evolution not seen in other species – our cultural evolution. And the question now arises: where is that cultural evolution taking us? In many ways, those of us being honored today are examining different perspectives of this question.

In contrast to our biological evolution, our more recent cultural evolution has not been about of survival as a species, but rather about seeking to change the quality of our lives. As humans evolved, we developed technologies to modify our environment, yet these innovations are increasingly affecting our behaviour, biology, and society. Now we must figure out how to function in the world we've created. Over thousands of years, humans have invented ingenious ways to gain mastery over our environment. The ability to communicate, accumulate knowledge collectively, and build on previous innovations has enabled us to change nature. Innovation has allowed us to thrive. The trouble with innovation is that we can seldom go back and undo it. We invent, embrace, and exploit new technologies to modify our environment. Then we modify those technologies to cope with the resulting impacts. But is there a limit to this technological arms race? Is nature biting back? Our ingenuity has not only changed our world; it is changing us.

Technology and knowledge have driven the rise in the planet's population, while technology has driven climate change and its downstream impacts. These have driven the loss of biodiversity. Then, there is the digital revolution. In its broadest sense it is changing our institutions of self, of our social lives and of our civic lives. And that technological transformation shows no signs of slowing. We can already see its probable impacts on mental health especially in young people, on social interactions, on social cohesion, on the relationship between State and citizen, even though at the same time we rejoice in it as a communication tool and as a source of knowledge.

But it is that source of knowledge that generates a further existential threat because the issue of what is real, and what is reliable knowledge and what is not, is now so dominant, that the basic institutions of liberal democracies and their social cohesion could be threatened. It is not a matter of being pessimistic or techno-enthusiastic; we must be pragmatic, for technological advances are likely unstoppable and it behoves us to think through the importance of education, of supporting critical thinking and how our core institutions will need to evolve to keep our species, our society and our planet salient in the face of these enormous challenges.

And here, Universities such as Bergen will have their most critical role. Only they can bring the needed marriage between disciplines to allow us to better comprehend what is going on. Natural, digital, medical, social, and political sciences must work together in a transdisciplinary manner to create a platform of reality, and the natural sciences, social science and humanities must help us consider what we are and what we might be. Only through critical thinking across disciplines can we navigate through this perfect storm of existential challenges that are technological, demographic, environmental and social in nature.

I am biased but I do believe small countries like Norway and New Zealand have a particular role to play. We have no confounding geostrategic desires and we can create dialogues between all relevant actors in a way that large countries cannot. We have to be more strategic because size does not offer us any buffers. We are not just the canaries in the mine – we have the headlights to see the way ahead.

And the University of Bergen can be proud of how it is contributing to global thinking and leadership in these issues. Indeed, my own loose association is through your Centre for the Study of Sciences and the Humanities (SVT). More than many other centres, it is challenging the problem of disciplinary silos, and of the dangers of siloed elitism in knowledge generation and application.

In concluding, let me again finish with another Māori proverb, a *whakataua*kī, which all our honorees would fully subscribe to:

*Haere e whai i te waewae o Uenuku, kia ora ai te tangata*

Good fortune comes to a person from the memory of going to the feet of Uenuku. (Uenuku was famed for his knowledge, which he passed on to others.) All of us are here today because we too sat at the feet of others.

You have honored us today; we are all humbled and privileged to now be graduates of such a fine and ordered space, a champion of critical thinking, research and education.

Thank you.