

University of South Australia
Graduation Ceremony
11th August, 2010
Division of Business
Division of Education, Arts & Sciences
Occasional Address
Ian Little
Managing Director
Envestra Ltd

Pro Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Members of the University Council academic staff, graduants, families, partners and friends.

This is an important day. It acknowledges the end of a long road for all of you, a road that for many would have had its ups and downs, but ultimately has been an achievement. Not everyone in this country gets to earn a University degree, particularly one from an esteemed university, such is that of Uni SA; not everyone has the capability. And for that alone, we celebrate the hard work, the dedication, the commitment, that the paper about to be bestowed on you, represents.

I would particularly like to recognize the achievements of our international students. It is not easy to come to a new country, a new city, leaving family and friends behind, and devote oneself to years of study in an environment that is often so different to where you have grown up. As an immigrant myself, I appreciate the effort and some of the hardships involved, both for yourselves as graduates, but also for your families who have committed significant resources to your future and have no doubt felt your long absences. Graduation is only the initial reward for these sacrifices, but an important one all the same. I congratulate you accordingly.

For our Australian graduates, whether young or older, this is also of course a special day which I hope you will look back on in future as commemorating a period of learning that serves as a foundation for successful endeavours in the future, whether through work and money, or through your contribution to the community in which you choose to live. That in particular is the benefit that your recent education and attainment can facilitate.

Many of you here are business and law graduates and it is in those areas that I have spent most of my life. Whilst some of our graduates no doubt will already be in employment, all with critical faculty must wonder what opportunities are going to

open to them and how the transition from university to engagement in our society will unfold.

I recall my own experience when graduating at 19 from uni (I wasn't that smart, I was just in a hurry to leave high school). Although I knew I wanted to pursue a business career, I was acutely aware of my limited knowledge of the world. On the meagre savings I had accumulated from uni holiday jobs ranging from dishwashing, construction sites, abattoirs to hotel bars, I committed to a flight to Kuala Lumpur, with a view to hitch-hiking to Europe across Asia. I regarded it at the time as my "Arts degree". Having years later embarked on such a degree, I know how ridiculous that comparator was (I never finished the arts degree!).

My real point though is that despite a degree, or perhaps because of it, I was hungry for knowledge. That is a value I would encourage all of you here today to retain. It is a cliché that we live in a rapidly changing world. Much of the material we have learnt in the last 5 years or so, will be outdated in another five. Each of you can expect to have 12-15 different jobs during the course of the careers you are about to embark on. The need to constantly learn, to adapt to new knowledge, technologies and opportunities is vital to not only your own success, but to your ability to participate effectively in the community.

In my own case, perhaps armed with some real experience from a year's travelling on the cheap through places you can now hardly get to – Afghanistan, Iran, northern Syria, Palestinian refugee camps and more - but with the benefit of a disciplined university degree to rely on, I found that I was well placed to make progress in my business career in those early days. But looking back, I really had no idea of how the various opportunities that arose might eventuate. Life was uncertain, but that degree, combined with a little worldly experience, provided a certain security in embracing the future.

As it happened, I went to Indonesia, learnt bahasa, immersed myself in a culture that previously I had had no inkling of, found an interest in the energy business, moved to Melbourne and joined Shell, completed my MBA, worked in almost every part of the oil & gas business, joined a utility business when the “privatisations” mania was underway, and eventually found myself in the CEO's seat.

So what? I only give you this clipped life story to highlight how unpredictable a career can be. I had no idea when I graduated what twists and turns would occur to get to my current position. But I did have a couple of advantages. One was some role models, including my parents, but also people who I had observed, whether parents of friends, or people I met along the way, that were exemplars of leadership. And it

is leadership that many of you here today will be responsible for as you pursue your careers.

In talking of leadership, I am reminded of a story, (from my MBA days) told by Max Depree, who, following in his father's footsteps, was the second generation CEO of one of the most successful Fortune 500 companies in the US (Herman Miller Furniture).

One of his long time employees had died, and he thought he should visit the family. He went to the house and was invited to join the family in the lounge. The widow asked him if it would be alright to read some poetry. He of course agreed. She went and got a book from another room and for the next little while, read selected pieces of beautiful poetry. When finished, he said how beautiful the poetry was and asked who wrote it. She replied that her husband, the factory hand in the furniture plant, was the poet. Mr Depree reported that for the next decades, he, and others in the business always wondered "Was he a poet who did factory hand's work, or was he a factory hand who wrote poetry?"

In our efforts to pursue our careers, what do we learn from this story? In addition to all the ratios, goals, technologies, specialties and bottom lines, it is a fundamental tenet of leadership to understand the diversity of people's gifts and talents and skills. Understanding and accepting diversity enables us to see that each of us is needed. As Depree said,

“it enables us to think about being abandoned to the strengths of others, of admitting that we cannot know, or do everything”.

The simple act of recognising diversity in corporate life, or indeed, any institutional life, helps us to connect the great variety of gifts that people bring to the work and service of the organisation. Diversity allows each to contribute in a special way, to make our special gift a part of the team effort. Recognising diversity gives us the chance to provide meaning, fulfilment and purpose. When we think about leaders and the variety of gifts people bring to organisations, we see that the art of leadership lies in polishing and liberating and enabling those gifts.

Each of you here today, evidenced by the paper you are about to receive, has the ability to become leaders in our community. I hope as many of you as possible can attain that aspiration and understand the fundamental difference between goals and rewards. Our world needs educated, clever people like those before me. I encourage you to relish in the diversity amongst you and in the community in which you live, with a view to polishing, liberating and enabling that diversity so you can lead us to a better tomorrow. I have every confidence you have been given the ability from these last years of effort, to do just that.

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Congratulations, and best wishes in all your endeavours.