

IBEI Graduation Talk (Barcelona September 6, 2021)

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Honourable guests

Esteemed colleagues

Wonderful class of 2021 for the Master's in International Development & Master's in International Security & Research Master's in International Studies

Families and friends.

Welcome.

I am honoured to be here with you and to represent the IBEI faculty by saying a few words.

Firstly, to the students:

This has not been a normal year. You have been called on to make unexpected changes and to work in unexpected ways. Some of you were expecting to be sitting here in 2020, but you had to change to part-time to be able to get through your master's degree and so here you are today.

But you have all made it. You are all here. On behalf of all the faculty, I say congratulations.

Secondly, I want to say thank you to the families and the friends. Sons and daughters ended up back home, studying in their old bedroom. Friends had to find spaces in shared flats for everyone to log on to classes. You had to listen to the worries and the stresses and the complaints. This award is, at least in part, also due to all of you for your support. Thank you.

This year was not what we predicted. And the future is not what we thought it would be, even just a few years ago. I feel that there have been many turning points in the world in the last year and I would like to reflect on a few of them, since this is the world that you will be going into. I want to concentrate on three areas.

The first is the threat to the multilateral order. Multilateral institutions have been tested in the last few years and in many cases they have been found wanting. The covid-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses in the World Health Organisation. It was slow to respond, it had no power to impose a united strategy, it could not enforce an investigation into the causes of the pandemic, it could not impose vaccine sharing in the better interests of the whole population of the world. The Syrian conflict has shown the defects of the United Nations system – the permanent members could veto actions, leaving space for the Syrian regime to commit atrocities and ultimately end up in control of the country. In issues of key importance to the international order – finance, security, health – nations are going their own way. And I think, moving into the future, this will be one of the most important new realities that you will have to deal with. Some of you will work in

those very multilateral institutions. Do you lead change from within? Some of you will work for your national governments. Will you help your nations re-engage with the multilateral order? The world is changing and some of you in this room will shape that change. You need to decide. What future do you want?

The second aspect that I want to highlight where I think we are seeing a new future is the power of words. There has been a key turning point in how words can have real-life consequences. We have seen how misinformation about the vaccines has distorted the response to the pandemic and has ultimately affected all of us. The blanket response of “fake news” has weakened the power of journalists to investigate governments and hold them to account. And this has diminished people’s trust in government. Social media algorithms have spread abusive information that has led to massacres in Myanmar. Again, this is the world you are inheriting. Some of you will work for non-governmental organizations and lobby groups. Some of you will work for your country’s diplomatic service or government press offices. How will you combat misinformation? What will truth mean to you?

The final aspect I want to talk about is how for this generation the personal has become political. We see this in the way that people identify with their nation and want their nation to be strong. People identify with leaders who speak for them, and so we see the rise of populism. But also we see it in how people are judged on social media for their values, their beliefs, even the labels they put on themselves. Who you are matters, in a way that is different than previous generations. Who will you be in this world? What values and beliefs will you prioritize?

I hope that some of the things you have learned this year will help you in this future that you are facing.

I am not just talking about understanding how the United Nations works, though obviously as one of the faculty I do think that this is important. I’m thinking about the broader lessons you have learned.

The training you have had in assessing information, tracing statements back to find the original reference, evaluating the reliability of sources, using logic, testing arguments.

The core values you have developed through working with others, of tolerance, of support and solidarity. You have made networks here at IBEI that I hope will last into your future. We certainly want you to be part of the alumni network.

Particularly from this year, you have learned to adapt in the face of the unexpected. You have found that you have enormous resilience, adaptability and perseverance. Not only have you earned your master’s degrees, you earned them in the pandemic year.

In conclusion, this year you have learned a lot from us (we hope!), we have learned a lot from you, and you have learned a lot about yourselves. The world that awaits you is at many turning points. I have highlighted some of them. You have the skills and are at a moment in history where you have the opportunities to shape the world that we will live in. However, I want to leave you with one overriding purpose and I am going to take the quote from author Toni Morrison. She said,

“I tell my students, ‘When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.’”

Class of 2021, I wish you all the best in your futures.