Emeritus Professor Occasional Remarks

Thank you, Deputy Chancellor. I am extremely grateful to Vice Chancellor Høj and the University for this generous acknowledgement of my time with it. A period, I might say, which gave me enormous satisfaction. And I would also like to thank Professor Lee for his generous remarks. I was very lucky to be at the University in its formative years, for there were always new responsibilities and the chance to grow with the institution. There are particular rewards, I think, to be had in a young university which has to prove its right to exist, rather than claiming excellence on the basis of longevity. As UniSA demonstrates a continuing maturity beyond its years, I suspect there will be far fewer opportunities for people to spend as long learning on the job as I did – or to take on external challenges and subsequently return to the fold.

However, in what follows I am principally addressing today's graduands. I think we have something in common, in that we share a successful association with

the University of South Australia. Of course, for me, much of that association is in the past and I am probably approaching what my wife – when she is inspecting items in the refrigerator – thinks of as 'the dangerous to use by date'. When I look back on my career – which started with me dropping out from high school and having to do a TAFE distance education course to matriculate - and achievements with which I have had some involvement – I am both pleased, for, as educational careers go, mine has had its moments – but I also think it's important to keep a bit of perspective and to try to exercise a degree of self-knowledge. Whatever successes we have are tempered by things we got wrong or failed to do [and I have had my share of both], and, in terms of overall accomplishment, it's salutary to remember that when Mozart was my age, he had been dead for 27 years.

So, when I say that we are alike because we share a successful involvement with UniSA, I want to tease out what I think that means for you as new graduates.

University education is about preparing you both for a specific field of endeavour but also to take intelligent and responsible decisions in contexts which you may not previously have encountered. UniSA talks about preparing graduates and citizens, and attempts to do this through the seven Graduate Qualities, which acknowledge that higher education is not just about professional competence in a technical sense but also involves a broadening emphasis, both of which provide capabilities essential in any civilised society, and for this, if no other reason, university education matters.

It is currently fashionable to disparage universities – or as the Commonwealth – bundling them up with private colleges - dismissively refers to them as merely “providers of higher education” - and then implicitly links them with the notion of elites, which by some extraordinary linguistic slipperiness has come to have a perjorative force, apparently to deny a voice in public debate to those who have expertise. Don’t buy into this pervasive nonsense. What universities do is incredibly important, for our

economy, our complex national culture, and our international role as a society.

Being a graduate of the kind this University seeks to develop, that is, able to operate autonomously across a range of contexts – with a degree of intellectual independence – is not the same as simply doing your own thing within the context of your profession. It involves at least three important elements.

First, whatever your personal attitudes and commitments might be, you have to be competent in your chosen field. I was a fairly radical student in my university days and not good at keeping my opinions to myself. (Some of my colleagues here will be asking: So what has changed?) I remember seeking advice from one of my Education lecturers, and asking him what I needed to do not to get into trouble when I went to work in a school. He said, “Mr King, [we were more formal in those days] people will put up with a lot from you if you can demonstrably do the job well.” I believe he was right. Your education has made

you aware of the skills and attitudes you need to practise to be good at your profession, and you do need to practise them.

Being good at what you do also involves knowing what the rules are - and why they exist - before you start breaking them.

I think it also involves resisting the pressure to do things the way they have customarily been done. That is the dead hand with which convention frustrates improvement. But if you want to do things differently, and I hope that you do, you had better be sure of your ground. Competence is necessarily predicated on reflective practice. You will be better at what you do if you read about your field, think about it, test your perceptions in practice, and can justify your own professional decisions and actions to others with informed perspectives on the matters at hand.

Second, you need to grow as a professional. A number of the things which underpin professional growth have little to do directly with our work. Reading widely, travelling, developing sophisticated outside interests – all contribute to our breadth and depth as professionals and should not be undervalued.

I have hardly had a planned career, but I have observed many of my colleagues become successful and highly professional. One critical element of this is developing a professional network outside your immediate workplace, including overseas. You need to know what is happening in other places to stimulate thought about your own situation. The internet is a fantastic resource in this regard.

Most professional activity is collegial and I have enjoyed arguing through issues with others, particularly those who are either older or younger than me. They have different experiences and perspectives and they test what I believe. UniSA was great in that regard. Most of those I

have worked with have been much more interested in making sure we were getting things right together, than defending their own turf.

I have also seen people accept secondments that expose them to different responsibilities, and take the risk of changing jobs when they knew they would learn by doing so. This happened to me when I went to NSW TAFE where I became a better educational manager, simply because it was expected that I would and I had to rise to that expectation.

Many of you will have six or seven distinct professional roles during your working life. Try and anticipate these (or at least, potential plausible options) and grow into them, rather than letting them just happen, or be the result of someone else's decisions about your life.

Third, I believe being an autonomous professional draws heavily on one's personal value position – the beliefs you have about what dealing with other people involves, about

the relationship between the individual and social structures, and what it means to be a good and responsible citizen. And I believe it is part of your job as a professional to advocate those positions to the wider community, as well as having them guide your practice. Professionals should take a public role in relation to their own expertise.

Just for example, I believe architects should speak out on what is happening to our cities and the way the construction of private and public buildings impacts on all aspects of our environment; journalists should take positions on the domination of opinion-forming information sources by a small handful of wealthy people, or the way the media engages in facile pursuit of mediocre celebrities rather than helping readers make the informed choices on which democracy depends; psychologists and social workers should identify and articulate the policies and practices that lead to a growing disadvantaged underclass in our communities; and teachers interrogate the assumptions embodied in

education funding policy (as Lyndsay Connors, a doctor of this University has consistently done), for these have far-reaching consequences beyond the concerns of the immediate student cohort. They could also expose the political catch-phrases which are used to obscure rather than clarify – to confuse rather than educate – in public debate. Take ‘freedom of choice’ as an example. These are the weasel-words by which our society legitimates the restriction of educational advantage to those who can afford to pay for it.

Of course, many good professionals do these public things. The point I am making is that higher education both enables you to make similar contributions to our community and also challenges you to do so. Don’t use your university experience just to become a better follower. Our society needs you to be leaders. Your association with UniSA gives you a start or enhances commitments you have already made.

I wish you all the best for your future, and everyone on this stage and those parents and friends sitting behind you want you to make the most of it. Thank you for listening.

Emeritus Professor Bruce King

17th August, 2007