

Emmanuel College Papers

by
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Acknowledgement

Emmanuel College acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which the College is located, the people of the Turrbal nation and Jagera/Yaggera nation.

Our community lives, learns and grows together on these rich lands and waters that are, and have been, a place of gathering for thousands of years.

Emmanuel College is committed to honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the lands, waters and seas, and their significant contribution to society as the oldest living civilisation in the world.

Emmanuel College endeavours to promote reconciliation through education, respect and engagement.

Author

Pratyush Mishra is a postgraduate resident of Emmanuel College and a first year PhD student studying Theoretical Astrophysics, specialising in cosmology, at The University of Queensland.

He grew up in the United Kingdom, mainly in Stoke-on-Trent and Liverpool, where he completed his high school education from Newcastle-Under-Lyme School, Tower College, and The Liverpool Blue Coat School, from 2013 - 2020.

From 2020-2024, he completed his bachelor's and master's degrees in Natural Sciences (Physics) from the University of Cambridge, where he resided specifically within Trinity College. From 2024-2025, he completed a one-year research placement in the astrophysics department within The University of Queensland, before commencing his PhD with the same research group in 2026.

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Thank you very much, Principal Stephen Peake, it is an honour to have been invited to speak here today.

I would like to preface my speech by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the lands on which Emmanuel College stands, the people of the Turrbal and Yaggera nations, and pay my respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

Congratulations to all students who are being recognised tonight for your various accomplishments. You have worked very hard to get here, and the reward is well-deserved.

Principal Stephen Peake asked me to speak here today about my own academic journey and experiences, as well as to provide some advice and potentially new perspectives. I must admit, I feel a little out of place doing so, since I am not much older than most of you, so I, myself, am still continuously learning in life, but I will try my best.

As mentioned earlier, my name is Pratyush, I am one of the postgraduates here in Emmanuel College, and I am studying for a PhD in Theoretical Astrophysics in UQ. However, my academic journey actually begins a long way away from here, all the way over in the UK. I moved around a lot within the UK, but I spent most of my life after age 13 in Liverpool. I attended independent schools up to Grade 10, before enrolling in a grammar school for Grades 10-12. Following this, I was fortunate enough to be accepted to study Physics at Trinity College in the University of Cambridge, where I completed my bachelor's and master's degrees. My time at Cambridge was absolutely amazing, the place is filled with rich culture, extensive history, beautiful architecture and the most wonderful people. In fact, you may have heard that many of the cultures and traditions here at UQ are inspired by Oxford and Cambridge. For example, many of the college names, Emmanuel College's crest and blue-white colours, and the Great Court run, which actually comes from my previous college, Trinity College, where our biggest courtyard is also called Great Court, and we also hold an annual Great Court Run. I really enjoy seeing these parallels, as it reminds me of my undergraduate times. Especially when I first came here, it created a sense of familiarity with UQ, therefore helping me settle in.

I would like to focus my speech on two different themes, both of which resonate strongly with me, and hopefully by the end of the speech, they will with you too. First, is the theme of overcoming setbacks, specifically academic setbacks, but the same ideas can be applied to other areas of life. I know today is a celebration of academic success, but there will come several times in our education and careers when we need to overcome difficulties. Many of you will have already experienced and overcome these, and many not yet, regardless of which one you are, setbacks will continue to arise. I, personally, have certainly faced my fair share of them. Everyone will have their own unique way of overcoming them, each of which is perfectly valid; what matters most is what works for you. My perspective from this is well summarised by a quote I heard that really resonates with me. The quote is from a book, "The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse". The group are in a forest, and the boy, feeling overwhelmed, says, "I can't see a way through." The horse replies, "Can you see your next step?" The boy answers, "Yes," and the horse says, "Just take that". This advice seems so obvious; I am sure we have all heard something similar to this in life and thought nothing of it. Many of you may have thought, "That sounds too simple, there's no way it works", but it is easy to overlook the true impact of this. I want to support this concept from two perspectives, both of which are equally valid: a logic perspective and a feeling perspective.

First the logic side, psychological and neuroscience studies have identified something called the "Goal-Gradient effect", which effectively says that when we stop telling ourselves "I have only made progress when I achieve my end goal", and we start perceiving each individual step of the journey itself as important and meaningful progress, then we get a dopamine hit for each completed step, which gets us hooked and makes us want to complete more and more steps. From the feeling side, it can be very easy to feel overwhelmed thinking about big goals or hurdles, so instead of thinking "I need to fix my academics" if you tell yourself "I just need to take this one small step first", it feels much more manageable, and it reduces the anxiety that may be causing you to avoid that goal.

Some examples of how you can try this are, if you are feeling really demotivated and don't want to study but you know you have to for a deadline, put on a timer and study for 5 minutes, see how you are feeling afterwards. If you still don't want to study then fine take a break and come back later, but the chances are that your brain will be settled in and be ok with continuing. Actually, I did this when writing this speech, I was very tired one evening and didn't want to do any work but, after trying this trick, my brain became relaxed and was happy to continue. If you are really stuck on trying to understand a complicated concept from lectures or class, then forget about the end concept, start from the beginning, understand the first small step, if you need to, then re-read it a few times to consolidate it, once you've got it then move on to the next and so on. It might even take a couple of days of repeating this process in separate sittings, but eventually it will click. To sum up, I would like to give a personal example, which some of you may be able to relate to.

As part of my master's degree, I did a long 8-month research project, which involved a lot of coding to perform physics calculations and several times I was completely stuck on how to remove a tiny bug which was causing my whole code to fail, or I didn't even know where to start when I needed to develop a huge section of code. At times, I felt so hopeless, as though I would never find a solution, that my research project wouldn't be completed by the deadline and that I would fail this portion of my master's degree. But each time, I implemented this concept of just taking the next step, proof reading or writing one line of code, and then the next and so on, and every time I found a solution. Now I use this experience to motivate myself and give me confidence whenever I face new academic setbacks or hurdles, by telling myself that I have overcome such difficulties in the past and that I can and will do it again.

The second theme I wanted to speak about is finding your own happiness, again from an academic or career point of view. In today's age, we are constantly surrounded by external sources from YouTube, Instagram, influencers, and society in general telling us how we should define happiness and success within our careers, and that we should only feel satisfied if we achieve this type of thing or if we choose this type of life. We hear stories of 23 year-olds making $50k US dollars per month from stock trading, 25 year-olds who just sold their first start-up company for millions, 17 year-olds who are representing their country on the world stage in some sport. Whilst these stories can provide some inspiration, they can also lead to comparison complex where we are always comparing ourselves to others, and they can distort our own definitions of happiness and success within our careers.

Following exactly those paths in your career are certainly options that you are free to follow if you wish, but they should not be viewed as some necessity to having a happy, successful and fulfilling career. Everyone will have their own definition of career happiness and success, maybe you want to open a restaurant in a big city, maybe you want to work a remote job so that you can travel the world and explore different cultures, maybe you want to start a clothing brand, maybe you want to work in a school back in your hometown and give back to the place you grew up in. It doesn't matter how humble or grand your goal may seem; all of these pursuits are equally as valid and equally as valuable. What is most important is to find your passion, your goals, what brings you happiness, and to go after them. Put in the work to hone your passion, to achieve your goals, and do what makes you happy, not what society says should make you happy.

Note that this will come at different paces for everyone. Never compare the pace at which your life is unfolding to someone else's. Everyone is living life at their own pace, and there is no right or wrong pace, so don't stress about timelines; everything will happen at the right time. Another note, your own definition of what you think will bring you happiness in your career will change both as you grow up and as your perspectives on life change, and that's ok. My own thoughts on this are changing all the time. When I was in high school, I used to want my career to be a certain way, but as I grew older, my mindset shifted, and I realised that there are other aspects of life which are really important to me. Now, I still want my career to unfold in a similar way but, not at the expense of the new things that I have realised are important to me. So don't feel bad if your perspectives on life, and your idea of happiness in your career and life change; that is totally ok.

That concludes my speech, with the two main messages being: just take the next step and find your happiness. I hope you found this useful, and congratulations once again to all the students for your awards.