

**Occasional Address delivered by Richard Potok
University of Canberra Graduation Ceremony
Parliament House, 27 September 2017**

I first would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land where we meet today, the Ngunnawal People, and pay my respects to Elders past and present.

Thank you, Vice-Chancellor. It is a wonderful honour to be here today. I was completely shocked when you telephoned me with the news of this award – I thought you had called the wrong person.

Congratulations to you all on this important milestone in your lives, and congratulations to your proud family members here celebrating with you today. When thinking about what advice I could give from my experience over the 34 years since I graduated from university, to be honest I was at a bit of a loss. So I did what I do best: I procrastinated. I procrastinated for weeks. I am an Olympic-level procrastinator – my partner, Nicky, is convinced that this Honorary Doctorate is really for my skills as a procrastinator.

Late last night, as the deadline loomed, things started to fall into place (as they always seem to) and I have three pieces of advice for you. They all relate to the **choices** you will be in a position to make in the coming years.

The first choice is about your career – the quest to find something you love doing. The second is about never hesitating to seek help and guidance. And the third choice is about consciously deciding to positively impact the lives of others.

In 2005, Steve Jobs advised at a similar ceremony at Stanford: *“Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. ... Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition.”*

I agree with this, but only to a point. For me, finding my path didn’t happen overnight. Many of us must first build the skills and gain the experience that we will need to identify and then follow the path that is right for us. When I was graduating from UNSW in 1984, I never contemplated working in Indigenous education. And yet, in

hindsight, what I have done in the past has equipped me with what I needed to be successful enough to be standing here today.

The intellectual rigour of the Master's at Oxford, the analytical skills I learnt at a consulting firm and the attention to detail needed when working as a lawyer in New York and London – these were all a fundamental base for what I do now. My experiences in the corporate world also taught me that a large hierarchical organisation is not the environment in which I thrive.

And yet, my corporate experience opened the door to specialising in a subject area that I loved during my Master's, namely, Conflict of Laws. This led to work in 35 countries that involved my love of teaching as I presented to governments, industry and academics about the need for legal change. Most importantly, I found that I enjoyed solving problems experts professed to be unsolvable. I loved the challenge of proving them wrong. We did this with a treaty at The Hague.

However, achieving law reform in the financial markets, although intellectually stimulating and important, did not allow for the degree of personal contact and individual impact I was looking for in the longer term.

Where I am now is where I want to be. As a Jewish Australian, whose parents fled Europe before and after World War II, I love being on the side of the underdog. Being a part of something others believed impossible has been exciting – people cautioned that it was unrealistic to hope that two Indigenous postgraduates would get into Oxford and Cambridge each year. Now, seven years later, 37 Indigenous graduates from 22 Australian universities have been accepted to Oxford and Cambridge, all on the basis of their academic merit and achievements. But would they successfully complete at universities currently ranked number 1 and number 2 in the world? Absolutely! To date, 21 out of 21 have graduated. This is a testament not only to the students but to the quality of the tertiary education system in Australia.

I love stories like the one about one of our first scholars, Lilly Brown. Lilly was told in Year 10 that she had plateaued in her studies and was not encouraged to continue on to Year 12. Lilly didn't let the school make this decision for her. She persisted and ended up with First Class Honours from the University of Melbourne. She went on to win a Charlie Perkins Scholarship to undertake a Master's in Politics, Development and Democratic Education at Trinity College, Cambridge. Lilly graduated with a Distinction, a grade that placed her in the top 10% of her class, and became the first Indigenous Australian to graduate with a full-time degree from Cambridge.

There are many stories like Lilly's – stories of Indigenous students who have ended up doing extraordinarily well at university after receiving little or no encouragement at school. Students like Jared Field, whose maths teacher in school was concerned he would struggle as "Aboriginal students don't do high level maths." Jared is now undertaking his Doctorate in Applied Mathematics at Balliol College, Oxford, and is also on a Charlie Perkins Scholarship. Or Rebecca Richards, who was asked in Year 9, "Why are you studying so hard when you are going to get into university through an Aboriginal special entry scheme anyway?" Rebecca went on to become Australia's first Indigenous Rhodes Scholar.

I am proud of the small part Aurora, the Charlie Perkins Scholarship Trust and the Roberta Sykes Indigenous Education Foundation are playing – we are helping to change the conversation about what is possible academically for Indigenous Australians.

However, I know that where I am today has only been possible because of the profound impact others have had on my journey. The advice and confidence of others, at pivotal times in my career overseas and now at Aurora, has been crucial. At times when employers and funders were hesitant about taking a leap, someone I trusted gave me great advice, or indicated their faith in me and what we were trying to achieve. Without such expressions of confidence and advice, I wouldn't have had the courage to proceed and succeed.

Some of those generous people are in this room supporting me today and include my Mum, and your Chancellor, Dr Tom Calma AO. It is such a privilege that this honour is being conferred by Tom's and your university, the first Australian university to appoint an Indigenous male Chancellor. Tom has been an inspiration and strong supporter over the years, and the University of Canberra has been a great partner in our work together.

So, to summarise the first two suggestions: first, build your career gradually, patiently and purposefully, gaining all the skills along the way to first identify and then follow your chosen path. Along the way, don't be shy to reach out to others to advise and help you – you don't need to do everything on your own.

This brings me to the third choice, particularly for those graduating in the area of education, but just as importantly for the science, technology, engineering, maths and social science graduates in the room. You too can have a profound impact on the lives of others who come under your guidance. You have the power to believe in someone

and inspire them to realise their potential; you have the power to change their life. This is the greatest power you can have as a teacher, a mentor or a parent.

When I finished Year 12 my marks weren't as good as I had hoped, and I was the last person to be accepted into law at UNSW. I ended up graduating at the top of my class, not because I suddenly became academically gifted overnight, but because I was so determined to prove that I was smarter than I believed everybody else thought I was. There was a bit of Lilly's fight in me.

And yet for every story of success like Lilly's there will be many others of students giving up. My own experience of this was in the sporting realm. I played in basketball teams at all levels, from club to international. When I look back I now realise that in situations where the coach was an authority figure I revered, but who did not believe in me, I crumpled. He didn't need to say anything to me. I sensed the lack of confidence and it impacted how I played.

As a teacher or mentor, as someone others look up to, your beliefs about your students and employees can quite literally change their future. They can excel or they can give up on their dreams. Indigenous Australians are now getting into universities like Cambridge, Harvard and Oxford in unprecedented numbers. And yet, many of these students did not excel academically at high school. Many only gained admission into their undergraduate course with the assistance of alternative entry programs. However, a few years later, they were receiving First Class Honours, and undertaking postgraduate study at the top universities in the world.

How did such a dramatic change happen? We have surveyed over 100 high achieving Indigenous university students and graduates involved in our programs. Time and again we hear about students blossoming academically because somebody believed in them. Often a parent (particularly a mother), sometimes a sibling or a mentor, a university lecturer, those at their university's Indigenous centre, or occasionally a teacher at school.

Too often, though, we hear stories of people who believe that Aboriginal kids are good at sport, maybe at music or dance, but that they don't have what it takes to be academic superstars. That's what our society tells us. We hear about the gap, and about low rates of literacy in remote communities, and those are the stories that define expectations of what Indigenous people can achieve. There's a term called "shooting for average" – basically as long as your Indigenous students can meet minimum benchmarks of literacy and numeracy, that's considered a success.

Even though Lilly finished Year 12 and excelled at university, she still carried doubts. Lilly didn't believe she could go to Cambridge – it had never occurred to her that Cambridge was for people like her, and until she attended Aurora's Study Tour that included a visit to Cambridge, she never would have applied.

So far, the Aurora Study Tour has taken 99 high achieving Indigenous students and graduates to visit some of the best universities in the world. I hear the same story over and over again from participants: "I never thought I was good enough" – "I never thought I could do this."

You, as mentors and teachers, have the power to inspire and positively impact others – their lives and their futures. If you believe in them, you can help them believe in themselves. In some ways it's a daunting responsibility, but it's an exciting one, too.

So, this is the third choice – consciously choose to exercise your power to inspire and support others.

Now you have my three pieces of advice – it's time to get out there and enjoy the next phase of your life.

Congratulations again. Thank you.

[Since delivering this speech, another two Indigenous postgraduates have successfully completed, one at Cambridge and the other at Oxford – so now 23 out of 23 have successfully completed at Oxford and Cambridge in the last five years.]

To put this in some perspective (on the basis of the latest available figures):

- *At Australian universities in 2015:*
 - *1.0% of domestic postgraduates were Indigenous;*
 - *this drops to 0.7% for Group of Eight universities (although this is an average of 2014 and 2015 data).*

- *Currently, there are 16 Indigenous postgraduates at Cambridge (5), Harvard (3) and Oxford (8), which is*
 - *2.8% of the number of Australian postgrads at those universities in 2016-17;*
 - *the number is 3.0% just for Oxford.*

Of these 16 current postgrads studying on Charlie Perkins, Rhodes and Roberta Sykes scholarships, 11 are undertaking DPhils/PhDs.]

