

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

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Delivered at the graduation ceremony for graduates from
the Faculty of Engineering

Great Hall, City Campus, Thursday 12 May 2005, 10.30am

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Faculty Deans, staff, distinguished guests,
graduates, families and friends

When I was invited to give this address today, I reflected on my own
experience some years ago when I was in your own position and the changes
we have seen since then.

So thank you for the opportunity to put some of my thoughts before you.

I want to preface my comments today by saying they are not directed in
particular towards UTS as an organisation, towards the academic body or
towards you, the graduates and the cultural diversity you represent.

And I know that UTS in particular has programmes in the areas I am going to
mention.

But I hope to achieve a number of resonances – in talking about an aspect of
Australia's position in our Asia Pacific Region without being too proscriptive
about the perimeter of the Region itself.

We are seeing the shift from Australia taking a trading - partner and
representative nation role to that of a political partner and peer – please note
my careful choice of the word “peer” here as we can never believe we will
become a peer from our own perspective only, and today we are missing
many aspects of this peer role.

On this premise, we need to briefly hold up a mirror and look at ourselves
today and see how our contribution should be enhanced.

I refer to our ability to become culturally a greater part of Asia Pacific by developing a far deeper knowledge and understanding of these diverse Countries and certainly I am guilty of this lack of understanding today by referring to this large number of Nations by the far too convenient collective of "Region".

But my observation is that we largely contribute from outside these societies as a result of many historical factors related to our own traditions – and I seek to encourage some change here.

Firstly I want to talk about language and the fact we do not have a natural demand for our children to learn a real competency in a second language – here I emphasise the word competency as most of the nations around us have a strong natural need for multilingual competencies from early childhood, whether through the prevalence of a second non-national language or through an exposure to both a dialect and the National language.

As an example, take China where knowledge of Mandarin and a local dialect is normal and now the education system strongly supports English as well.

While certainly our education system introduces a range of languages to our children, there is no imperative for the development of high skill levels and should this occur it is more from personal inclination than from the deliberate development of a national skill.

So my first message is the need to recognise in Australia that language skills are a national need not a personal need and our Education System should be enabled at all levels with courses that give a greater depth of language preparation.

Secondly, we need to ensure that the languages and the dialects of our region are fully represented in our educational system - in doing this we will demonstrate a peer to peer level of respect towards each country.

And in being prepared to understand the language of each country in depth, we must also be prepared to move beyond the pure technical skill of lingual competency to a colloquial and cultural depth that can only come from training while living in these countries.

Here I recognise the educational institutes that support such programmes however I would argue it is not a scheme for the very best students only, but should be a broad expectation as part of student development during their course or a natural post graduate extension.

So my Third message is for Australia to more strongly form the reciprocal arrangements as part of education or outside of formal education , to bring a wider opportunity for overseas location to develop in our young people a cultural and colloquial depth.

In making these comments today I speak from some experience.

I was recently approached to give advice to a young graduate who wished to spend time in a country as I have just suggested. All I can say is the way forward was not obvious.

I work for Alcatel, a global company with a presence in 130 countries. From within Alcatel we are exposed to a diversity of cultures and languages through both the flow of our global business and through a deliberate high level of exchange for those who wish to work outside their country of origin. More and more to develop a career there is an expectation of global experience.

I would argue today that today's generation entering employment should start with a developed competency outside of Australia as it is difficult to contemplate our graduates remaining in Australia for their careers or even if this is the case it is impossible to contemplate they would not be exposed to the diversity of our region in some manner.

Within my own direct experience I have in recent times worked for five years in both Taiwan and China and as with most of my generation having no broad language skills found my self at a disadvantage and facing the rather difficult task of starting to learn Mandarin in my late 40's – with limited success I might add.

While the opportunity has passed for people of my generation, and the need was not so obvious when we were within our formal education, today I am convinced the need is obvious and the introduction of broad competency based language training should be an imperative.

With a few notable exceptions, and Kevin Rudd is one who I would recognise, our politicians do not today have the skills I am talking of and have not yet collectively addressed this national need for the future.

I should add, that having decided on the theme for this speech today I looked for statistics and the data on the collective education in language across Australia. Sadly this was not easy to find. Maybe it exists, but it would appear there is a place for a piece of work to pull this information together and more formally address the issues I have highlighted.

I would like to close with a brief anecdote.

While living in Shanghai my son, who was 18 then, studied Mandarin full time for a year in the “foreigner class” at China East Normal University. Within his class were young adults who had found their way to China from all over the world to learn Mandarin, many as a post graduate activity.

One evening I was chatting to one of my son’s fellow students who was from Hong Kong and asked why he was doing this course. He somewhat stunned me when he said he already spoke three languages before starting Mandarin. However, in a rather oblique Chinese way he also conveyed in some further comments the deeper context of his reply, which was his brother had four languages and that his family had decided his problem of only three languages needed to be resolved!!!

I put to you all, in this graduating class, that you will compete with people with such skills over your working life and I put to you that if you have one language today, there is still time to learn another, and if you have two, then consider the step of cultural immersion for a period of time. Or do both.

You will build your own skills and help to create the leadership we sorely need in this domain.

One day I hope this attitude prevails in our Australia and when it does, we will have the softer skills to be more closely recognised as a peer by each nation in our Region.

In closing I certainly recognise the work that UTS has done in making Regional Languages available within coursework or as non-award subjects and with the International Exchange Programme.

So,

Congratulations on your success and I wish you all every success in the future.

Thankyou.