John Nolan

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Colleagues and friends, graduates and graduands and their families - today the University will award an honorary doctorate to Prof John Nolan, of Nolan Associates and former President of the Institution of Structural Engineers. John was brought up in this area and has devoted much of his professional life to working as a Structural Engineer in Birmingham and the West Midlands, and it is thus fitting that the University should honour him in this way. After passing his eleven plus he went to St Philip's Grammar School in Edgbaston in the 1960s. During his later years at that School he had a number of vacation jobs on construction sites in the area, including working on the construction of flats near Saltley Gas works as a general labourer. In an article in the Structural Engineer as he began his time as President of the IStructE, he admits to having a much more cavalier attitude to health and safety than would be acceptable these days, writing "I raced another lad from top to bottom of the building down the outside of the scaffolding! I vividly remember tripping on the 16th floor scaffolding and because of the absence of toe boards losing a wheelbarrow and its contents over the side, luckily nobody was underneath!". He the hastily goes on to say his attitudes to Health and Safety now are radically different from those he held at the time. Another project he worked on at that time was the construction of the foundations of what we now know as Spaghetti Junction. The various problems with that edifice are well known – but nobody has ever been worried about the adequacy of the foundation and ground works! After school he enrolled on a Civil Engineering degree programme at Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry, and commuted from Birmingham. During that course he obtained a placement with a civil engineering consultant in Birmingham called Sir Herbert Humphries and McDonald, working on a wide variety of work on sewerage and sewage treatment works projects, before he returned to Coventry for his final year of study. He graduated in 1974, but his graduation ceremony was cancelled due to an IRA bomb threat, and he finally received his degree certificate in a special ceremony in 2010. So the award of an honorary Doctorate today comes only four years after the award of the Bachelors degree, which must be fairly unusual.

1974 was a grim time in which to begin one's professional career – the era of power blackouts and the three-day week. But John was able to find a job with RM Douglas Construction, working on structural projects at places like Round Oak Steelworks, and various Lucas factories – names that are sadly only memories now. He then undertook further study at Warwick University on an MSc in Structural Engineering, and then worked for Farebrother and Partners on a range of projects, including one in which he worked with very novel monitoring and analysis methods to stop Black Country factory buildings disappearing into disused limestone workings.

In 1982 he moved to set up his own business in partnership with others – the firm of Nolan, Cameron, Taylor in Birmingham. This grew quickly to several hundred strong, and in 1993 John moved on to set up Nolan Associates. Over the years this firm has worked on many major buildings in the city and elsewhere including Brindley House – a former BT Exchange in Birmingham; the temporary spectator stands for the 2012 Paralympic tennis in London; the former Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) offices in Coventry and Calthorpe House in Edgbaston, Birmingham. In 1996 Nolan Associates was sold to Erinaceous in 2006, who then rapidly proceeded to collapse. John bought the firm back from the administrator, and although there was some loss of staff, nonetheless managed to keep the core team together. He is also Chairman of Antringham Developments and Global Cable

Recovery and a Non-Executive Director of Green Frog Power. In 2012 John was elected as the President of the Institution of Structural Engineers, the highest honour that can be awarded to members of the profession, although the amount of work involved in the presidential year must make it a somewhat dubious honour. In his presidency he concentrated on the relationship between cost and value in Structural Design and on the education of young engineers. That Institution holds a seven-hour practical design examination for would be members and is widely regarded as one of the most rigorous entrance tests to any Professional institution in the UK. John was a strong critic of many recent trends in Structural Engineering education, advocating significant changes to both curriculum and teaching methods. On the basis of this, the current Head of Civil Engineering invited him to become involved with the School and as the Royal Academy of Engineering Visiting Professor in Innovation and Design taught and in the development of a new Structural Engineering MSc. Further he has encouraged his own staff and other practicing engineers in the locality to become involved with the School, to the great benefit of both students and staff. This orator has been subject, along with many of his colleagues, to a withering dissection of his structural engineering ability whilst trying to construct a tower out of marshmallows and straws at a School Awayday at John's offices.

In his later school days, John joined Moseley Rugby Club and is still connected with them as a vice-President. He married Valerie, then doing teacher training in Birmingham, on his return from his sandwich course placement. This period coincided with an injury that ruled him out of rugby for the final year of his undergraduate course and gave him more opportunity for study, a period in which he admits that the quality of his academic work notably improved, which must be a message to all undergraduates.

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, for a lifetime dedicated to his profession and for his commitment to our city and region, I present to you and to the University Prof John Nolan, for the degree of Doctor of Engineering, Honoris Causa.