

The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award Foundation

**2016 Asia Pacific Regional Conference by the Chairman,
Dr. Johnny Hon, Hong Kong, 10th September 2016**

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure to join you all today and above all to be able to assist the fantastic work of the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award Foundation through my sponsorship and active support.

Opening up opportunities for the next generation is a cause very close to my heart. I truly believe that there is nothing more important for the future of each and every country in the world than investing in our young people and equipping them with the skills they need to succeed in life. This is exactly what Duke of Edinburgh's International Award is about and that is why I am so proud to be a benefactor and to support the great work it does.

As you all know, the Award aims to create opportunities for young people to develop skills, get physically active, give service to the community and experience adventures – all crucial elements of helping them to develop as truly well-rounded individuals and to equip them to face the challenges of life.

Formal education is very important, of course, and it is vital that all countries focus on building the best education system they possibly can. But on its own, this is not enough. We all know that development outside the classroom, in the classroom of life, can be just as important a part of future success. This is particularly true in our fast-changing world, where soft skills can matter as much or more than formal qualifications – something I know well as a businessman, employer and venture capitalist supporting ambitious start-up firms and young entrepreneurs myself.

From the earliest stages in their lives, young people today navigate multiple technological platforms and have to understand that everything they do as teenagers can leave a lasting online footprint. As rapid technological progress transforms our lives, we have to respond – as individuals and as professionals – to challenges that may simply not have existed ten or even five years ago.

Critically, people have to engage with ever-greater numbers of international stakeholders in the course of both their careers and personal lives, as organisations are becoming more global and individuals more internationally mobile. In a word, we really do now live in a global village.

All this calls for greater adaptability than ever before, for quick thinking, strong communication skills and an ability to work effectively in diverse teams, spanning continents and cultures.

All this cannot simply be learnt within classroom walls – and this is exactly where the Award comes in.

It improves employability, as taking part in Award activities helps young people to learn first-hand about teamworking, respect, care for others and the pursuit of excellence. It can also give participants, especially those who may come from under-privileged backgrounds or simply do not have the role models in their day-to-day lives to inspire them to aim high, the gift of confidence and self-belief. This is all-important not only in empowering people to pursue their dreams but also in helping corporates build more diverse and well-rounded workforces, such that no one is put off from applying by the thought that a job may not be ‘for someone like me’.

We all recognise that diversity and equal opportunities have great importance socially and, from a corporate perspective, really help the bottom line. For me, this is not just words, but a deeply held personal belief. It is sound business advice too!

My business, the Global Group, is a multi-national employer itself. We feel strongly that our commitment to the principle of equality, regardless of race, nationality, sex or disability – an ethos incidentally that ties in perfectly with the nature of the Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award – has been integral to our success since the Group was founded back in the 1990s. A successful equal opportunities programme can lead to very tangible business benefits from easier talent acquisition and better retention to enhance customer service and public image.

The Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award also makes a great contribution not just to young people but also to the wider society in a variety of ways. It can teach our future leaders important lessons about social responsibility and community relations, and offers a starting point to those wanting to give back to their community, their country, and the wider humanity.

This can be important professionally as forward thinking businesses and their people strive to be responsible corporate citizens – and consumers increasingly want to buy from responsible corporate citizens. But giving back can also bring real personal fulfilment to individuals, can enrich their lives and ultimately help us build more equal and cohesive societies. Some fear that today’s teenagers are at risk of missing out on the joys of direct personal ties because so much of their interaction with others now happens via technology. Thanks to initiatives such as the Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award, our children and young people can have the best of both worlds.

In short, I believe the Foundation is doing vital work to develop the kind of well-rounded and forward-thinking young people who are, without a shadow of a doubt, the key to a bright and sustainable future for our world.

Thanks to the efforts of many of those here tonight, I am sure every young participant in the Award’s Asia-Pacific programmes will find the experience beneficial and have a lot of fun in the process – and that wider societies, employers and local communities will see real benefits too.

This is why I am passionate about supporting the Foundation not just financially but also through time and effort, helping them establish a stronger presence in China, create new local partnerships and, ultimately, open up the Award to young people who do not yet have the opportunity to participate. I'd love to see every young man and woman across the Asia Pacific region have the chance to take part. That is my dream.

Ladies and Gentlemen, at this exciting time, I look forward to working with the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award Foundation to make this happen – and helping to let everyone see the benefits of the Award for themselves.

Thank you for listening to me this evening.

Dr. Johnny Hon
10/09/2016