

Occasional Address Graduation Speech,

Ceremony 17, 12:00pm, Friday 19th April

Professor Geoff Scott, former Pro Vice-Chancellor (Quality),

University of Western Sydney

Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, colleagues, families, friends and most importantly graduands.

Forty seven years ago I was sitting like all of you, about to graduate and take up my position as teacher of English, History and Maths at Kingsgrove South High School.

I was the first in my family to go to university and graduating opened up a whole range of life opportunities and a world that otherwise would have been closed to me.

Back then, as I sat in my tutorials being overwhelmed by people like Germaine Greer, we didn't think of education as a consumer item. But we knew it opened doors, opened up new possibilities. We knew it made a difference.

Education remains in my view one of the critical investments a country can make in its people – in its total social, intellectual, creative and cultural capital, not just an elite. It is, for people of ordinary means, one of the key factors in shaping one's life chances and it is the foundation for building a harmonious, inventive, productive, sustainable and adaptable country.

As graduates, you carry with you a powerful moral imperative and critically important role - to encourage all with whom you work to develop their potential to the fullest through further study so they too can have the benefits you have achieved today.

Of course back in the 1960s when I went to university times were different – we had the Vietnam war, I still used a slide rule and a book of logarithmic tables, calculators were not even invented and making more than one trip in a lifetime on a jet plane was pretty well unimaginable. The GFC, 9 eleven, climate change, globalization, cyberwarfare, urban terrorism, a rapidly changing world of work, post-modernism, the population explosion, asylum seekers and the ICT revolution were still ahead of us.

Back then the idea of wandering around with a small device in my pocket packed with Aps that has astronomically more grunt than the old 5 ton SILLIAC computer with its cathode ray tube memory which we used in the Physics Building at USyd in '66 was unimaginable.

If there is one key lesson I have learnt over the past 40 years it is that constant adaptation is the name of the game and that change doesn't just happen but must be led, and deftly. But where will the future leaders who will help us with this process of constant adaptation and invention come from?

In my view the key source of the leaders for tomorrow is our universities, our graduates, people like you who are at the heart of

building and sustaining what counts for a harmonious, creative, adaptable and inventive Australia; people like you who have developed the capabilities to tackle the challenges of the next 20 years; people like you who can help us think carefully about the tacit assumptions driving the 21st century– like growth is good, consumption is happiness, ICT is the answer and globalization is great.

Here today we have a range of graduates with capabilities at the core of building a socially, culturally, economically and environmentally sustainable and flourishing Australia; with the key skills to engage people in the highly social process of making desired change happen. Amongst us we have people who have specialised in areas like urban studies and sustainability, child and community, criminology, contemporary policing, juvenile justice, peace and development, heritage, sustainable tourism and community development.

What can all of you expect in the first five years of your career in these professions that are so important to Australia’s future? Since 2001 myself and a team of researchers have been working with hundreds of graduates identified as being highly effective performers by their employers, colleagues and clients in the first years of their career. We have focused on identifying what capabilities these successful graduates have found to be the most important for success in the first five years of their professional work. Today I want to share what they have said with you.

The findings have been remarkably consistent. Our successful early career graduates say that your professional capability will be most tested not when things are running predictably or smoothly, but when something unexpected happens or goes wrong.

It is then, they say, that you must be able to remain calm, keep things in perspective; it is then that you have to think on your feet and try to figure out what is really going on. It is then that text book answers don't really seem to fit.

What is really interesting is that these graduates repeatedly say that professional knowledge and skills are necessary but not sufficient for successful practice. What is far more important is how you respond to the unexpected.

So what are the top dozen capabilities that these successful graduates repeatedly identify. The capabilities fall into three categories: personal, interpersonal and cognitive:

The top ranking personal capabilities are:

- being able to remain calm when things go wrong and tolerate uncertainty;**
- Always listening first to others before you act;**
- having a sense of humour and perspective;**
- caring about what you do and wanting to achieve the best job possible – they say satisfaction comes from more than making money – it comes from making a difference;**
- being able to take a hard decision;**

- **being able to bounce back from adversity;**
- **being willing to face and learn from your errors and listen openly to negative feedback;**

The key interpersonal capabilities are:

- **being able to work with diverse clients and colleagues and handle conflict situations productively;**
- **your ability to work as part of a team;**
- **being able to develop and use informal networks of colleagues to solve problems;**

and the most important cognitive capabilities are:

- **being able to set and justify priorities, see the key issue in messy situations; and being clear on where you are headed;**
- **being able to use previous experience to figure out what is going on in a current situation;**
- **being able to trace out the consequences of different, potentially relevant courses of action.**

What is surprising is how many of these key capabilities are about emotional intelligence. Also, what we have found is that these capabilities may not be teachable but, once you know how important they are, they certainly are learnable by reflecting on what you do when things go wrong. And embedded in them are the values that distinguish productive, caring and civil societies and the distinguishing characteristics of successful, change capable

organisations. For me these capabilities have provided lessons not just for work but for life.

I want to say a little more about being able to develop and use networks of fellow practitioners for life-long learning. Your networks will include the friends you have made at UWS and who are sitting next to you today - some of whom you will still be seeing in 40 years time. Our graduates repeatedly say that these ‘fellow travellers’ will be your prime source of support when things go wrong, for learning on the job and that by working with them on key workplace dilemmas as they arise you will learn by doing. However, these networks don’t just happen – you have to be out there, responsive, helpful, approachable, reliable for help and opportunities to come your way. If you take but never give you will have no network. I know that I would never have seen the unexpected opportunities that have shaped my life come my way if I had not been a willing contributor to the reciprocal networks.

Many of you will be working in Greater Western Sydney– this is a remarkable region and in many ways a living laboratory for tackling the social, cultural, economic and environmental challenges we all face in the coming decades of the 21st century. And it is UWS that hosts the UN Endorsed Regional Centre of Expertise in ESD for GWS. It would be great if you got involved.

I would like to conclude by acknowledging the significant contribution which your partners, parents, families and friends

have made to your achievement today. This highly significant milestone in your life is the result of a true team effort.

It has been a delight and privilege to address you today as I move onto a new phase in my life and you do the same.

Congratulations and keep the fire burning.

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