

**Southern Cross University Graduation 2016**

## **Occasional Address**

**by**

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Whitebrook Theatre, Lismore campus, SCU

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Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I am honoured to be delivering today's Occasional Address.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land upon which this graduation ceremony is taking place – the Widjabal People of the Bundjalung Nation – and I pay my respects to the elders past and present, and to the unique role they play in the life of this region.

I also acknowledge the Deputy Chancellor Mr John Shanahan, the Vice Chancellor Professor Adam Shoemaker and of course the graduating students and their families.

This is one of the occasions that those of you graduating will remember for the rest of your lives. You have studied long and hard and this is your time to savour the deep satisfaction of achieving a goal that, at the beginning, must have seemed a long way off, with some uncertainty about the path to achieving this goal. Your tertiary qualification is indeed a significant milestone.

For some of you, today marks the first step out into the wider world of professional careers. For others, it offers a recalibration of an existing career or perhaps the chance to start afresh. For all of you, great opportunities await, and it may well be that those opportunities lie in directions you can scarcely imagine.

Preparing this address caused me to reflect back on my graduation with a medical degree from the University of Cape Town in South Africa in 1983.

At that time the apartheid regime in my homeland was firmly in power, but it was becoming increasingly clear that this oppressive system could not last. It was a time of turmoil and uncertainty in the country. It was inconceivable that I would be spending most of my career as a public health researcher on the other side of the world, much of it in the steamy tropical city of Darwin.

That is how life is. Opportunities crop up and, if they interest you and circumstances permit, you follow them.

The extent of the value of my original tertiary qualification has become increasingly apparent to me over the decades following my graduation. My degree opened up an array of opportunities that would otherwise have been out of reach.

This brings me to the first major theme of my address, about the value of educational opportunity.

Having a tertiary education places one in a privileged position in Australian society – and even more so in the global society. On this occasion of your graduation, I encourage you all to reflect on how you have come to have the opportunity for tertiary study.

For me, the strongest sense of gratitude is to my parents. I grew up on a dairy farm in South Africa. My parents worked hard to support their children's education. They had a strong sense of social justice, and were committed to improving the conditions of farm labourers and families living on the farm - access to education for children, improving employment opportunities for women, and housing.

South Africa is classified as a high middle-income country. By that standard it is not a poor country, but it has one of the highest rates of income inequality in the world. I benefited from the privileged position afforded white people under the apartheid system. But I also benefited from exposure to the inequity of this system through my family circle's efforts to confront the system and address inequity.

Several years of working as a doctor in South African hospitals serving urban townships and rural areas – and then in rural New Zealand – opened my eyes to the health impacts of poverty and social inequity. From this flowed my interest in public health and comprehensive primary health care, and led to almost two decades conducting research that aims to address the social determinants of health among

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia.

The means by which you graduating students have reached graduation will have been different for each of you. The influences that have brought you to this point today will affect the rest of your career.

I encourage you to reflect on what has made it possible for you to reach your goal, and to make a point of thanking those who have contributed in significant ways to enabling your achievement.

With my recent move to Lismore, it is a great pleasure for me to be living and working in a rural environment again. While the experience of living and working in Lismore itself is new, much of it feels familiar. Dairy farms and other smallholdings dot the landscape, just as they did in the Midlands of Natal where I grew up. The Midlands is an area of beautiful rolling hills, which rise to the majestic escarpment and peaks of the Drakensberg Mountains. This is an area of beauty that is comparable to the Northern Rivers.

Reflecting on the importance of place in my life brings some understanding for me of how those of us who are relatively new to the area, whether this is months, years or even a few generations, can only begin to imagine the significance of the connection to land for people whose families have lived here for innumerable generations, over thousands – or tens of thousands – of years.

As I am learning, the Northern Rivers is distinctive from a health perspective. For a regional centre, Lismore punches well above its weight in terms of health facilities, and in terms of the intellectual resources within the community. Many of those graduating today in the various health and allied health disciplines will have already experienced the benefits of these. However, we also face particular challenges, with socio-economic disparities being amongst the most important.

Disparity in socio-economic status is widely recognised as a critically important

determinant of – within countries, cities or in regions such as this. While the disparities in our region are not on the scale of those seen in South African society, some areas of the Northern Rivers are among those with the greatest socio-economic disparities in New South Wales.

Addressing the social determinants of health requires sectors, organisations, communities and individuals to work together. So, collaboration is the second major theme of this address. Much of what I have achieved as a researcher has only been possible through working with others.

Collaboration takes specific effort, and is hard work.

It seems to me that there is a strong commitment to collaboration in the Northern Rivers. Much of the critical mass in this region's health sector has been built through collaboration and good leadership.

I now have the privilege of leading the University Centre for Rural Health, an organisation that relies heavily on and makes a vibrant contribution to collaborative work in the region. Founded in 2001, much of the Centre's work has been conducted through a collaboration between Southern Cross University, and the Universities of Sydney, Western Sydney and Wollongong. Our major responsibilities are providing rural health education, including through providing placements for medical and allied health students across the region, and conducting research that promotes regional health development.

By working closely with the Local Health District, the North Coast Primary Health Network, Aboriginal Medical Services, Southern Cross and other universities, and other organisations in the region, we can provide a breadth and depth of educational and research experience for students and health practitioners that is virtually unparalleled in regional Australia.

It is essential that we continue to strengthen collaborations across all sectors of

government, academia and the private sector. As you move into new roles in the world, I encourage you to promote and engage in collaborations, to be a team-player, and to engender team-based approaches in your work wherever relevant.

An important part of our mission at the University Centre for Rural Health is to knit the two sides of our work together – integrating research and education to build a culture of research and learning. This brings me to the third major theme of this address – building a culture of research and learning.

There is increasing emphasis in health education on developing understanding of research. Evidence is accumulating that engagement in research improves organisational performance and service quality.

I encourage you as university graduates to contribute to building a culture of research and enquiry as you move into new roles in your field – health or otherwise. A good understanding of research will add value to your work throughout your career.

As I reach the end of my address, I urge all of you graduating today to reflect not only on the benefit of your achievement for you personally but also on the potential benefit to the communities in which you will live and work. I encourage you to reflect on the value of your education, the importance of collaboration, and on the vital contribution of a vibrant culture of learning through engagement with research.

You can reshape the world we share for the better.

Thank you, and good luck.