

Vote of Thanks: 'Perseverance'
Arts and Sciences Graduation Ceremony, 9 October 2009
Denise Phillips

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Council members, distinguished guests, academic staff, fellow graduates, family and friends. I am truly honoured to deliver the Vote of Thanks on behalf of all graduates today.

Firstly, I warmly congratulate my fellow graduates. Today is a day when we have a sense of completion. Our achievements are recognised, and we celebrate this significant milestone in our lives. Graduation day can be full of many emotions, because it is also a day for reflection on where we have come from, and where we are going in the future.

While we're united by the University of New England, we are a diverse group. We are made up of domestic and international students, externals and internals, and young and mature-age students. We cover many disciplines, and we each have our own unique memories of our time here at the University.

Through my studies, I have become a social historian, which means I'm usually asking other people to tell me about their lives. But today, I've been asked to share a little of my own life. I was 16 when I left school, cutting my education short. I became a mother at the age of 19, which has been the greatest joy. In the 1990s, my life's course then took a sharp turn with a serious illness. It was at this point that I slowly realised that life really is too precious to ignore our dreams. I had an unrequited love for books and learning. So, in 1998, I enrolled as an external student and, along with you, my fellow graduates, I persistently completed my degree, unit by unit. (Except, I think most of you were a lot faster than me.) This began what is now a life-long love of higher education.

In turn, I reflect on your own experiences and the challenges you have overcome to be here today. Together, we join in thanking those who have helped us over this time.

Through the dedication of our professors and lecturers, we have learnt so much. With their wealth of knowledge, they have given us enduring foundations in our chosen fields of study.

They have nurtured talents that we perhaps had lost sight of, or didn't know we had. Through debate, our teachers have stimulated us to think more critically and to think for ourselves. They have given us compasses so we can make our own discoveries. For this, we owe a debt of gratitude.

Today also belongs to those who have supported us in practical ways behind the scenes – our families. Whether our family is made up of our spouse or partner, parents, children, extended family or friends, you have cared for us, encouraged us when we thought we couldn't make it, and coped with our absences while we studied. We acknowledge your many personal sacrifices, and our achievement is indeed also yours.

The University has provided the solid framework for our learning and various experiences. On campus and at residential schools, we have forged life-long friendships. Nor do we overlook another team on campus who have helped us, from tireless librarians to administration staff and cleaners. Additionally, the University, along with sponsors, provides over 2.5 million dollars in scholarships and awards each year, making it possible for many of us to study or do research. We thank the University for these opportunities.

Through my research, I have become closely involved with refugees from Afghanistan and they have taught me much. Among stories of war, my Afghani friends have also shared with me their passion for education. In their home villages, they often had no classrooms, no books or pens. Instead, they gathered under trees and wrote their lessons in the dirt.

Education should be a right for all but these stories remind us that, for many, education remains a privilege. With that privilege, comes responsibility. This brings us to the question, 'Where are we going next?' Some of the attributes of a UNE graduate are being able to apply our skills in new situations, to be good communicators, and to see things from a global perspective with a social conscience. The greatest way then to show our gratitude is through our future actions.

I'm inspired by the life of historian, Studs Terkel. Deeply committed to social progress, Terkel argued that sometimes we've got to 'rock the boat' to create change. There are many examples throughout history. It was by rocking the boat that women won the right to vote in South Australia in 1894. It was by rocking the boat that we gained a national Apology to

Australia's Indigenous Peoples in 2008. Our international students, I'm sure, could add their own examples.

However, along with rocking the boat, there is another quality. I was privileged to be taught by Emeritus Professor Alan Atkinson. I recently saw Professor Atkinson, and I asked what wisdom he had for me now. True to form, his advice was short and sweet. It was one word: *perseverance*.

Perseverance means 'steady and continued action or belief, usually over a long period and especially despite difficulties or setbacks'.

It is through *perseverance* that we arrived here today. As we go forward, there are no shortcuts. It is through *perseverance* again that we will achieve our future goals. It is through *perseverance* that we can bring about changes, whether it be tackling environmental problems or teaching others. And in a world beset by divisions, it is through *perseverance* that we can build bridges of dialogue with others.

Whatever our expertise, let us show our thanks by using our education to be the best we can, despite 'setbacks'. Through 'steady and continued action', let us honour our responsibilities by making innovative contributions, whether large or small, to our local and international communities.

In closing, neurologist Oliver Sacks said, '*Nothing is more wonderful or more to be celebrated than something that will unlock a person's capacities to allow him to grow and think*'. This is indeed the gift that we have been given, and that now guides us into the future as we pursue positive changes for humanity and our planet. For this gift, to all who have supported us, we express our heartfelt gratitude.
