

President's address to the Class of 2024

Delivered on June 6, 2024 at the Abu Dhabi Energy Center, Abu Dhabi

Your Highness, your excellencies, distinguished guests, esteemed faculty and staff, and the extraordinary MBZUAI Class of 2024. I want to congratulate you, our students, for having finished the very admirable and audacious journey to completing your studies at the university and achieving your current heights.

You graduate at a critical moment in history where a new form of technology is reshaping many aspects of our life, our society and even our civilization — and this technology is Artificial Intelligence.

We've had great inventions in the past, like the microscope, electricity, and the internet. These technologies have helped us to achieve results beyond human capabilities or at a scale greater than human collective efforts. But I believe that what AI can bring is even more powerful. The only comparable invention in human history that I can think of is the printing press, because it went beyond just doing things better and faster; it changed the way people think, and even the meaning of life.

The printing press brought about the Age of Enlightenment by giving everyone access to books and unlocking knowledge from the privileged class. However, its positive impact was not attained without plenty of painful reforms and even bloodshed. I would say that AI promises to bring the Age of Empowerment. Every individual will have access to all

the collective knowledge ever created in history, and can build new things based on such knowledge through automated generation of writing, coding, audio, video, and more. This is an immense power, but it is not without risk. Can human beings safely steer this new form of power and productivity? Like we do with steam engine, electricity, and nuclear power?

You, the graduates of the world's first and only AI university, must answer this question. You are going to be helping society make our world a better place to live. So please allow me to share with you some advice to help you pursue the answers to these questions.

Bring AI to people

My first suggestion is that you have to work hard to bring AI to people. AI must be used by more and more people. The more it is used, the better it will become and the deeper we will understand it.

But conversely, you must also bring people to AI so that AI can have a chance to understand people; to know their concerns, their needs and their questions better, so it can focus on more meaningful questions and align better with users.

As trained AI specialists, you are the new pilots of this amazing craft, and you are to train more such pilots in the future. Some of you will also be the builders of next generation of stronger, better crafts. You bear the responsibility of bringing AI to people, bringing people to AI, and making them understand each other.

Understand real life

My second suggestion is to walk out of your ivory tower, your social media bubbles and your own echo chambers: Understand the real life

You must walk the walk and put your knowledge into practice. Go own a project, earn a salary, work with or lead a team to make things happen. You will never understand what life really is, what product really is, and what a need really is without experiencing them,

making them, owning them. Because an algorithm is no better than an abstraction on a blueprint. It is not going to be a real engine for good without undergoing the weather and harsh environments in real operation.

You must be the battleground soldiers to dig the trench, fire the bullets, and win the battle. Don't just hide yourself behind an office door, a facial mask, a social media username, or a team of proxies. And don't rely on second-hand information or hearsay when making critical decisions. In fact, any decisions. Especially when it comes to making AI products. You have to build your real-world-facing AI solutions accountably, based on your experience with life.

Remember, a perfect idea, not just in science and technology, but also in humanity and society such as equality, fairness, even peace, is no more than an idea without understanding the practicality of implementing it in life.

In combating AI bias, do not use one bias to counter other biases. You need to understand the issues of bias holistically, not just from one angle. And you must not disregard common sense and facts. That is not called a solution to bias, but an exacerbation of bias.

Set long term goals and aim higher

My third advice is to set long term goal and aim higher. I would love to see you all embrace change and not be afraid of disruption. We are in the age of transformation; let's embrace change, embrace knowledge, and embrace the paradigm shift. This means rethinking fundamental concepts such as what constitutes knowledge, skill, common sense, competence, merit, and objectives. It is also time to redefine what is considered big or small, simple or complex.

To achieve this, reflect on your material needs. Often, we are blinded by immediate material desires, which can divert us from our true long-term aspirations. It is

crucial to distinguish between what you need to survive and what you need to thrive. Aim to build a life that balances both material success and personal fulfilment.

We can be slowed down or even pulled back by lack of judgement, short-sightedness, or being vulnerable to distractions and random influences. To achieve confidence and perseverance you must keep learning, set a goal for yourself, and focus on that clear goal for your work and life. Without a goal that is big and far enough down the road, people will tend to connect it to the past. This means you will build things and set up systems and practices only to accommodate the legacy, to accommodate perhaps already obsolete rules. But if you have a goal in front of you, it will be your lighthouse, and you will be more tempted to connect the dots forward by innovating and learning new things to achieve your goal and outcome.

Be passionate

Last, but not least, whatever you decide to do in your future, do it passionately.

The future ahead of you will never be easy and smooth. Modern society is very complex; it is constructed by extremely complicated rules and conventions. You might soon hit the wall, find your work boring, or become frustrated with institutional bureaucracy. Do not fall into the trap of becoming a social robot. Be creative, and have passion for your life and your work. Passion is the ultimate driving force that will fuel you to achieve future success.

MBZUAI graduates, every year at this time, it is always been a bittersweet moment to bid farewell to you. It is a privilege to me and to all of the faculty to be able to accompany you during this important episode of your life. Now you are ready to enter a new world and use the knowledge that you learned from the university to launch your professional career. So what are the most valuable things that I hope you will take away with you from the university?

You've learned some knowledge, you've got your master's or Ph.D. degree, and you've made friends here. All of these are very important for your life, but I want to remind you that there is one thing that is even more important: That you have been trained here as a scientist, to do science. You read scientific literatures, you invent and implement algorithms to solve problems for which no answer yet exists. You also need to write papers to explain your results to others. You need to address criticisms and answer questions. You need to convince others and get your paper published. This makes you a unique personality; a personality of a scientist with formal scientific training. Don't take this for granted, and don't take this experience lightly. This is something very fundamental that you and I have in common: We are trained as scientists.

So what does this mean? Even if you go on to launch a career outside of science, the scientific training you received here makes you different. You read and you understand, you innovate and attack open problems, you describe your ideas so others can understand, and you prove your results to others so they can be convinced. You receive feedback and use this feedback to make yourself better, and you handle criticisms and defend yourself with grace. It is these kinds of experiences of scientific methodology and inquiry, more than any other skill, that defines us.

When you look around the world, how often do you actually see such an approach being adopted by people? How many people adhere to such a way of work and life? We live in a world where many noises can be heard. We hear popularism, individualism, political correctness, progressivism, radicalism. And these can often sideline science and scientific critical thinking, civil and respectful debate, and objective reasoning, as well as diligent argumentation in public discussion, in decision making, and in legislation and policy making, giving way to political, economic and other agendas.

Even in many academic situations, the space for scientific discourse and exploration are diminishing. Scientists are challenged, mislabelled and sometimes even decried for non-scientific reasons, such as political and business activism in various environments. This is sad, oftentimes even deplorable, because I believe that in our society, not just in university, we require a free space for scientific thinking. This space should embrace and emphasise objectivity, rationality, rigour, impartiality, openness, deliberation, self-reflection, and most importantly, evidence-based and first-principle-driven reasoning that can stand the test of time.

In that regard, I wish you to draw inspiration and strength from your scientific training at MBZUAI. Bring this air of scientific spirit to your professional life, stand your ground based on science and rationality, be honest to people when it come to science, defend the integrity of science, and form your judgement and walk your path of life with the honesty, diligence, and integrity you learned here during your scientific training. I believe the world will be a better place with more science and rationality, less conspiracy and hype. And in this, you, our graduates, can make a difference.

Congratulations again, Class of 2024. Your journey is about to start and the future is waiting just ahead for you. Remember to always keep in mind our University motto: “Power from Knowledge to Serve”. You gained knowledge from this institution not to just make you look good and feel good. It is to make you become empowered and make useful things happen. Now it is time for you to carry on to serve and make the world around us better.

Thank you.