Mary Curnock Cook

President, Master, Pro-Vice-Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues,

Mary Curnock Cook. We are truly honoured to have you as a Fellow of Birkbeck. Curnock Cook is Chief Executive of an institution that affects one-third of all the youth in this country: UCAS, or the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, the body that processes higher education applications. Its acronym that has been immortalized not only in the minds of ambitious young people, but also in poetry, novels, and plays. My favourite is a play called “Town”, written by D. C. Moore. His play is not only a profound reflection on identity, belonging, and youthful angst – it is also hilarious. In one scene, the protagonist (John) is having a discussion about UCAS with his 17-year-old girlfriend, Mary.

John: So have you started?

Mary: What?

John: Your statement? UCAS.

Mary: Yeah but it makes me sound a bit. Retarded.

John: I'm sure it doesn't.

Mary *takes the statement, which is neatly pressed inside an A4 exercise book, out of her bag. Hands it to* John*.*

*A pause as* John *reads it…..*

John: Yeah, it's not. Great.

Mary: But I didn't get no teacher help or nothing…..

John: Do you fancy a drink?....

Mary: It's the afternoon.

John: Yeah. It's good whisky.

*Pause.* Mary *rests her bag down.*

Mary: Have you got any vodka?

I have looked at that section of the UCAS’s website that gives advice about how to write that all-important “personal statement”, but makes no mention of either whiskey or vodka. Perhaps it ought to.

But Curnock Cook has a high opinion of 17- and 18-year olds. One reason for this is that she is a phenomenal worker who believes not only in managing people but also in managing outcomes. As she once said, “the biggest buzz is giving customers something they want and need – especially when they didn’t even know they needed it”. What advice would Curnock Cook give to the fictional Mary of Moore’s play? I think she would say: find a course that “makes your heart beat faster”, get advice from as many people as possible, polish and polish and polish that “personal statement”, ensure your application is submitted in time, and for goodness sake, hold off on the vodka!

Curnock Cook follows her own advice. As Chief Executive of UCAS since 2010 (the year Moore’s play premiered at the Royal Theatre Northampton), she is responsible for over 450 workers and has been included in the Woman’s Hour Power List.

In many ways, she did not have a traditional career path. She grew up in Lincolnshire where her father – a stockbroker-turned-farmer – grew wheat, barley, and sugar beet. It was a good life for an active child. By the age of 8, she was driving tractors – something that would make any Health and Safety Executive today blanch. Independence and enterprise were inculcated into her from a very young age. And the currency seems to have been fairly modest: 6 pennies for each sparrow shot; one shilling for darning her father’s socks.

She was privately educated at a convent, but left at the age of 16 with a few O levels and one A level. At her school, girls weren’t expected to be ambitious, and she wasn’t.

Secretarial college (where she learnt to read shorthand upside down) was followed by her first job as secretary to Kenneth St Joseph, CBE, the Cambridge archaeologist who developed the science of aerial photography. Clearly, though, she was too energetic to devote her life to this distinguished but rather quiet and unassuming academic. She was restless. As she reflected decades later, she believes that

the only way to progress is not to stay put for too long. Moving about lets you see different cultures and operating norms. It gives an insight into different experiences.

And so it was with great speed that she moved up the ranks. There is not enough time to list even a small proportion of her achievements, but here is a sample:

She joined International Biochemicals as a “marketing exec/secretary” – and after eight years was its international sales and marketing director. She worked for the quango, Food for Britain. In her mid-20s, she applied for a job at BII, overseeing standards for licensed retailing of food and drink. Although she was appointed Chief Executive, Lord Kimball (its former head and a Conservative MP) was reported to have said:

Well gentlemen, not only have you chosen a woman but you’ve chosen a woman with the biggest feet I’ve ever seen in my life.

In fact, Curnock Cook fitted in well in the male-dominated corporate world. After seven years at BII, she was awarded an OBE for services to training in hospitality and tourism.

Never one to rest on her laurels, however, she began her educational-turn. It was now or never, she realized, and she wanted a degree. And so it was that, in her 40s, she went to university, gaining a Sloan M.Sc. in Leadership and Strategy (the only programme of its kind in Europe) at the London Business School.

Smitten by education, Curnock Cook accepted the position of Director of Qualifications and Skills at the Qualifications & Curriculum Development Agency. Policy-making on education and developing the 14-19 reform programme, consumed her energies for more than six years.

Education became (and remains) her obsession. She is active in the Sutton Trust, dedicated to improving social mobility through education. She is a trustee of the National Star Foundation, which provides highly specialist care and learning support for young people with complex physical and emotional difficulties. She is a trustee of The Access Project, which gives one-to-one tutoring to students from disadvantaged backgrounds to help them get into the top universities.

She has made me aware of some shocking facts. For instance, 15 per cent of secondary school pupils in the UK are eligible for Free School Meals but they make up only 2 per cent of the intake in the top 25 universities. Children from poorer backgrounds have the cards stacked against them. There is also a growing gender gap in education. Young men, she points out, are becoming disadvantaged in the educational stakes. Almost 25% of girls were awarded an A\* or A in their GCSE’s compared with only 18% of boys. In over twenty universities, there are twice as many female full-time undergraduates as male ones. These statistics should worry us.

What explains her success? Partly it is her versatility and wide-ranging experience in the private, not-for-profit, and public sector. Her intelligence. Her wit. Her managerial acumen.

But she also lives life to the full. When Simone de Beauvoir was asked if she had any regrets, she responded that she had only one: “Having to live only in my own skin when the world is so vast”. I imagine that Curnock Cook (who also likes quoting de Beauvoir) might have said something similar.

She travels the world, especially the Middle East and Morocco. She loves crossword puzzles. She is a formidable cook and hostess, even if her private workplace tastes boil down to rather austere boiled eggs. At the other extreme, I am reliably informed that she likes a very good quality glass of wine – not for her this supermarket mouthwash. Curnock Cook loves fast cars and sailing (it is easy to get her talking about participating in the Sydney-Hobart ocean race in 2008). She is a passionate horsewoman, who, as a child, dreamt of being a mounted policeman because “being in the saddle all day… is the most wonderful idea”. I imagine that it is a source of regret to her that, although UCAS’s offices are set opposite the racecourse in Cheltenham, she rarely has the time to indulge. She is a formidable tennis-player and claims that she doesn’t mind losing – but somehow I don’t believe her.

Winning at UCAS, though, is a lasting triumph. When she arrived in 2010, Higher Educational was in turmoil: fees, devolution, and technological innovations were just three major challenges. She grasped the mettle and instigated reforms. At Birkbeck, we have benefitted. We began participating with UCAS, and our three-year degree programme increased dramatically. Curnock Cook also vastly improved the advice given to applicants writing those personal statements, so that playwrights like Moore no longer have such an easy target. Moore play premiered in 2010, the same year Curnock Cook became UCAS’s Chief Executive. Near the end of his play, John and Mary resume talking about whether she should apply to university.

John: You still gonna drop out?

Mary: Don’t know. Maybe.

John: Either way, I drafted you a statement. UCAS. It’s pretty good.

Mary: Ok.

Mary Curnock Cook works to ensure that she helps others become more than “pretty good”. We are honoured that she is a Fellow of Birkbeck.