

## **FROM PROVIDENCE TO PROMINENCE: A FRESHER'S GUIDE IN THE AGE OF AI**

*Being a Speech Delivered by Dr. Olusola Ayoola, PhD at the 2026 Matriculation Ceremony, University of Ibadan, Nigeria on March 11, 2026*

### 1. Protocols.

Let me express my deepest gratitude for the privilege of addressing the matriculating students today. It is a particular honor for me because exactly 20 years ago when I did my matriculation, if anyone had told me that I would have the honour of being on this stage someday, I would not have believed.

2. I say this because the first time I applied to the University of Ibadan, it was 2005. I was denied admission. So I stepped back. I went and did my A-Levels. I studied harder. I prepared again for UTME. I came back in 2006, believing that this time, it would work. And I will tell you — getting into UI that year felt tougher than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. I waited for the first batch. My name was not there. I waited for the second batch. My name was not there. I waited for the third batch. My name was still not there. It was only on the supplementary list — that quiet list the university releases almost reluctantly, as if to say, "well, perhaps we should give this one a chance" — that my name finally appeared.

3. And I cried because I had already given up. And in that moment, I made a promise to God. I said: "Grant me wisdom. Let me work hard. And when I succeed, let this university look back and say — it was good that we gave that young man a chance."

4. And I stand before you today, exactly twenty years later, not as a guest — but on the special invitation of the Senate of this University. And so I ask you: what else can we call that, if not providence?

5. I owe a debt to every person who came before me. No university on earth could have given me the combination of knowledge, values, and character that the University of Ibadan gave me. A university with a reputation that far precedes her name. A university that is no respecter of fame, wealth, influence

or connection but the values of integrity, merit and determination to excel. Greatest Uites...of the greatest Uites.

Yes, UI is the greatest of tertiary institutions in West Africa. But let us face it, it did not happen by chance...it took men and women, students and staff of uncommon substance, to build this reputation. Now, today you join our community. So I say congratulations.

6. Congratulations. But permit me to ask: "What kind of student do you want to be?" Because, there are students, and then there are students. Not all students are the same. Some people pass through this university and their Vice-Chancellor knows them by name. Their lecturers remember them. Their HOD refers to them. Others pass through these same gates, attend the same classes, sit in the same halls — and not even their class representative remembers them.
7. Well, I do not know what your journey has been up to this point. But I know that just like me, there are some of you who also came through a long road. For some of you, even your parents were overjoyed and couldn't sleep the night the results came out. Some of you doubted whether this day would ever come. But you are here. And that is not an accident. Thousands of people dream of sitting where you are sitting. Thousands applied but were turned away. Thousands more didn't even dare to apply to UI — they already knew they couldn't make it. But you applied boldly. And you got in. That is providence. That is God's way of saying: "here is your platform. Now what will you do with it?" So I say to you — say it after me: "Providence brought me here."
8. After Providence, you need Diligence, because Diligence will keep you here. This university does not joke. It will test you. You will hear that certain courses are tough, or that certain lecturers never give above 70%, do not be deterred. The fact that those before you struggled doesn't mean you would. We are wired differently as I learned many years ago. So, plan your time. Wake up when others are sleeping. Study when others are chilling. Ask questions when others are lost. Remain hungry in your pursuit of what you came here to achieve. Remember — your parents are depriving themselves today of

comfort, fashion, holidays, and even their personal dreams, all for you to become great tomorrow. So when we say Diligence, it is not just for your sake. It is a race for your entire family.

9. When you want to give up, remember why you started this journey in the first place. As for me, it was simple. I was tired of waking in to a country where power supply was a luxury, not a right. Where the old farmer in the village had no protection. Where the young girl walking home wasn't safe. Where the less privileged had dreams but no ladder to climb. And I said to myself — someone has to solve this. In this country, they say you need connections to make impact. I had none. So I made a decision: I will become the connection my family needs. I will be the one who succeeds, so that when my people need help, I can help them. That became the fire in my belly. That was what kept me going — not for glory, but for purpose.
  
10. Day and night I studied. I attended tutorials. I taught my colleagues. I took part in activities. I made sure I was known — not for noise, but for substance. And God was faithful. Scholarship opportunities came — I was on the list. When it was time for my industrial attachment, I had three internship offers on a platter of gold: Shell Petroleum, Schlumberger, and one more. Three. Not because I chased them. Because I had built something worth finding.
  
11. I like to say that yes, diligence will keep you here but it is excellence that takes you there. Excellence means you don't just attend lectures — you pursue "true understanding". You don't just listen — you read. You go to the library, you put it to practice. You form study groups. You teach your colleagues, because teaching is one fast way to master what you have learned. During my own time here, I attended tutorial groups and taught my friends. Every time I explained a concept to someone else, I understood it more deeply myself. When exam questions came, I was ready — not because I had memorised answers, but because I had truly understood the material. Excellence also means choosing to be different. When your peers say they are tired, you push forward. When the crowd takes shortcuts, you take the right path. You wish to stand out, and you work for it.

12. Lastly, for anything you know, you need Confidence. You can be the most diligent, most excellent student in your department — but if you cannot speak up, if you cannot walk into a room and represent what you know, your brilliance will stay locked inside you. And locked-up brilliance helps nobody. Ask questions in class even when your voice shakes. Contribute to discussions even when you are not certain. Raise your hand. Disagree respectfully. Be present and be heard. Confidence is also about exposure and engagement — real, genuine engagement with your field. Attend seminars, volunteer at events in your field, follow thought leaders. The more you immerse yourself in the world of what you are studying, the more naturally confident you will become — because confidence is not performance, it is familiarity. As a student, engage your lecturers in intellectual conversations. During my time here, I would write letters to lecturers respectfully questioning what was taught, sharing my own perspective, and asking for clarification. And they would invite me to their offices for real conversations. Those conversations shaped me.

13. But I must add this — confidence also needs courage, and courage needs street smartness. Stay fully aware of current happenings in your country and across the world — politically, economically and socially. A student who understands the world around them carries themselves differently. It keeps you grounded. It keeps you in control. Truth is that the world you are in today will be very different from the world you will be graduating into 4 or 5 years from now. You must continuously adapt.

#### THE AI ADVANTAGE

14. Now — and this is where your generation is truly different from mine. Twenty years ago, when I was sitting in your place, nobody spoke of Artificial Intelligence. We had textbooks, libraries, and if we were lucky, a computer lab. Today, you have search engines, social media, and AI assistants that can explain complex topics, summarise research, generate practice questions, and review your work — all within seconds. This is a tremendous advantage. But only if you use it wisely.

15. Here is how I advise you to use AI for your academics: think of it as a study partner — and a very knowledgeable one at that. A good study partner doesn't do your work for you. They discuss concepts with you, challenge your thinking, help you identify where you are weak, and push you to go deeper. That is exactly how you should use AI. Before your lecturer even walks into the room, open your AI assistant and discuss the topic you are about to be taught. Build curiosity. Then attend the class with context already in your head. After the class, return to your AI assistant and debrief — discuss what was taught, clarify what confused you, and consolidate what you learned. Then — close it. Open your notes. And write what you think. Use AI to generate past questions, challenge yourself to answer them alone, then let it review your answers and show you where your gaps are.
16. And I must say this clearly — never abandon your textbooks. AI is powerful and confident, but it gets things wrong sometimes. On the other hand, your textbook has been reviewed, edited, and verified by experts. So use AI as a discussion partner, but verify with your texts. Talk to AI as a study partner, not as your teacher. Your lecturer remains your teacher. AI is your thinking companion.
17. Guide your values. True excellence is not in the use of AI to write your courseworks but in the use of AI to optimize the learning resources available to you. Life will test you in moments where you cannot google anything. In that examination hall, in that job interview, in that boardroom where a client is waiting for your answer, in that theatre where a patient needs your decision right now — there will be no AI, no search engine, no study partner. There will only be you and what you have truly learned. So yes, use AI to build yourself, but not to replace yourself. The goal is that one day, when it matters most, everything you need is already inside you.
18. For your career and your public presence — social media is now a portfolio, and a personal website is a brand. But beyond that, AI is one of the most powerful career tools available to your generation. Use it for ideation — to brainstorm ideas, explore possibilities, and think bigger than your immediate environment allows. Use it to learn new skills that your curriculum may not

even cover yet. Use it for networking — to craft professional messages, research organisations, and identify opportunities you would never have found alone. I cannot count the number of opportunities that have come my way just because ChatGPT recommended me to someone during their chat — and AI gets its data from the public web. So put yourself out there for the right reasons. When you apply for a scholarship, a job, or a fellowship tomorrow, the selection committee will search your name. What will they find? I urge you to begin today to build a positive digital presence. Talk about what you are learning. Share your projects. Document your journey here at UI. Make the name of this university shine through you.

19. I leave you with this warning: AI must be your servant, not your master. It must be your tool, not your teacher. It must amplify your best — not replace your thinking. Whatever it gives you may be wrong. Remain objective. Lastly, AI is an amplifier. If you show AI hard work, it will amplify hard work. If you show it laziness, it will amplify laziness. The choice of what you feed it is yours.

20. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen — in a nutshell, twenty years ago, a young man came through the supplementary list of this university by providence. Through diligence, he went on to earn a Federal Government scholarship for his Master's degree, and a UK scholarship for his PhD in Robotics.

21. With excellence, he proceeded to establish Robotics and Artificial Intelligence Nigeria, hosted the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, led Nigeria's Smart Agriculture Initiative, and became Meta's partner in delivering their AI Developer Academy in West Africa. And just recently, without his knowledge, the National Assembly in Abuja passed a resolution urging the Federal Government to liaise with his company. I do not say this to impress you. I say it because every single thing that happened to that young man — was built on the foundation this university gave him. So I say to you, if this university could lift me up, UI can also take you high.

22. I welcome you to Nigeria's first and finest university. The cradle of great people. The University of Ibadan. Congratulations, God bless you and Wishing you Godspeed.