

Graduation – Excellence, Happiness and Respect.

*Graduation address of the Hon. Marilyn Warren, A.C.,
Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Victoria
Delivered at Deakin University
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Thank you, Chancellor.

Chancellor, distinguished members of the university and guests, graduates, ladies and gentlemen.

Today marks a special and memorable occasion in the lives of all the graduates. It is also an important day for the teachers, family and friends of all graduates. Indeed, congratulations are extended to each one of those who contributed to the graduates reaching this position – it might be said that their achievement is as much your achievement as it is theirs. I also extend my congratulations to Deakin University in achieving the

graduations today in the year of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of this important university.

Now, for the graduates. For each of you the day is one you will remember for the rest of your lives. I convey my very warmest congratulations.

Given the special nature of the day, the sense that finally after so many years of relentless work and study, you have completed the task, how is it memorable beyond the achievement of self? You are now a graduate in a significant degree from an important Australian university. Is any more necessary? Is there anything else to be gained from the day than the parchment in your hand?

I suggest there are three intangible things to take away as accoutrements or companions to your new degree. First, the pursuit of excellence. In your studies you have pursued

excellence in seeking admission, progression and now graduation in your degree. Excellence is, by definition, an achievement that few attain in any particular sphere of human endeavour. However, there are two aspects of the seeking of excellence which I would like to comment on today. There are the benefits that flow from merely seeking it. If you have sought excellence in the years leading up to this graduation you will have developed in so many ways, in so many skills necessary for the continued pursuit of excellence in whatever life or vocational pathways you choose.

Next, while few obtain excellence in any particular sphere of human endeavour, all can achieve excellence in a particular endeavour in the particular environment that best suits the individual's developing talents, skills and experience.

Choosing that particular pathway or set of specialist jobs will not only be your next task, it will be an ongoing challenge for the rest of your life. I would suggest, to achieve the best out of life you should pursue that challenge of finding your set of life and vocational niches where, with effort, you can achieve excellence.

*I turn then, to the second accoutrement to your new degree, happiness. Mostly, your feelings today are happy. If there was an all ordinaries index of the level of happiness in this space today, it would be high. So, enjoy your investment in your self and the dividend yielded – a high degree of happiness. The performance level of your investment in the commodity of happiness has proved to be “blue chip”.

Thirdly, respect for difference. In the process of achieving your degree, you have encountered socio-economic and

cultural difference, gender difference, sexual preference difference and physical and psychological difference.

You have developed a respect for difference in the course of your studies because the ideas and arguments articulated by teachers and fellow students were what was important, not each individual's particular defining personal characteristics.

So, this evening, I wish to suggest a discussion or reflection point, one possible platform from which you might from time to time consider your position, your focus, your ambitions and your method.

Before suggesting the nature of this checkpoint, allow me to set you a question. There is a preamble to the question that involves running your life on a fast forward to see where you might be in 20 years time. Imagine that your life

after graduation unfolds in a way equivalent to one of the following scenarios of post graduate life.

The first scenario.

You have obtained your law degree and you not only succeed in obtaining articles of clerkship in a prestigious law firm but you immediately impress both the firm's partners and clients with your dedication, intellect, hard work and rapidly developing legal skills. You are regularly promoted in the ensuing years and are offered and accept a partnership well before most would dare dream of such success. You come to be recognised throughout the profession as a first rate legal mind and one of the most knowledgeable, skilled and successful lawyers in your particular speciality.

The second scenario.

Imagine, alternatively, you have just graduated in management and marketing and because of your academic record and enterprising work with a major

corporation, you are offered a junior but promising position in its marketing department. Your creative and enthusiastic application of the corporation's charter is recognised and you are given every opportunity to take on major responsibilities in key projects. Your career progresses as you see every opportunity to explore new products in niche markets and you achieve extraordinary success in the corporate world. You come to be recognised universally in the business sector as a creative entrepreneur with all the financial and management skills to make commercial enterprises different, competitive and dominant within their respective market areas.

Now the question: You began your university degree with the objective of using your degree to build a successful life; would the success as described in the two scenarios above truly fulfil you?

If I return to the companions or accoutrements to your degrees, pursuit of excellence, happiness and respect for difference, they have clearly instructed your career path in the "fast forward" description just considered.

But at the end phase of your career there will have been an ethical imperative, I would hope, to use your degree and commensurate qualification and university experience so as to expand the pursuit of excellence, happiness and respect for difference beyond self to other.

How might you do this? It is not for me to appear to dampen a celebratory occasion by speaking of obligation. Thus, I do not. That said, the spread of the pursuit of excellence, happiness and respect for difference might just be liberating and enlightening and not a burden.

In your career there will doubtless be opportunities, both for self and for other. It might take the form of working for a community legal centre, a non-government organisation, performing pro bono work, applying legal or business knowledge and acumen to assist the disadvantaged, identifying and protecting human rights. So as you leave today with the accompanying intangibles to your degree, take away one further goal: the fulfilment of a wider ambition beyond self to other. Perhaps, this wider ambition will serve as a liberating and enlightening experience both for the development of self and for the interest and development of others and, hence, for society in general.

I wish each graduate every opportunity and fulfilment in the pursuit of excellence, happiness and respect for difference. I congratulate each of you, again, on your achievement in graduating today.