Professor Sir Leszek Borysiewicz (Vice Chancellor of the University of Cambridge): Morning Keynote Address

I’m delighted to be here with you today and to echo the fantastic success story that David and colleagues in this programme have been driving forward to try to build the relevance and importance of this programme within the University.

The Programme today is quite fascinating and on the ability to talk about the importance of this initiative, I’m just going to dwell a little internally, because David’s given you a great flavour of how this stands in terms of its external perception.

But the Programme has done something else that’s quite remarkable. Those of you who are here from Cambridge know how long it takes to get a set of ideas in this University into action. Let’s just say it is a pathway fraught with committees, a pathway fraught with divisions of opinion, debates and elsewhere.

The speed at which this has taken off within the University, driven by students, driven by academics who are determined to make this happen and have an absolute commitment to the partnerships that we’re trying to establish has meant that this has moved at a phenomenal pace and is supported by so many external funders who actually trust us and believe that we can actually make a contribution that is effective.

I think these are really exciting programmes. The speed of this progress is quite amazing. I have not seen anything move at this pace internally in Cambridge – and that tells me something, that this actually has bottom-up buy in which at this University is essential for success in the long-term.

But the good news is Cambridge has one rule that I’ve learnt. Do something twice and it becomes a tradition. And once it becomes a tradition it’s enshrined in a book of statutes and ordinances which is this thick and to try to remove it usually needs royal assent. So I’m thrilled because this is moving on from being something that was just being done by enthusiasts to something that is now embedded into the DNA of this University, and that’s something I’m very proud of.

You’ve seen the funding. The funding is hugely and hugely important but that offers something that opens up partnerships. Now I’ve been dwelling a lot on partnerships this year in my 1st of October speech but it is something that absolutely matters.

I’m just going to go back to that age-old proverb that’s used so often. If you want to travel fast, travel alone. But if you want to travel far, travel together.

Now we’ve moved fast. We’ve moved very fast. A lot of individuals have taken us through that rapid journey, but we now want to travel far. We want to travel in depth and build relationships that will stand the test of time and work to the benefit of organisations, institutes, universities outside our domain, that we do not seek to control except in a sense of friendship and partnership – and that’s why partnership now comes to the forefront.

So we have amazing partners. Makere University. The Uganda Virus Research Institute – this is a personal interaction that I have enjoyed over many, many years. The University of Ghana, Legon.
The MRC Unit in The Gambia. The National University of Rwanda. ICIPE in Kenya. And there are many, many other institutions that are coming forward.

And that’s the foundation on which I look to this. The money’s great. The individual students are great. But it’s also this capacity to support tertiary education, very often in difficult circumstances, so that those institutions know they have a partner in Cambridge that actually wishes to see them succeed as institutions because, at the end of the day, that’s where the long-term resolutions to all of the ambitions that all of the countries in Africa have are going to be embedded.

There is something about Cambridge in Africa which might strike as a little bit of arrogance, I mean I could say Cambridge in Europe. We keep talking in the United Kingdom endlessly about Africa and we forget it is made up of a myriad of countries, a myriad of cultures, and we’re trying to embrace it all within one institution. I’ll turn it around the other way. This is for us to be inclusive rather than exclusive of the variety of countries. And we have to recognise that we cannot solve all of Africa’s problems from one institution. But in the same as I’ve talked about partnership with African institutions, I also need to talk about gaining and convening more in the way of partnerships through the European Union and using our power – as I said at the University of Monash and have repeated several times since, the challenge to big universities like Cambridge, the so-called ‘global’ universities, is how much are we prepared to use what we have as immense convening power not to our benefit, but to the benefit of our friends and partners in other institutions?

The challenge is, are we prepared to seed that convening power to our partners to make sure that they themselves can build up their own reputations and activities.

So success for me looks like, for me in this area, is when our partners turn around to Cambridge and say ‘DO you know what? We want to stop partnering with you because actually we’ve found better partners than you now going forward.’

It’s to hand over a sense of freedom and that sense of the independence of those institutions who embark on their own pathways where we hope they will continue to see us as friends and partners into the future – but the choice is entirely theirs, not ours.

Now non-restricted funding and the funding we’ve received is absolutely great. I’m particularly proud of being able to have found some money to be able to put in directly from Cambridge in a way to actually ensure that we can have a sustainable programme of PhD studentships targeted at the areas here.

But we also need to work with international organisations. This year, in fact on Saturday, we launched a campaign to raise £2 billion for the University of Cambridge. The good news is we’ve already raised £540 million of that over the last four years. Why? It is to cement programmes like this. To enable benefactors to utilise us to support programmes such as Cambridge-Africa – and it’s a programme that I use to try to exemplify why I believe it matters and the responsibility on institutions such as ours to promote the well-being and development of staff, students and institutions in other parts of the world.
2nd Annual Cambridge-Africa Day, 23rd October 2015

My notes say ‘The V-C, you should add ‘it would be great to hear about the V-C’s personal experiences in Africa and his wishes and expectations of how the Programme could make greater and sustainable impact on African academia’. Consider it said. My own commitment is absolute, to making sure that this Programme will succeed. When I finish in two years’ time, the success of this Programme will be for me very much a personal odyssey that I will have been delighted to leave this Programme stronger than it was before – and over the next ten years, I’m looking forward to seeing so much more strength of embedding our activities in institutions in Africa, led by those institutions where our academics can also thrive by working together with great academics on the continent, which enriches and enhances us as an institution as much as them. That’s my one wish. That at the end of the day, that’s what this Programme will do.

My own involvement continues. I have a particular desire to see the new programmes being set up by the MRC Unit in The Gambia to make that we can raise additional resources for yet more studentships, for yet more opportunities, that that goes forward and that’s something I’m committed to.

But there is one event that I’m particularly proud to be a patron of and that’s the AIMS event that’s going to take place in Dakar. This is to ensure that top quality African academics – and I use the term African because they will be coming from all around Africa – young academics are given access and are seen by the rest of the world to rightly take their place in the international panoply of scholars. And the reason for this particular event is to highlight the successes that young academics are already achieving. That this is not something we might wish for in ten to fifteen years’ time. It is something that is here and now and is already happening – and we need to recognise that there is more pressure on the West in particular, to recognise those successes, enhance them and allow them to grow. That’s something that I feel very, very strongly about.

This is however a further element that I believe we do need to engage with as an institution. We need to promote the diversity of thinking in many institutions in Africa. When I talk to government leaders, so often they obsess on STEM subjects – science, technology, research driven. They forget the huge and brilliant cultural contributions that institutions in Africa make.

The problems that I see with so many tertiary level institutions in the developing world is the obsession with technology and in some ways the denigration of thinking, debate and ideas. In some countries, and not just on the continent of Africa but elsewhere, even particularly with countries such as Russia, that debate is not often welcomed. But that is all the more reason that institutions such as Cambridge must support academics who are prepared to want to debate issues that our political friends at times may not find particularly palatable. And universities have always been the place where that debate can be convened, can be conducted in a reasonably safe environment, where differences of ideas can actually be engaged with, discussed, thought through – and that thinking to be able to promote future directions is so important.

So I’m going to add to the challenges for Cambridge. Please grow the importance of the arts and humanities alongside the other programmes that we have to make sure that ideas and new ideas and new thinking is given as much prominence as elsewhere.
And my fourth challenge to the University – and one that I’m engaged with – is the exact opposite and to many of you, you may find an anathema in this room and that is the engagement of business and the corporate sector. Many of you will be taking a long pause and thinking ‘my god, we’re going to be supping with the devil now’. Well unfortunately I have to tell you to buy yourself a very long spoon because supping with this devil, you’re going to have to sup at some point.

In my own world of medicines, there is only the private sector that can deliver products at the end of the day for the benefit of society. So the issues here are, can we use and can we help, with our convening power, to make sure that we keep these relationships at an appropriate distance where the corporate partners never ever impact adversely on the academic freedom to criticise even them within institutions. It’s the basic foundation on which Cambridge works and we will not enter partnerships where any constraint is placed on any academic to be critical of the organisation that we engage with. And do you know what? Many of them are very happy to engage on that basis.

And part of those institutions include the banks – and now I’m on really thin ice. But the banks have the capacity to support local industries. The capacity to develop the small- and medium-sized enterprises. That ultimately the benefits of these relationships can be translated into the benefits for the societies that we ultimately hope to serve. But we have to do so in the spirit and understanding that this has to be done in an open and transparent way and to promote and keep the flag on the horizon of always looking to serve society rather than just to serve mammon.

So there are the four challenges. No pressure guys. Just keep going with the programme that you have. Keep building the partnerships. Keep attracting the amazing students that we’re so fortunate to be able to engage with. Keep doing the global, world-breaking research that you’re all very, very capable of and have already delivered to such an extent. And at the end of the day, I’m still a great believer. The more ideas, the more we promote, the more we expand, the old fashioned adage, the cream will always float to the top. If we keep excellence and quality at the forefront, then the sponsors and funders will come, because at the end of the day, they’re in the business of ensuring that the best will continue to survive.

And the end goal is the complete success of our partner institutions, hopefully in the future led by some of the students who have engaged in this programme so that they continue to see us as long-term partners because of an equality in the excellence of what they’re actually achieving. They’re almost there and we have to be big enough to accommodate them in this wider and ever increasing world. A world which I look at full of optimism as to what can actually be achieved and I just hope that we’re privileged to play a very small part in it. So please keep up the good work.

Thank you all for being here and please continue with your support for what is a very remarkable group of people and a very remarkable programme in its own right.