

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

Delivered to graduates from the Faculty of Business
at the UTS Graduation Ceremony
Great Hall, City Campus, Wednesday 11 April 2007, 2.30pm

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Deputy Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, members of Council, staff, distinguished guests, graduates and family and friends,

Let me begin by thanking you for the privilege of joining you on this enjoyable occasion. Whether you are a doctoral, masters or bachelors graduate, you have achieved something which will mark you out as a product of this university for the rest of your lives. Of course many of you will have been supported by family, partners and friends in the process of getting to the finish line, and it is always a pleasure to see many of those who have provided that support present in the audience to share in today's event. The university as an institution and its staff have also supported you but your achievement is a personal one and one of which you can be rightly proud.

Receiving the invitation to speak to you today has stimulated me to think about what it is that the university experience might provide for you as graduates. My father used to say that my own undergraduate career had transformed me from an unduly opinionated, eighteen year old, into to an unduly opinionated 22 year old, with a bank overdraft. I like to think he was joking of course because I genuinely believe that the university experience should represent something more than simply a right of passage, and that it should, at its best, provide us with some tools to identify and address not just personal but also societal challenges.

So what are the functions of a university and how might the experience serve you in the future? One function, at least at a practical level, is to contribute to the stock of skills and knowledge which can be directly applied in given fields to improve the nature and quality of life, and to enhance economic or social productivity. Those of you graduating in applied areas will certainly have benefited from enhanced professional competences, but all undergraduates will have developed generic skills in, for example, problem solving, working alone or as a member of a team and these are skills of considerable importance which of course will increase your employability and potential productivity.

However the university's role goes beyond that of enhancing the skill sets of its individual members. One of its key roles is to address, at a range of levels, the core

problems facing wider society from local and regional, through national levels, even to the global community. However, an understanding of core problems such as global warming or the increasingly multicultural nature of our societies should not only exercise minds at the strategic level but should also, for example, permeate the teaching programmes of the institution, and even reach down to individual behaviours as the adage “Think global, act local” implies.

In my own view, the problems of an increasingly multicultural world probably represent our most compelling political challenge, and this affects politics with a small ‘p’ at the personal level, as well as the politics of international relations. We have heard much in recent years about the clash of civilisations, a thesis which describes the world as made up of competing civilisational cultures which (most notably in the case of the West and of Islam) were founded on ultimately incompatible values. The West, according to some proponents of this thesis, was likely to have to resort to force if it wished to defend its values, since agreement on fundamental questions of values could not be reached. This kind of argument is not only dangerous but is also simply based on false premises. The commonalities **between** Muslim, Japanese, Christian, or Chinese groups are often far greater than the commonalities **within** those groups. Jewish, Western and Muslim feminists for example, have far more in common with one another, I would suggest, than they do with conservative anti-feminist elements within their own cultures.

This commonality of interest across cultures is something which working in a university exposes many of us to every day. I currently work at a British University in a group of eight staff (three of whom are British) and group of 28 PhD students, which incorporates 12 nationalities, and includes some nations or religious groups between which there are tensions at the international level (e.g. Israel and Arab / Muslim countries; Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China). What is impressive in this grouping (and many others) is that while international or intercultural tensions are regularly discussed and debated, and different positions are taken, the mutual respect within which such debate is conducted, both for the individuals and their cultural context, represent the foundations on which debate is constructed.

What bearing does this have on your undergraduate or graduate student experience? Well, I would argue, establishing ways of achieving consensus between culturally diverse groups is as important at the local or work place level as it is at the inter-governmental level. As students, many, if not most of you, have been brought together in circumstances when you have had to work alongside people of different life experiences, perhaps different cultures, ethnicities or religions. In such circumstances you will have had to adapt to one another, to learn to negotiate, to consider the other’s needs and to compromise in order to progress to mutually agreed goals. These personal skills in working within diverse groups are likely to be important in terms not simply of your ability to work in industries with culturally

diverse markets and work forces but also in operating as active citizens in multicultural society.

I know from my discussions with staff, that UTS places great value on the cultural diversity represented within its ranks of students and staff. My observation today is that if you are able to draw on your experience here as part of a diverse but cohesive community, this will provide not only a personal dividend in terms of your own careers, but also a broader social dividend for the communities of which you become a member. If this is something you can achieve, then university will truly have provided you with a positive and transformative experience.

May I finish in congratulating you once more on your achievements, congratulating those who have supported you thus far, your families, friends (and probably your bank managers), and wishing you every success for the future. Many of you are now entering a phase of your life in which you are faced with difficult choices. I can share with you one piece of advice which was given to me in such circumstances which is ... "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." When I first received this advice I assumed that it was a nonsense, but, on reflection, one thing that it does seem to imply is that one should seek to actively decide one's future rather than simply letting things happen, and this does seem sound advice.

Thank you Deputy Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, graduands, ladies and gentlemen for the invitation to join you today. I hope you will enjoy the rest of the celebration, and I wish all of you new UTS graduates good luck in your future endeavours.