

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

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Delivered at graduation ceremony for graduates from
the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Engineering, and
the Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health

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Differences of Degrees

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Faculty Deans, Staff, distinguished guests, graduates, families and friends. I wish first to acknowledge the Eora and Guring-gai peoples, the traditional owners of the land on which the University stands. It is a great honour, and pleasure to be with you today. I want to congratulate the graduates and wish you much success in the future. I also want to acknowledge the families and friends here today, who have supported you in getting where you are now.

I am a midwife and my work puts me in touch with families undergoing great changes, bringing new life into the world and giving the promise of a new start. Graduation is also a time of change. It is a time to mark a great accomplishment, a turning point. Life will never be the same again. For many of you this is a time for new beginnings.

Graduation was certainly a new beginning for me. Many of my generation and older were schooled in the University of Life. When I left school in Britain in the early 1960's few went to university. Getting a degree never really crossed my mind. For me the change was almost accidental. One day, when I was in my late twenties, I was painting the kitchen and I had the Guardian newspaper spread out on the floor to mop up drips of paint. Suddenly I happened to notice a story about the creation of what came to be known as The Open University. The Open University was created for anyone who wanted a university education, even those without formal academic qualifications. It was a very radical idea at that time, to admit students without formal academic qualifications. It was also radical in that it allowed people to study for a degree while they worked, by distance learning. The courses were provided through modules that came through the post, television and radio, set readings and study groups. Assessment was by continuous tutor based assignments and exams. For many like me it was the first chance ever to move on to higher education.

When I read about the OU I was already quite established in my career. Suddenly it seemed there was a new opportunity and I got really excited about the possibility of 'getting a degree'. I applied and graduated after a few years. I was surprised at the change it brought about in me. It was as though a wide window had been opened on the world, and my mind opened with it. It didn't seem to matter which course I did, the 19th century novel was my favourite. Every course made me think, challenge and ask questions and use my imagination, and learn to write. Since then I have never been able to understand why anyone would take the opportunity of degree level education for granted, or not want to do it.

Perhaps in earlier times the higher level of education that a degree represents was not quite as important. But, the University of Life does not always prepare us for the complexities we face now in the workplace, our homes, and our world. The world we live in now is more complicated, the information we need to deal with overwhelming, and the challenges we face are pressing and difficult to resolve.

Talking about degrees makes me think of the distance I have travelled to get here today. On this day last week I was walking to work along the embankment of the Thames in London. Now here I am in the ancestral home of the Eora and Guring-gai people. I have travelled from 0 degrees west to 151 degrees east and from 51 degrees north to 33 degrees south. It is a small world. It is a small world but it is a world divided. Many people, even when they live in the same country or even side-by-side, are often worlds apart. The important differences may not always be due to differences in degrees longitude or latitude. Rather they are to do with differences between living with wealth and poverty, liberty and oppression, education and ignorance, health and illness, justice and injustice, security and peace or war, violence and aggression.

In this world of ours, with all its complexity and inequalities, the provision of an education at degree level that is accessible to all is an important route to the creation of social justice. Degree level education provides the opportunity for personal development and advancement. Higher education is important to the good life and the creation of a just society.

Higher education, particularly higher education in a university like UTS, prepares us for the place of practice or the workplace so that whatever our work in the world we can do it more skilfully, thoughtfully and knowledgeably. Engagement between education and the work place provides for vital and relevant learning. But a higher education does more than that. The work of earning a degree, going through the academic process of questioning, thinking, learning, writing and creating, makes a difference to our lives, our worldview, and gives us the tools to help build a better world, for ourselves and for others. The development of intellectual abilities, ethical reasoning, the ability to challenge and question, the dissemination of knowledge and values that a higher level of education will provide are important in making true progress.

What does all of this have to do with each one of you graduating today? It is simply this. The accomplishments we are celebrating today will make a difference, both to your lives and to the lives of others. The world we live in faces what seem at times impossible problems. Yet I think the world holds, now more than ever, the chance to

make it a better one. It is, I believe, through the development of thoughtful questioning and aspiring individuals like each of you that the world will change.

I am sure some of you will be feeling today that you never want to open a book or turn on the computer again. Some of you may be ready to go on to further study. Many of you will have mixed feelings. I hope that each of you will be able to savour your achievement, and take the time to catch breath and simply enjoy life, at least for the moment, before moving on. Some of you will go on to achieve even greater things. All of you have already accomplished so much in your commitment to learning and advancement, the world is already better for what you have done. For that I thank you.

Whatever the future, I leave you with the maxim of the University of Technology, 'Think, Change, and Do'

Thank you for the opportunity to deliver this occasional address, thank you for listening, and once again congratulations.