

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

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Delivered at graduation ceremony for graduates from
the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building; the Faculty of Education; and
the Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health

Great Hall, City campus, Thursday 29 September 2005, 10.30am

Pro-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.

Graduation is an exciting event – one that signifies the end of a long journey and
the beginning of new challenges and opportunities. I congratulate the graduates
and wish you every success in the future.

I also acknowledge the families and friends who have supported you in this
journey. Graduations may not become a reality without families and friends to
encourage us, make space for our thinking and writing or take over household
duties when exams are imminent or theses are being written. My own academic
journey would never have happened without my loved ones around. I suspect
that is the same for many of you.

It is a great honour to be asked to deliver this address today; an honour that I
have approached with much trepidation. There was an immediate sense that I
should attempt to find a common element between Design, Architecture and
Building; Education; and, Nursing, Midwifery and Health.

I asked my 11 year old godson for assistance and his suggestion was 'water'.
Certainly this is a universal theme, especially in Sydney when it does not rain
much anymore. However, thinking of connections that were not limited to boiling
the water at a birth, bubblers in the school playground, water features in beautiful
buildings or Sydney's second favourite topic – water restrictions - was
challenging. These subjects seemed somewhat trivial and forced and hardly
worthy of a graduation address. So rather than this option, I have chosen to talk
of a broader theme, one that I believe comes with the opportunity and
responsibility of a tertiary education, and that is leadership.

But first, what does graduating from a university mean in 2005? For many of you, this will not be your first graduation having undertaken previous undergraduate and postgraduate education.

You come from three diverse faculties: Education; Design, Architecture and Building; and Nursing, Midwifery and Health. These are disciplines where practice is a focus. We all do things, usually things that affect people and society and often in very profound ways. Our disciplines affect the way people think, live and behave. Our practice goes from birth to death, through health and educational cycles and includes the houses we buy or build to live in, the planning that accompanies our communities, the clothing we wear, the media we see and hear and so on. These disciplines are visible, influential and constantly changing.

Our disciplines now also take their place among traditional academic disciplines and our research impacts on society and the way we live. The graduation of 13 doctoral candidates today is testament to the caliber of these disciplines and of the work that has been undertaken in the last 10 to 20 years.

What does this all mean for graduands today? One thing that it means is that there are responsibilities associated with tertiary education. These include a commitment to a providing leadership and vision in a world where sometimes this is sadly lacking. So, I come back to my theme of leadership.

Rudi Giuliani, the Mayor of New York on September 11, 2001, recently spoke in Sydney about the events after that day. He talked about how empathy and compassion were an important part of his leadership. Emotional intelligence, visibility and effective communication have also been highlighted by others as key characteristics which defined his leadership. I also believe that these are essential elements of leadership, elements that we have a responsibility and obligation to fulfill.

We all provide leadership at some level and within some context. For some of you, that will be in formal roles within your workplaces or professions. For others, leadership will incorporate personal and public vision, and be part of your everyday practice whether or not you hold a formal position or not. For others, leadership just means standing up for what you believe. I hope that leadership for us all also includes a commitment to equity of opportunity. As university graduates, leadership means ensuring others have the opportunity to learn as we have had.

Leadership is also part of our political system. In a democracy such as ours, we have a responsibility to ensure that the leaders we elect are committed to equity of access and opportunity, as well as being empathetic and compassionate.

Equity of access includes the obvious; for example, universal access to health care and education, to affordable housing, and to responsible media. Being empathetic and compassionate as leaders includes caring for those people who are from disadvantaged or marginalised groups, those from countries that are war torn or dysfunctional and those who don't speak our languages or follow our customs. I hope the recent footage from Hurricane Katrina will never become a reality in Australia. There, for the most part, we saw examples of how a lack of leadership meant a breakdown in equity of access, as well as diminished compassion and empathy.

Ideology plays a crucial role in leadership. We have some systems in Australia that, at the moment, run the risk of being too driven by an ideology to privatise and an over-emphasis on the benefits of private choice over public good. We have a government which is cutting services, including health and education, while we run a budget surplus. It is likely that, in the near future, the federal government will offer to decrease taxes rather than increase services. Many of these current decisions in Australia are not, in my view, driven by notions of equity, empathy or compassion. Tertiary education is a particular area of concern. We run a great risk as a society of having a system where tertiary education is for the 'haves' rather than the 'have nots' or the 'could haves in the future'. We, as graduates, need to ensure that this is not the case and that a university education is not priced out of reach of many.

Tertiary education comes with other opportunities. Our education not only provides us with new knowledge, new skills, new ideas and possibly, new attitudes, but it also shapes our social networks and political perceptions. Universities are about engaging with a wider world, exploring broader possibilities and understanding the nature of a just and moral society. Many a leader in Australia has cut their teeth on university politics or taken on leadership roles in student associations or unions. Universities should provide these sorts of vibrant, challenging and diverse experiences for students. It is often in these associations that leadership abilities are nurtured and tested in supportive environments. Student associations provide such opportunities and therefore deserve our support. It would be a sad time when a tertiary education meant only new "knowledge and skills". It is our responsibility to ensure that graduates have diverse and exciting experiences that prepare them for a broader role in society.

It is tempting to always blame the government for the ailments we see in society and for the policies and laws that we do not agree with. But, let us remember that

it is 'us' who elect the government – 'us' who make decisions on the media we watch and read, and 'us' who make choices on the goods and services we buy or want. We must take responsibility for electing governments that lead the country in the way that we want to it to be led. It is, therefore, our collective responsibility to take action through challenging and changing systems to ensure that the ideals and values we hold will continue to be possible. It is our responsibility to make the most of the leadership roles that our university education has given us.

Graduates do make a difference. New knowledge, new experiences, new ways of looking at the world, new challenges to solve, old assumptions to challenge and new tasks to achieve, can all go towards making the world more compassionate, more emphatic and to grow people and a country with vision and spirit.

Thank you for the opportunity and honour of speaking today. Congratulations on your graduation. May you use the opportunities provided by your tertiary education wisely, and apply your informed voices to lead and help create a society which is compassionate and fair.

Thank you.