

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA GRADUATION SPEECH - Mèdy Hassan

I would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people who are the traditional custodians of this land on which we are meeting and pay respect to the Elders of the Ngunnawal Nation both past and present. I extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in attendance today.

Vice-Chancellor Stephen Parker, Chancellor, distinguished members of the faculty, ladies and gentlemen, and especially those graduating today - “my fellow Alumni”.

I’m honoured to be here today to share this important occasion with you.

This is also a special occasion for me for a couple of reasons.

I worked on this fantastic building as a site cadet whilst in my first year at the University of Canberra - my first ‘professional’ job.

Then there is the fact that I have never actually attended a graduation ceremony before.

I missed my first graduation from the University of Canberra in 1987 because I was so caught up in graduation celebrations, shall we say, and then my subsequent graduation from RMIT University for similar reasons.

But then, your time at university isn’t only about academic pursuit. It’s also about the friendships you make, the activities you pursue, and the new interests you develop. I have some incredible memories of my time here:

- O-week (Orientation) was a big feature when I was here. My first experience was meeting a member of the skydiving club who had only one arm after a skydiving accident (true story!), signing up and going through with my first sky dive. My parents to this day are unaware of this endeavour and unsurprisingly I still develop a slight nervous twitch flying over Lake George (otherwise known as ‘the drop zone’).
- The design studio in the school of built environment which was open 24/7. My mentors, colleagues, the friendships and the positive competition our projects generated amongst us. We pulled a lot of all-nighters there working to get our projects done (and partying). As far as I’m aware, I set the record for 4 all-nighters in a row pre-thesis time - which is not a challenge I would recommend to you!
- One of the highlights and welcome distractions from the all-nighter sessions were the ‘teachings’ by the overseas students. Specifically, how to lock the lift between floors to be able to make free overseas calls from the phone in the lift, to far-away family and friends. This was all unbeknownst to our lecturers and also possibly the University of Canberra finance office – so don’t tell anyone.

All up, a brilliant time in my life and a truly excellent education.

More seriously, my time here also sowed the seeds of the direction and purpose I wanted to take in life. By purpose I mean what I wanted to do, and what sort of person I wanted to be, beyond simply following one profession or another, or beyond what I would end up being in terms of a job title.

When I was asked to give this speech to you today, I thought about what I could say to you.

First of all, I was reminded of two incredible individuals who had a direct and positive impact on my time at UC and afterwards. Those people are Roger Johnson, who was the Head of the School of Environmental Design when I was here, and Don Aitkin, Vice Chancellor and President of the University from 1991 to 2002. Thank you to them both.

All of you will today walk out of here knowing that you've been the recipients of a truly excellent education, and that you now have a lot of learned knowledge under your belt which will help you make your way into the world as professionals who are trained and highly skilled.

The greatest 'gift' that my education gave to me was the ability and the capacity to think. How to think and the ability to make choices about what to think. Thinking can sometimes be hard and uncomfortable. Truly, thinking is about being self-aware and making decisions. Making decisions about the kind of work you want to do, the sort of person you want to be and what you want to contribute to the world.

So, I want to share with you some of the things I've learnt along the way since I left UC, and that I continue to learn as I move through life.

Let's talk first about purpose.

What is your purpose? What things strike a chord with you, that you're personally interested or invested in, and what problems do you want to solve to improve the world?

Passion. I've long been a fan of Richard Branson who is an amazing entrepreneur who makes extraordinary things happen with confidence and joy. He's got passion for what he does.

As Branson says: "Some 80% of your life is spent working. You want to have fun at home; why shouldn't you have fun at work?"

Passion is one of the keys to success. Passion fuels confidence, creates excitement and is contagious.

Some days will be good, some days will be bad.

Work on your ability to control your inner monologue. Be curious. Care about what you do. When you have a great idea, share it. When you believe in something, you'll motivate others around you to achieve success.

I want to recommend to all of you here today, that you also keep being a 'challenger' in life. This, in my opinion, is a key leadership trait. It won't be easy and sometimes you will meet a lot of resistance, but keep going. Be a disruptor.

Challenge everything: not like a crazy person who challenges everyone and everything for no good reason. That's just being argumentative.

But, maintain and "expand" the curiosity, enthusiasm and questioning nature that is alive during your academic years - never let this go.

Challenge the status quo. Challenge the model, the information, the foundation, the destination. Ask yourself, where are we going, what are we doing, can we do this a better way?

Seek feedback from others. Use negative feedback as an opportunity to reflect, to improve yourself or improve perceptions.

Take joy from positive feedback and use that energy. Be honest with yourself. Set goals. Become an expert. Try something new. Take yourself out of your comfort zone. Keep learning.

As part of this, also seek out mentors who can help you in your life and your career. These can be both formal and informal mentors. Never stop learning and keeping your mind open. Seek to be a mentor to others, too. Pass on your knowledge, your learnings and your passion.

As a challenger, look to embrace change. Change, after all, is the new norm, and the rate of change is ever-increasing.

By way of example, I have recently returned from Singapore where I was asked to present 6 guest lectures at the SIM University. The student learning experience is so different now than when I was studying.

The rate of information and access to multiple sources is almost overwhelming. But how good is that – all this at your fingertips. The key is to "filter" quickly yet slow your thinking and form an educated opinion.

So, let's also talk about innovation. It's part of being a challenger and also part of the leadership equation.

The businessman and writer Tom Collins once wrote "“Excellence must be achieved through the eyes of those who judge us; once achieved it can only be maintained with constant innovation.””

Innovation is about creating and testing new ideas. Sometimes new ideas fail along the way, and that's ok.

It's what defines you, your point of difference, It's part of your personal brand.

And, by the way, what is personal brand all about? To me this is a way of describing what's important to me, both personally and in the workplace. It's about how I choose to behave, how I want to be seen, and how I present myself to the world.

My company brand, the strapline, is "collaboration, innovation, excellence". This encapsulates what I'm about personally, and in a business sense. Your own sense of who you

are, and who you want to be, is something – I suggest – that you think about too, and then take forward into the world.

As I've mentioned before, the greatest gift that the University of Canberra provided me with were the tools to knowing 'how to think' rather than knowing 'what to think'. This gift has been instrumental in shaping me today both personally and professionally.

There are a couple of final ideas I'd like to leave with you.

Philanthropy. Be a decent human being. When you can, help others in need. All kinds of studies indicate that those who help others are generally happier. Leave things better than you found them. Leave a legacy. You don't need a fortune to create an impact.

You know, in my own career, university and my life experiences helped me to 'connect the dots'. The switch was flicked and lights went on. I've been involved in developing business cases, financial analysis, designing and building arguably some of the most innovative special purpose, university and research facilities in the world.

But what ultimately became most important to me was not only delivering outstanding results in terms of the built form, or the financial outcomes, but also recognising the social contribution and the value capture derived through promoting the research and the work that is carried out in these buildings.

I became personally invested. I developed a personal interest in medical research, and it became important to me as members of my family and friends experienced medical issues such as cancer or stroke.

Over the years I also became personally invested, through my work, in physical sciences and engineering, which are all about the future and new developments for tomorrow. This is personally very rewarding to me.

I discovered that I wanted to make a contribution, and through the work and expertise I've developed, I found ways to do it. That's something you can do too, in your own way.

There's one final thought I want to leave with you, and that's on the issue of diversity.

Diversity is a hot button issue right now and for good reason. The biggest challenge for any business is getting the right people – and ensuring they stay.

This is certainly a conundrum for my industry – the property & construction industry. Just 13 per cent of employees in my industry are female. Diversity is not only a problem for property & construction, the statistics tell us it's a problem right across the board.

If you're not convinced that women should be equally represented in the workplace, at all levels, then have a think about this: it's inconceivable that 49 per cent of Australia's population could possess 100 per cent of the skills and abilities.

All of us, men included, need to step up to take a leadership role and tackle this problem head on.

While diversity is often code for 'gender balance' a truly diverse workforce is one that gives everyone – regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion or sexual preference – an opportunity to contribute and to be your best self.

And so, finally, I mean it when I say that this is a special occasion for me, as it is for you.

I know all of you have done the hard yards, to be where you are today. I want to congratulate you for your perseverance, your dedication and your achievements which have brought you to this moment. I look forward to witnessing the impact each and every one of you will have in the world.

I would also like to congratulate the University of Canberra under Stephen Parker's leadership. Stephens's passion and governance has taken the University of Canberra, my university and yours, academically from strength to indisputable strength.

Time to go and enjoy yourselves.

Thank you.