

Occasional Address
UNE Graduation
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It is an honour and a privilege to be giving this Occasional Address today – the University gave me this honour but you, the graduands, have bestowed this privilege.

The UNE that you have experienced stretches from three years on campus in our highly professional college system to studying fully on-line and seeing the campus for the first time today – yet you all have in common that you have made the benefits of higher education your own via this great institution with diplomas, Bachelor and Masters degrees and PhDs.

By the way, I should like to reassure those who are about to graduate with a doctorate in your chosen field that the pain will ease. You have been through one of life's rigorous exercises and emerged battered but triumphant. Soon you will even be able to smile about it.

You - and indeed all graduands here today - will probably be surprised at where your degree will take you. It is unlikely that the disciplinary focus of your studies with which you graduate today will be the focus of your employment ten years hence in 2016. Regardless, you will still need to rely on one thing that you have mastered well at UNE and that is your ability to learn - this will be the mainstay to your future endeavours.

Joseph Goldstein put it much more poetically than I when he said, "*you can't stop the waves but you can learn to surf*". Today is a time to celebrate your mastery of surfing and to look forward to the next king tides.

In early 1970s, I gained my first academic position; I had no idea that I was entering upon a lifestyle that was then in its death throes.

Workload was an alien term; professors were still gods; for young academics morning tea was mandatory but publishing was optional; eye-watering substantial grants were there for the asking; service to the community was radical politics and students were still spending more time in the refec than in the library.

Recently I was contemplating the issues of fundamentalism in universities. The meaning that I attach to this was well articulated by Terry Eagleton when he said that "*Fundamentalism means sticking strictly to the script...Fundamentalism is the paranoid condition of those who do not see that roughness is not a defect of human existence, but what makes it work.*" (22 Feb. 2003)

There is a lot to be said for the ambiguous, the indeterminate, roughness and throwing the script out of the window. I would argue that our desire to create uniformity and sameness is killing academic life.

As a Dean, I suspect that I should have looking for more conformity but I really find it difficult to promote sameness. A single example from my own discipline of philosophy must suffice.

The philosopher Bertram Russell in his seminal work "*Principia Mathematica*" at the turn of the century devised a schema capable of dealing with null classes.

This lead to the concept of exhaustively describing items according to a defined series of classes – what we now recognise as the zeros and ones of digital language.

The marriage of this philosophical concept and technology brought forth the computer and so the largest industry the world has ever seen was born.

The question to be posed is "*If a federal Minister for Education went about picking winners, would she alight upon an philosopher who had a wacky idea about groups that didn't have anyone in them*"?

I have absolutely no doubt that our growing inability within universities to harbour heretics will be held against us. Our scramble for security will be seen as self-serving and our promotion of rules over passion as a cop out.

A Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius in his book, *Meditations*, said "*I have often wondered how it is that every man loves himself more than all the rest of men, but yet sets less value on his own opinion of himself than on the opinion of others*".

You are the only one who will get to live your life. Ultimately it matters little what others think since it is you who has to look yourself in the mirror each morning. In any event, the regard of others is fleeting. For example, how many here today know who built the building behind us or how it came to be part of UNE and yet that story is critical to the establishment of the university in Armidale and hence to the fifty plus years of great work that it has contributed to regional Australia?

We in universities are often busy about many things but we need, more often than we do, to bring back into perspective what is and what is not important and redirect our energies to what really matters — which is our education mission.

These thoughts on the passage of time pass through my mind recently when I was digitising my old photographs and came across some taken of myself as a university student. I say to you graduands that when you get to look at the photographs taken today in some far distant time – and such a time does exist - you too will be amazed at what has happened to you – quite apart from how good you use to look when you were young.

I suspect at this point that I should be telling you to strategically plan your life - set out your goals and work at them — but I am not. Instead I am going to preach a bit of heresy myself and say that chance is going to play a big part in what happens next. If in the future you happen to be in the right place at the right time be smart enough to make it look like you meant it — although it is usually coincidence. Rather than endless planning, my advice is to spend your valuable time on making the most of each day – either that or buy plenty of fridge magnets since they seem to know what we should do.

As a young man, a mentor told me that when my race was done and I was looking into my own grave one of the things that I wouldn't say would be "*I should have spent more time at the office*". I have always found that saying to be an excellent way to get perspective in a world dedicated to frenetic activity.

I am not saying that you will not have to keep up the pace - but if you haven't realised it already you soon will - that the most important person you are pacing is yourself.

As a weedy Irish migrant kid growing up in the far north of this wonderful continent, I soon learnt that it was a good idea to stick together with other migrant kids most of whom happened to be Italian – they all seemed to be so much bigger -probably because of the mouth watering Italian dishes that I also got to eat in their mother's kitchens. Of course, it wasn't possible to talk to these mothers since they spoke only Italian and I English. Consequently I was introduced very early to the simultaneous translated meals at which I showed my appreciation by somewhat exaggerated smacking my lips, rubbing my stomach and making thumbs up signs. I only found out much latter that these demonstrations of appreciation convinced them that I was incorrigibly thick.

Crossed signals will abound throughout your life but armed with courage in your own convictions, you will find you can achieve what you want to achieve. Armed now with your degrees, you can now set out to become the person you want to be and achieve the things you want to achieve.

I decided not to be political today but I must make one aside about a possible course of action for all of us over the next year.

UNE and most public universities are under intense funding pressure. OECD statistics reveal that Australian government tertiary education spending has gone down 7% in the past ten years while other OECD countries have increased their spending by 48% on average. When HECS charges were introduced in the 80's, a guarantee was given to the then Vice-Chancellors that public spending would not decrease and that universities would therefore be better off with the additional student contributions. This promise was not kept and it was not kept for one simple reason – voters by and large don't care about education. I fought five federal elections as a candidate and three more as a party official – in not one of those did education register as an issue.

However, all of you here today know the value higher education and so I would like to ask you to at least think about voting at the federal election next year for the candidate with the best education policy. If you don't then your children and grandchildren will go into their adult lives with higher and higher debt burdens from university study.

Of course, I accept that higher education has private benefit but overwhelmingly it is a public good. Imagine this country and its economy without its professions, without its cultural industries, without almost universal literacy, without public infrastructure, without roads, electricity and clean drinking water. You know what it looks like. You have seen the pictures of stark poverty around the work on your TV screens. Clearly as the old slogan goes "*If you think education is expensive, try ignorance*".

But these are matters for tomorrow and the coming year. Today we are enjoying spring in the New England. Here we have four very distinct seasons. We see the passage of time reflected in the world around us. These seasonal cycles intrude into the fabric of our existence.

You too now stand at the intersection of one of life's seasons. Most of you will be leaving UNE to pursue your careers. Some know what you'll be doing; others are waiting for the winds of change. Whatever the stance, "moving on" is now part of your season of life.

When we stand on the verge of a new cycle, a new set of experiences, we are often in an unsettled state. Many cultures fear these transitions and established ceremonies such as this out of a felt need to put structure onto flux.

So now you are at your own graduation. Your teachers here have provided you with the structure but it is your responsibility to bring about the change, to create the new world. It is a wonderful university from which you graduate and in which I have been honored to work. You have had the advantage of some of the best teachers in the country acknowledged with UNE being the only university in the nation to gain ten out of ten Carrick Teaching citations in 2006. With this superb support and your own personal dedication, you have come to this graduation.

Promise yourself then that you will follow through, that tomorrow and thereafter you will be the person you want to be. Live up to your own expectations. While it is very much safer to stay in the valley, climbing the mountain, smelling the sharp, clear air and feeling the wind blow against your face beats safe every time. Take life at a rush.

I wish to finish with an old Irish blessing that seems highly appropriate for those setting out on such an exciting journey:

*May you have enough happiness to keep you sweet
but enough trials to keep you strong.
Enough sorrows to keep you human
but enough hope to keep you happy.
Enough failure to keep you humble
but enough success to keep you eager.
Enough friends to give you comfort
but enough faith and courage in yourself to banish sadness.
Enough wealth to meet your needs
and one thing more:
Enough determination to make each day a more wonderful day
than the day before.*