

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

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

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Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Members of the University Council, Distinguished
Guests, Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

This is an important occasion which recognises the achievements of our students who have graduated today. I join everyone here this afternoon in offering my warmest congratulations to the graduates and wish them well for the future. I also extend my congratulations to their parents, friends and families.

I well understand the pressures that University study can place on relationships and the sacrifices that have been made to reach today's goals. Your degree is a special investment, which provides you with understanding and ways of thinking that will advantage you personally, and professionally, for the rest of your life.

PURPOSE OF THIS ADDRESS

As the Vice Chancellor has indicated in his kind introduction, my relationship with the University is now an honorary one – a benefit of this is that I now have much more time to think about, and reflect on, the critical issues facing business and business education in today's world.

In thinking about what I should say to you today, I reflected on the often-used quotation of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, who said that:

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

Of course, it is easy to forget about Yeats' ideals in the hurly burly of student life that has most certainly been your postgraduate experience. Have we all been concentrating too much, as Yeats said, about the “filling of the pail” – about getting assignments completed on time, passing exams, meeting for group work, getting to class on time, sweating over PowerPoint presentations, rather than thinking of the importance of lighting the fire of learning?

I wondered what kinds of fires have been lit, by your professors, by your fellow students and colleagues, and, by the issues you discussed and argued in your degree, while here at the University.

What individual sparks of interest will you carry with you from the University as you leave us today; what ideas and ideals will continue to nurture as you pursue your chosen career into the future? And how brightly will these flames burn against ignorance, bombast and unfairness that you will inevitably encounter; and will you carry a torch that lights the way towards a more just society and sustainable economy?

THE CRISIS OF MORALITY IN BUSINESS AND COMMERCE

In asking these questions about your learning, I am sure that many here today will agree with me that we are facing a kind of moral crisis in Australia, and in the West generally. I feel a sense of disquiet and unease which is hard for me to ignore. I am no longer sure that I belong to the civil society of rights, responsibilities and privileges that I lived and knew in this country, ten, thirty or forty years ago.

Going beyond intuition, the continuation of major failures of corporate business in this millennium provides firm evidence to support my disquiet. In the corporate world, a close look at the troubles of ENRON, WORLD COM, TYCO, HIH, ONE-TEL, the AUSTRALIAN WHEAT BOARD and WESTPOINT PROPERTY is useful. The problems faced by these companies were not financial ones. There is a common theme of neglect, deception and unprincipled behaviour by various directors and management. In many cases the conduct may have been legal, but by any standard, no matter how low we set the bar, it wasn't right. These failures have almost always occurred where hubris, self-righteousness or greed have become more important than ethical behaviour. The collapse of these corporations through management's ethical failures rather than for financial reasons should be of concern to us all.

Should we be surprised by these failures? Business exists today in an environment where young managers are bombarded with messages that suggest style is more important than substance, celebrity and stardom is more important than depth of character, action supplants reflection, spin is more important than truth and honesty, and *reality* is something we see on TV.

I wonder how well business and commerce can prosper in a society where *I didn't know, nobody told me, I don't remember, I read nothing, I can't recall, nobody showed me*, are seen as adequate bases for managerial incompetence.

All of these reasons have been presented to the Cole Inquiry into the AWB, as acceptable and serious arguments by business and political leaders to excuse misconduct and ineptitude in commerce and government.

The general public may no longer be willing to accept this. A Morgan Poll conducted on April 22nd 2006 suggests that over 60% of Australians now believe that the senior executive of the wheat board, and senior federal ministers, all acted unethically in relation to the dealings of the AWB in Iraq.

At the same time these standards are being displayed for all to see, the carefully reasoned arguments of scholars and thinkers are often dismissed and derided as not belonging to the “real world”, through the shallow biases of talkback radio hosts, by so called spin doctors, and by the earnest presentations of strongly opinionated, but poorly informed, media experts, in the guise of news entertainment.

In this regard, it is well worth a look at Sourcewatch on the Internet, www.sourcewatch.org, to see just what organisations are represented by some of these apparently independent commentators.

For example, the Bennelong Society attempts to discredit the ideas behind aboriginal land rights and self-determination, the Australian Environment Foundation works to oppose organisations such as Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund, and the Lavoisier Group, curiously named after the famous 18th century French chemist, argues that the evidence for global warming is based on inexact science and that any government action would be too expensive for Australia's industry. If arguments are sound they will stand alone; they will not need to be hidden behind a misleading name.

This picture I am painting of a troublesome world into which you go forth today may cause you some disquiet, and indeed may be unsettling. However, there is much to be thankful for, and there are many Australian enterprises of which we can be justly proud. And perhaps I am seeing a bit too much gloom and doom, just like Hanrahan, in the words of the well-known Australian poet John O'Brien: *We'll all be rooned, said Hanrahan!*

WHAT CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE OUR ETHICAL ENVIRONMENT?

What can you, as managers, do to improve this unhelpful business environment? One of the interesting things about the ethical issues I describe is that they are not new.

I confess that I am not really a scholar of history or the classics. I studied both Latin and French at high school, and I must say quite unenthusiastically; I still have some difficulty believing that *carpe diem* is not fish of the day, that *post mortem* is not the dead letter office.

However, I have found the development and study of the classical rhetoric by the Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato some 2000 years ago, both interesting and practically useful, in understanding the events of today. Through their efforts, Socrates and Plato exposed the work of the *sophists* who specialised in training and encouraging the early Greeks to present false and illogical arguments.

The sophists used flattery, misleading information, half-truths, and other trickery to persuade people to their point of view. They taught that winning an argument by any available means was okay, regardless of the truth of the matter.

They were the spin-doctors of their day. Socrates and Plato, and later Aristotle, worked to defeat the well paid, but misleading activities of the sophists known as *sophistry*, by exposing them and developing more ethical ways of uncovering the truth.

But the sophists did play very hard! In fact, Socrates was forced to commit suicide by drinking hemlock, because of his willingness to expose the sophists and refusal to recant his philosophy of logic and reason.

Plato was largely responsible for the modern view of the "sophist" as someone who uses rhetorical sleight-of-hand and ambiguities of language in order to deceive, or to support fallacious reasoning. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all challenged the philosophical foundations of sophism.

THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF TODAY'S BUSINESS GRADUATES

If we are to overcome the ethical problems we face today we will need to follow the examples provided by these ancient philosophers in maintaining a commitment to truth and integrity in our professional and personal lives.

Critical thinking must be an important part of your daily life. You will need to be careful of sophistry in your professional decision-making – uncover sophistry when you find it, with reasoned argument and evidence. Always examine your sources carefully. In any situation you need to decide what is really important and appropriate in the circumstances. Remember, you will be ultimately judged by your ethics.

To achieve these goals, you need to know yourself, and seek to develop a robust self image, know who you are, who you want to be, and where you want to go. Being true to yourself, and to your values, in the face of challenges or adversity, may well be one of the **hardest** tests you face.

What do **you** stand for in this world? Developing your ethics and constantly clarifying your values, will serve as an essential guide through your life, both professionally and personally.

An appropriate life balance is also important. Give yourself time to reflect and think; to develop and maintain your relationships with others; and to see things in their broader perspective.

I have already mentioned the importance of personal ethics in knowing yourself. But you **must** always maintain this system of ethics, particularly as a manager. What is **legal** in business is not always **right**.

The central challenge for this century is to create a sustainable economy and just society, and in achieving this, you as business leaders will play a vital role. You need to see sustainability as a strategic business opportunity, to develop a culture of excellence that will benefit both your organisation and society. This, I think, is true **business leadership**.

OBLIGATION

Finally, our **Australian** society is broadly marked by a unique tolerance and acceptance of **all** cultures. As graduates of an excellent **Australian Business Faculty**, you have been given an enormous advantage in the global business world. You now have a **social** obligation to this world, which has given you your education, to make a contribution back to your society.

As Yeats said, “education is the lighting of a fire”, so carry this fire of excellence and integrity proudly aloft as you go forth today.

CONCLUSION

Chancellor, again I thank the University for the opportunity to present today’s Occasional Address and I wish the graduates all the very best for a fulfilling and satisfying future.