# Maureen Robinson Honorary Graduate Speech Transcript

It's a great honor to be here today and I would like to thank the executive dean and the University of Strathclyde for this prestigious award. I would also like to thank the people who put me forward for this award. It's very much appreciated.

People often ask me, how did I get into the career I eventually followed, and I say by accident. I, as you've already been mentioned, I first started my career at this very university many, many years ago as a pharmacist, long before many of you were born. It's been nearly 50 years since I first walked through the doors of this university. And I must admit, my memory is not what it used to be. But I do have a couple of anecdotes I remember with within the student's union building, and this was the old students' union. Uh, there was a, what was like a coffee shop on the mezzanine floor. And we used to call it the mezz, which my friends and I frequented a lot. But by the time we moved into our second year, the coffee shop had moved up to the canteen, in the corner there, and the old mess was a snooker hall. It just didn't have the same atmosphere as before, as um, it did before. But we started to, or we started to take our studies a lot more seriously.

One other thing I recollect is that one of my friends heard us talk about one of my lecturers teaching style and the fun he introduced into the topic and she liked it that much, which she actually came to our lectures to, even though it was nothing to do with her actual course.

 Unlike you today, I did not finish my pharmacy degree, but decided instead to follow a career in science in the scotch whisky industry and studied for an HNC in chemistry. The company I joined was the Distillers Company Limited, now known as Diageo, where I worked in the laboratories for nine years before becoming a Master Blender for 36 years. During those nine years, I developed an understanding of the intricacies of science of scotch making, from distilling to blending and from the different aromas and flavours you can achieve with the tools you have available, such as individual distilleries, age and the maturation root.

What is a master blender? Master blender has many roles, but the one that inspired me the most was innovation. This is where we actually, we got to create and develop new scotch whisky products, which I found exciting and rewarding. Seeing on the shelf what you had developed gave you a sense of achievement and it was even more notable if your signature was on the bottle. One of the things I found most interesting was the opportunity to travel the world, whether it be for market research or for product launches. This allowed me to get a better understanding of the various cultures and their preferences for future reference. And I had the good fortune to visit countries such as Mexico, United States, Japan, China.

One of the things I often asked was, do I think myself as an artist or a scientist? And I always replied an artist, but you need the science to become that artist.

During my time at Diageo, I was responsible for many things, but there are a couple of, I'm most proud of. Being The first female Master Blender in the modern era, and opening pathway for others to follow my footsteps, especially in an industry where certain roles were very male dominated.

I was also instrumental in creating and developing a scotch whisky character classification language specific for Diageo, which is still used today. In fact, my first introduction to organoleptic categorisation was when I worked in the labs. Historically distilleries, I'm not too sure if people would probably know this, uh, historically distillers were classed into regions like Speyside, uh, Highlands, Islay et cetera. But over years it became apparent that from an organoleptic perspective, there was more to it.

When I first became a Blender, I was asked if I could change this regional classification, which I did, but it's still not wholly organic attributes. It was more along the lines of interchangeable distilleries for based on blend characters of blending purposes. It was not until the early 00's I was involved with others to develop a classification based on their organoleptic descriptors, which to us made more relevant for blending perspective than regions. And that is, is what we use today. This involved nosing hundreds of samples from different distilleries and different ages. It resulted in six category headers based on aroma, for example, meaty and fruity. And, but underneath that we actually had like ‘meaty’. You'd maybe have things like you make descriptions like Bovril and oxo cubes and things like that. A lot of my descriptors actually relate to food 'cause I do like my food. And the other one, fruity that also include, and people in the science area will understand that 'cause fruity was like fruitiness, fresh fruits, and things like that, so even though we had headers, they are actually, there's lots underneath that.

During my 45 years, I received several awards from my achievement that meant a lot to me, and it's already been mentioned, uh, being inducted as a Keeper and Master of Quaich. The exclusive international side of it recognizes those who have shown outstanding commitment to the scotch whisky industry, being one of the few who has entered the Whisky Hall of Fame. And to pick that was a total surprise to me. I was at our luncheon and the next thing, somebody started talking about what it was, and I'm sitting going, that sounds like me. And it was just totally, um, surprise to me.

And of course, today's recognition is something I could never have dreamed of and I really appreciate this today, I did retire in June 2022 from Scotch Whisky industry, but only lasted six months.

I have now embarked a new career, transferring my skills to a different type of whisky with a need. This will challenge, this will be a challenge for me, but I'm looking forward to it. Today, you're graduating in your specialized fields, sbut at some point in years to come, you might need to want to make that career change, but you should embrace it and not be scared to take that leap. I did, I made the decision and I don't think I would've achieved the recognition I have today. If I hadn't made that initial leap when I first started in the scotch whisky industry as a scientist, I never dreamed that it would, I would become passionate about it. I still get a buzz out of Googling my name and seeing all the various articles and courses.

Of course, the many things I have achieved - First female Master Blender, Keeper in Master Quaich, member of Whisky Hall of Fame, and of course now an Honorary Doctorate.

 In fact, I am embarking on my new career leap so watch this space and hopefully I'll get more mentions in Google.

 I wish you all luck in whatever career path you take and enjoy today as you all, you've all worked hard to get to the stage in your life. I have one last thing to say and that is to my family and friends who are here today. Thank you for all your support you've given me over the years.

Thank you.