

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

Delivered to graduates from the Faculty of Science
at the UTS Graduation Ceremony
Great Hall, City Campus, Monday 7 May 2007, 10.30am

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Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Faculty staff, distinguished guests, parents, partners and of course, graduates.

It is my genuine pleasure to have been asked to address your graduation ceremony this afternoon. It is a special pleasure for me as an Adjunct Professor of this University, Chair of the Course Advisory Committee for the degree in forensic science and as a former academic.

It is some thirty (30) years plus since I last sat in your position as a young graduate. I seem to remember someone – who was of course much older than me! – telling my fellow students, and I, that the world was our oyster, the fruits of our labours were ready, waiting to be picked, and similar euphemistic encouragement. If ever that was the truth, and I very much doubt it, it is in many ways a more demanding world that faces you today. Somewhat tarnished by the cynicism of age, I am nonetheless energised and encouraged by the fact that young people today, seem relatively untouched and somewhat oblivious to the purveyors of doom and gloom.

In thinking about what I wanted to say today I had a look at the traditional things expected of speakers fronting the podium at university graduation ceremonies. Campus review revealed that speakers in recent graduations had reflected on the **past**, usually interspersed with words of hope for the **future**. Rolf Harris encouraged graduates to “be yourself and to be unashamedly Australian” an interesting observation for one who has chosen to spend the greater part of his life in the UK! He then entertained the audience with a rendition of “Tie me Kangaroo Down Sport!” accompanied by the wobble board.

Those of you who are familiar with my Glasgow brogue will be relieved to hear that I don't play the bagpipes and I don't intend to inflict on you a verse or two of ‘I belong to Glasgow’ or “Scotland the Brave” interspersed with Billy Connolly jokes. Like Rolf I **would** say you are indeed fortunate in living in the best country in the world, Australia, and I say this as one who **has** chosen to live here and not in the UK.

Well, speakers on occasions such as this are also supposed to say something deep and meaningful. I have pondered on what topic you should, in the words of a fridge

magnet, presented to me by one of my staff, be given the benefit of being 'entitled to my opinion'.

I want to spend just a few minutes addressing the issue of 'do we really need science graduates?' At times you might be forgiven for thinking the answer to this is a simple, no!! As the government clearly does not believe so, charging you up to twice the cost of being an arts graduate! As an employer of science graduates, in my 'bit' of the Australian Federal Police, we have employed well over one hundred (100) young graduates in the past few years. It is often put to me that in my own field, forensic science, we should not encourage too many students as there are not enough jobs for everyone. Well, if this was the criterion on which we assessed the number of science places we need in Australia, I'm sorry, but most of you would not be here today. We might have a single university per state doing science! How can we reconcile this with the fact that the media constantly tells us that the future will be the age of science and technology, when we hear of shortages of science graduates in key areas, when everyday living demands a greater understanding of science issues, be it of genetically modified crops, stem cell research or science in the courtroom.

Surely today more than ever we need more science graduates. Why is it then that University enrolments in science have been under pressure in recent years, that the traditional sciences are not attracting students, and that, bluntly, only a relatively small percentage of you will end up working as professional scientists.

This is hearsay for a graduation speaker – remember I am supposed to tell you the world is your oyster! Well it is!! **But**, and many if not most of you will have already worked this out for yourselves, most of you will not end up as professional scientists. Does this matter? Well, of course I would like to see everyone who **does** want a job as a professional scientist, achieve their personal goal, but in the bigger picture it is not important. I studied agricultural botany, did a PhD in plant physiology, ended up as a lecturer teaching forensic science, moved to Australia and here I am today leading a forensic and technical group. What does this tell us? Well, apart from telling us that forensic science is a good way to see the world, what it tells us is have a career plan, have objectives, but also be flexible and open minded.

The mission of UTS includes a statement that it 'provides higher education to **enhance** professional practice'.

At the same time specialist degrees are under review and scrutiny as they are more expensive to run and raise concerns about students becoming too narrowly focused at an early stage. One of these courses at UTS is the four year honours degree in forensic science. There is a world wide move towards a more general three year science degree. For those in my age group this sounds very much like the degrees we took in the 1960's and 70's.

From the view point of my 'profession' or industry, our peak body, the Senior Managers Australia and New Zealand Forensic Laboratories (SMANZFL) recently conducted a significant review of education in the forensic sciences. We strongly recommended the need for a very sound grounding in the basic sciences and went further to state that the forensic component of a forensic science degree should not be at the expense of this foundation.

There seems to me to be two major challenges facing universities today in their science and technology offerings. The first is, how can universities produce courses which capture the interest of students who may not wish to work as science professionals, **or** allow them to keep their options open at least until the end of one year of study? The second challenge for UTS is, how can this be reconciled with the aim to 'enhance professional practice'?

To some extent these two challenges **are** difficult to reconcile. It is probable that the true enhancement of professional practice will only be at honours and post-graduate level. This will come at a cost for those students wishing to work at a professional level, this being a cost in additional fees and extended study time.

As the chair of a course advisory committee at UTS, a successful outcome for specialist areas can only be achieved through meaningful and ongoing dialogue with the relevant industry. UTS is to be commended for its strong historical interaction with industry, but this needs to be maintained and if possible, strengthened.

The role of universities is to educate. What does this translate into in real life? Well, if you leave university with the right mix of being able to find information, and to analyse, synthesise and communicate information, then these qualities will serve you in what ever job you end up.

Your future careers may not be in the area you thought you'd work but we need people who understand science in all walks of life.

Well, now I've got the serious stuff out of the way, occasional speakers are also expected to pass on some personal wisdom.

I started off by saying we live in a highly competitive world, one in which a degree today at best gives you a marginal advantage. To get ahead today what you must have is that something extra, what I'd call that plus factor. You need to sell yourself – there are no prizes these days for shrinking violets or false modesty. What I look for is a sense that the individual has some views and opinions of their own, some personality, that they will be more than ordinary.

Let me read another quote to you, "education is the method by which an ignorant man gives confidence in himself". Have confidence, it is infectious! I'm reminded of the story

of one student in a junior high school class who after touring the White House was asked by his teacher to write his impressions of the visit. He wrote "I was especially glad to have this opportunity to visit my future home". In almost my first interview for a job I remember being asked by the head of the department what position I eventually saw myself occupying. Never one for tact I replied that I could say his job but if the truth be told it would be that of the college principle. He was on the interview committee! I didn't get the job but I did get a better one a short time after.

Whilst education is an excellent starting point for a successful career there are, as James Strong the former CEO of Qantas Airlines has said, other magical qualities which accompany ability and education in the case of every successful person - ENERGY, ENTHUSIASM and DETERMINATION. Add to this common sense, a desire for simplicity, and a genuine interest in, and concern for, people and you won't go far wrong.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the work of the general and academic staff, and, even more so, the support of parents, families, friends and spouses. They bear the burden of support, financial, moral or otherwise which although given without thought of reward, is a vital factor in our success stories – you, our graduates!

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to address you and good luck where ever your future takes you. But remember that, as James Barrie the writer of Peter Pan, said, "the secret of happiness is not in doing what one likes, but in liking what one does!"

James Robertson