

SCU Graduation Occasional Address

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Whitebrook Theatre, Lismore Campus

Firstly I'd like to thank the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor of Southern Cross University for giving me the honour of speaking at this event, and specifically Helen Hughes for inviting me here today.

I also acknowledge the Widjabul People of the Bundjalung Nation, Traditional Custodians of this land, and pay tribute to the unique role they play in the life of this region.

I've been asked here today to give a short talk reflecting about the world you will be engaging in as graduates, and also some broad observations based on my own career and experiences.

But first I want to congratulate all the graduates today. This is a significant milestone in your life and it's important to mark and celebrate such things.

Also, it very important to acknowledge and congratulate family, friends and faculty who've helped you along the journey seeing you learn and grow throughout this process. Part of the social glue of our community is to help each other achieve goals and then celebrate their achievement. So once again congratulations to you all.

Now you've graduated you're a step further along your journey. For some this is a great adventure whilst others may find the uncertainty unsettling. For the latter, don't worry. One lesson I've learnt over the years is that being equipped with a degree, and living in a safe and prosperous country, is a great privilege and gives you the tools to succeed in life.

My wife Cathy can't be with us today to join your celebrations as she's out in a remote rural community in Serenje, Zambia working with communities to empower them to prevent unnecessary deaths. The stories of the people she works with and how they succeed against the odds is both heart-warming and humbling.

The particular project she's working on at the moment is training local community volunteers to raise awareness of maternal and newborn health issues and equip them with the knowledge to identify early signs of complications in child birth. She also works with communities to put in place community emergency transport systems to get patients to a nearby health facility. My Christmas present from my wife last year was a bicycle ambulance for a community in Mkushi District and within the first few months of use, it had already saved 17 lives. I've got a suspicion that I may be getting an ox and cart this year¹ Either way, I've received far more satisfaction and enjoyment from knowing my gift is making a difference to people's lives than me owning more things.

Over the past 25 years, Cathy's experiences in developing countries have always been a salient reminder that we are very privileged to live the lives we do. However, with that privilege comes a responsibility to be good custodians of country and our fellow humans.

When I graduated as an environmental scientist from University of East Anglia in 1988, it was a time of environmental resurgence and activism across many developed countries. Specifically, in the UK, it was also a time of great social upheaval with Thatcherism promoting individual over community, and the breaking down many of the social safety nets put in place by previous governments. After a couple of decades of relative prosperity and apathy we seem to have come full circle on many of these issues with political and environmental activism on the rise against a backdrop of increasing social and environmental change. The only constant seems to have been growing inequalities between the haves and have-nots and continuing degradation of our environment.

From an environmental science perspective it's a very interesting time. We're almost 30 years since the Brundtland Commission's *Our Common Future* was published, 23 years on from the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, almost ten years since the Nicholas Stern Review on the economics of climate change, and we have COP21 about to start in Paris.

Whilst studying at UEA we were very aware of climate change – notwithstanding taking climatology as part of my degree – as the Climactic Research Unit was being built next to our lecture theatre as I studied. The Climactic Research Unit is probably best known for the political espionage climate-gate email hack against the university IT systems from vested interests. However, what it should really be celebrated for is the fantastic research it has undertaken over the past three decades.

The lesson learned over the past 30 years of climate talks, treaties and targets is that even when over 90% of the scientific community agree on the science behind an issue, there is a responsibility to clearly communicate with public and policy makers, to ensure wider community understanding. Unfortunately this is no simple task as our lives, science and technology seem to be on a trajectory of getting ever more complex. For those of you who will continue your journey in academia it is important not to lose sight how your research is being used and communicated.

Getting back to celebrating your graduation and what happens next in your adventure.

I would like to offer two simple pieces of advice: do what makes you happy; and don't be afraid to ask. These may sound like glib platitudes, but they can have a significant impact on your life.

On the first point, following graduation most of you will be starting or re-joining working life. For many of you, you'll spend over 40 year engaged in activities to keep yourself fed and sheltered. You will be sharing this journey with a wide variety of

fellow humans and for your own benefit you need to make sure you choose activities that make you feel fulfilled. Each of us has different drivers and it's important at this stage to try and understand what makes you tick. For my part, making a difference, a love of the environment, and engaging people on the wonders of the world are the things that get me excited.

My first job after graduating was as an Interpretive Ranger where I was able to do all of these and get paid for it, which was fantastic. My specific role was to reconnect people with nature through activities such as nature trails, earth education and guided walks. I still remember the joy in people's faces when they first hugged a tree or saw the spark of interest when finding out some amazing fact about our environment. I've been incredibly lucky that I've been able to continue this journey into what looks like a well-planned career in the environment and sustainability. For me the satisfaction of doing something that makes a difference has far more personal benefit.

If you can understand yourself and what makes you satisfied then you're 90% of the way there. Choose a job that is good fit with your values, and be honest with yourself as to who you are and what you'd like to do. The most effective and successful colleagues of mine are people who were lucky to find work they enjoyed which over time then turned into a vocation or career.

Also, don't be afraid to try something only to find you don't like it and use that experience to move on and find the things you do enjoy. I can honestly vouch for the fact that life is way too short to spend half of it working in an organisation or role that isn't a good fit. You won't be happy and your colleagues won't be.

On the second point of not being afraid to ask, this is universal across your career. Ask people to be a mentor when you're working in new situations. Ask peers and stakeholders what their perspectives are so you can better understand the bigger picture. Ask co-workers for help when you need it, and reciprocally ask them if you can help when they look like they need it. The majority of communication issues

arising in the workplace are because we are not finding the time to ask. Additionally, the synergies when you do ask and get different perspectives on an issue greatly add to the rich tapestry of life. On a personal note, learning and understanding the scientific process to me was a great joy at University and I haven't stopped asking questions since.

And on that final point, I would like to congratulate you all again for graduating today, and wish you the best of luck for the future.