GIRL empPOWERED
Scholarship Programme

Blackheath High School – Academics Scholars' Evening 2026

Speech by Alex Hunt, Master of Wine

I must say I feel very privileged to be asked to speak this evening. The breadth of the content that's been discussed already is hugely impressive – there has clearly been a lot of "learning for learning's sake" going on. I want to talk about why I think that's a good thing, and also why the phrase undersells it. But first, let me begin with a brief story.

Once upon a time, there was an intelligent, hard-working person who by their early forties was – by any definition – seriously successful. They were just one promotion away from becoming the boss of their entire organisation, in charge of 33,000 people and a budget, in today's money, of £1.7bn. Sure enough, the time came when this person's name was put forward for the top job. But it didn't feel right; this person had other interests. So instead of taking the job, they resigned, and set out on an alternative path that changed the world.

That person is David Attenborough, and in 1972, he could have become the director general of the BBC. Instead, he fused his experience as a television producer with the childhood love of the natural world that had inspired him to study zoology at university. He went on to transform how humanity understands, values and protects the environment, and at 100 years old, is arguably this country's most beloved and respected citizen.

He probably would have made a very competent director general – but this example illustrates the difference between status and achievement. By avoiding the lure of status, and instead following the intellectual passions that drove him, he was able to achieve more than he ever could have done, had he chosen the other path at that crucial turning point in his career.

He had the essential raw material – a good brain – just like our scholars here. The question is: what do you do with that brain?

Earlier in his life, you might have classed the time Attenborough spent as a child collecting fossils, all the way through to his natural science degree, as "learning for learning's sake". It certainly had no immediate vocational outcome. But my problem with this phrase is the implication that there's no real benefit to such learning, beyond maybe a moral one. It gives a sense that you may as well do the bare minimum you need to pass exams and get a decent job – any learning over and above is somehow an indulgence. I believe that's a fundamental mistake, and I'll give you three reasons why.

Reason #1. Intelligence doesn't thrive in a vacuum. The mind needs to be nourished, just like the body. And just as the body needs a varied diet, so does the mind. It's natural that our educational diet narrows as we progress through school, and on to higher education. I was certainly relieved to give up my least favourite GCSE subjects when it came to A-level time. But if you can retain a passing curiosity in some of the topics you've set aside, it will keep your mind sharper.

Why is that? Our minds are programmed to find patterns and connections in what we experience around us. A broad range of inputs will yield a more interesting, varied and unexpected output, which then becomes part of your own personal content, and in turn, something more for your mind to chew on – it's a virtuous circle. This will make you a versatile thinker, with a mind you can turn to almost anything. You gain in generalised intelligence. Tune the engine, then choose the race.

Reason #2 follows on from this. Having a capable mind, well nourished, and knowing how to use it will make you more successful. It doesn't really matter in principle what you choose to do – if you can end up, say, in the top 10% of your chosen field, and it fulfils you, I would call that success. In most activities, being in the top 10% involves the consistent application of a well-honed intellect. This brings not just quality but differentiation to your work – be it an exam, or later on, a job. If you can stand out by offering not just excellence but a fresh perspective, then your "audience", be it an examiner, an admissions tutor, a manager at work, or the public at large, are more likely to be engaged and impressed. Any academic discipline is enhanced by creativity – and vice versa. Operating at the interface between the scholarly and the creative will see you rise above your peers. It also makes what you end up doing all the more rewarding.

This is certainly my own experience, anyway. I am a wine merchant. I make a living trading bottles of wine – which sounds pretty straightforward. It's a liquid made from grapes, it tastes nice, it's a popular part of a meal, and if you sell it for more than you paid, you make a profit. Basic stuff! Or you can scratch the surface a bit more, and discover a cultural and intellectual framework of remarkable richness.

Here is a cultural artefact that has existed in civilisation for 8,000 years – that's 3,000 years older than written language. It has accompanied humans on our journey from the stone age to the present day, forging deep links with history, geography, social dynamics, chemistry, biology, gastronomy, economics and aesthetics. It appeals to the lesser senses of taste and smell, presenting us a linguistic challenge around how to describe it. It is like liquid art that links us back to agriculture; a cornerstone of ritual, both religious and secular; a time capsule that can transport us to a different moment and place on the planet.

It's hard to think of an academic discipline that doesn't link in some way to wine, and I've engaged with that extended cultural fabric to my professional advantage – but I don't think it's a special case. Everything is linked in one way or another, and finding these connections can give you a unique perspective to explore, which will help you stand out from the crowd. It vastly increases your options, as we saw with David Attenborough. And it's also just part of what makes life interesting.

Which brings me to **Reason #3**. Learning about the world enhances our appreciation of it. You get to experience life in 3D, fully immersed.

Mind-blowing beauty and mystery are everywhere, across every subject. The golden ratio, the motion of galaxies, the symmetry of the periodic table, the intricacy of cell division, the phenomenon of consciousness, the Rosetta stone, the sophistication of the Incas, the geometry of snooker, the complexity of a symphony – there are endless things to marvel at and discover more about – more than enough for 100 lifetimes.

If you're thinking, "isn't this all a bit much?" then you wouldn't be the first. The philosopher John Stuart Mill posed this question: is it better to be a pig, happily wallowing in the mud, or Socrates, with all his mighty intellectual capacity, but also facing the challenges and struggles that inevitably come as part of the package.

Some days it might seem easier if you could dial down your intellect, to live a mentally simpler life. Well, I'm sorry, scholars, it's too late. You are already team Socrates. The best you can do is embrace it. Drink from the well of knowledge.

Drink often, and sometimes drink deeply. Go down that rabbit hole – you never know where it might lead. But try to take at least a sip every day. The painter James McNeill Whistler lived by the maxim “no day without a line”. Take that as a metaphor for intellectual life in general, and try to live “no day without a thought”. Nourish that brain and it will reward you in ways you might not even expect.

Learning for learning’s sake is a good thing, because it’s so much more than it says on the tin. It’s an investment: in your greatest asset, your mind; in your future success; and in your unique relationship with the world around you.

So good luck, happy learning, and thank you for listening.