

Occasional Address – University of South Australia

Graduation Ceremony

Thursday 16 August 2007

Professor Don Bursill AM

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Members of Council, Doctors of the University, Emeritus Professors, academic staff, today's graduands, their families and friends, ladies and gentlemen.

I want to begin by offering my sincere congratulations to all of those who have graduated today. It is a significant moment in your lives and in your personal development. I can still remember my own feelings of happiness, pride – and a sense of relief at having graduated after years of hard work and study.

I would like to thank the University and the Council for the great honour that has been given to me today. It is definitely the high point in a long association with the University of South Australia.

UniSA is a relatively new university having been established in 1991. Of course, its history goes much further back through its predecessor institutions. My involvement began more than 30 years ago through the School of Chemical Technology in the South Australian Institute of Technology. My early interactions were mainly concerned with training programs for technical staff involved in water analyses.

In 1987, the Australian Water Quality Centre, the scientific group of the South Australian Water Corporation, the SAIT and the University of Adelaide were successful in winning a grant from the Australian Water Resources Council to establish a collaborative water quality research program here in South Australia. This was an extremely successful venture and was essentially the foundation for the more substantial national collaboration that followed through the Co-operative Research Centre for Water Quality and Treatment. South Australia has now established a national leadership position for its water quality expertise and we have a strong international reputation for our water research achievements. This important outcome has been the result of a strong alliance between our South Australian universities and the water industry in this State.

This is a university that we can all be proud to be associated with. My own experience is that the University has always been willing to support and actively participate in projects, strategies and even help support grand visions that have come from the water sector. Indeed the message from the Vice Chancellor currently on the UniSA web site pays particular attention to the University's commitment to partnerships and collaborative activities with business, industry, government and other organizations.

From my dealings with University staff over the years it is clear that operating through strategic alliances has been considered an important way of undertaking research and development and it has guided the University in addressing educational needs.

As well as getting the job done better, there are some interesting side effects from strategic alliances. I am really an outsider to this University. I have been employed for almost my whole working life by the South Australian Water Corporation. Yet, I feel a part of this University too.

There are many people at the University, including Chancellor Klinberg that have contributed to making me feel at home at UniSA. I would like to acknowledge three people, in particular. They are Professor Dennis Mulcahy, Professor John Ralston and Professor Ian Davey.

Dennis Mulcahy is a real asset of the University. His dedication to UniSA, the students and his teaching activities is outstanding. Dennis has led the Education and Training Program of the Co-operative Research Centre since its inception in 1995 and this Program has been one of the highlights of the CRC's long list of achievements. Some 105 postgraduate students will have been supported through their research degrees when the current funding term of the CRC is completed next year. Many of these people are already in leadership roles in the water industry here in Australia and overseas. Dennis has watched over the development of these young people with great care and compassion. Of course, he is not perfect – as anyone who has tried to outlast him at late night pub sessions will testify, and he can cause the accounting people some concerns from time to time, but this only adds to his charm

John Ralston has a CV that you would die for. The Ian Wark Research Institute is one of the outcomes of his endeavors here at UniSA. The quality of this man was evident the first time I met him. His arrival at the then SAIT was a key factor in giving me the confidence to suggest that we apply for the Australian Water Resources Council grant, mentioned earlier. I knew that an alliance between the Australian Water Quality Centre and SAIT would produce high quality outcomes for the water industry and would meet the exacting requirements of the Australian Water Resources Council grant. This turned out to be the case and it put us in an excellent position to advance to the much bigger and more important Co-operative Research Centres Program with the strength and experience of that collaboration behind us.

Ian Davey recently retired from the University after making a fantastic contribution to its leadership team over some 11 years. He has been of tremendous support to me personally, through his involvement with the Co-operative Research Centre at Board level. In addition, he has facilitated a number of initiatives that I have been interested in pursuing with the University, including the establishment of the Centre for Water Science and Systems at Mawson Lakes. We had a short but excellent trip to China in 2003 when we were able to establish collaborative links with Harbin Institute of Technology and with the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

It is a tough task running a large Co-operative Research Centre with some 60 core and associate partner organizations located around Australia and there are always people ready to criticize. It was very helpful to have Ian's good council through much of that period and it did a lot for one's morale and energy levels to have a person of Ian's caliber grab you on the shoulder from time to time and say, "your doing OK son - keep it up".

I consider myself to have been very lucky in my career. I came into the water sector because I needed a job so I could complete my university studies. I was offered a lab assistant role washing up glassware in the water laboratory at the then Engineering and Water Supply Department. Like most young men, I wasn't especially keen on washing up, but I discovered that water science is complex and fascinating, and I stayed. There are many scientific and other challenges associated with water quality management and it is a field that has always been important to society. It is becoming even more so as we struggle with climate change and sustainability issues. I have had the opportunity of collaborating with some of the best water scientists and engineers around the world and the good fortune of working with some excellent, dedicated people; one of whom is here today – Neil Killmier; a former colleague of mine from SA Water.

If I were to give any advice to you today, it would be to pay attention to establishing relationships – especially with talented and dedicated people. The term "networking" is often used these days, but it is a little clinical, in my view. I have in mind something more than just meeting key people and collecting business cards. Relationships that are built on mutual respect, tolerance and understanding, honesty and trust are more likely to be helpful in your personal development as well as potentially being of value in your professional activities.

South Australia has benefited from substantial overseas funding of water research projects as a result of strong personal relationships. The formalities and processes of the lawyers, accountants and risk managers would make international collaboration all too hard if there was not a strong bond between friends and a desire to work together on something productive and worthwhile.

My second point would be to remind you that your special status as a professional brings with it a responsibility to apply your knowledge, skills and abilities to the benefit of the community in which you operate. It should not be just about securing a good job. The broader community relies on professionals to act responsibly and with integrity, and to show leadership when needed. It is my view that we should always seek excellence in what we do and be innovative and fresh in our approach to our professional activities. In my experience, too many professionally qualified people find it too easy to accept a lower standard of outcome, even when higher quality, more innovative outcomes are clearly a better choice and investment.

There is an element of laziness in mediocrity. It is often easier to stay on the more well-trodden paths, using methods that have been in place for many years. Innovation and excellence require a brighter spirit and more energy, enthusiasm and perseverance. The risks might be higher, but the outcomes are likely to be better and more rewarding.

Innovation and the pursuit of excellence is the stuff that moves humanity forward. Why not be a part of that?