

**UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA  
GRADUATION SPEECH – Renè Leon**

Today is a shining day for each of you. You have reached the moment that all your efforts have been directed towards, some of you for many arduous years. You are surrounded by the appreciation and congratulations of your peers, your family, your friends, and your teachers. And you now can look forward to the career or life path that you imagined when you set out on this academic journey.

For me, the path to graduation was unexpectedly many years long. After being a glitteringly good student at high school, I longed to do something other than study, as I'm sure you weary students will understand. But in those days, there was no gap year tradition, so I undertook my first year of studies as if I was on a gap year. I quickly realised that glittering results were not going to follow and that I needed a break. That turned into a 9 year hiatus where I broadcast on community radio, hitchhiked the east coast of Australia, travelled through war-torn Uganda, worked on a Greek island, and joined organisations that were trying to change the world. And then realised that much of what I was doing and trying to achieve would actually sit well with finishing my law degree and back I came to study, enriched by a world of life experience and ready to bring that to my learning.

You will all take different paths to success and to achieve your goals, and they may not be the ones you imagined or your parents envisaged. I know my parents were horrified that their diligent daughter had apparently wandered off the rails to travel the world and fling herself into causes, but eventually relieved that I came good in the end.

And, as well as studying, you too will have filled your life with experiences while you have been at university.

You may have made firm and lasting friends, you may have met your life partner, or had your heart broken. You may have learnt habits of discipline and also the skill of winging it. You may have juggled a series of part-time jobs to support yourself while you studied. You may have learned how to excel as well as how to pick yourself up from failures and setbacks. You may have started with one degree but changed course and finished with another.

As you pause here on the threshold between your academic learning and your future career, I want to invite you to embrace and value, not only the skills and knowledge for which you have been assessed for your degree, but all of the experience and learning you have had in your time at University.

Because the times in which you are finishing your studies and entering or re-entering the world of work are interesting times.

It is true that university graduates are highly employable and usually well-remunerated. 84% of workers who hold a bachelor degree or higher qualification are employed, compared with around 60% for those people who do not hold post-school qualifications.

Over their lifetimes, university graduates with a bachelor degree or higher qualification will earn around \$2.6 million, compared to an estimate of \$1.5 million for those who have Year 12 as their highest qualification.

Hoorah you say!

However, finishing a university degree is no longer the almost guaranteed ticket to success and prosperity it once was. Four months after finishing a degree, 69% of graduates are employed full-time, but 10 years ago, that figure was over 80%.<sup>3</sup>

The winds of change brought by globalisation and digitisation mean that many of the roles that current students envisage when they start their studies may not even exist by the time they enter the workforce.

Perhaps it was ever thus. Did I imagine when I started degrees in Arts and Law that I would one day be a Departmental Secretary? Not for a minute. Even before the age of social media, we were influenced by what we saw on screens, and I thought I would be a Perry Mason character, saving the day for my innocent clients in court. In fact, the only day I've seen in court was the day I was admitted to practice as a barrister, and I never did.

But these days you know that change is afoot, not only for each of you individually but for your whole generation. Some recent reports have claimed technological change will likely mean that a significant portion of Australian jobs that exist today will no longer exist in 20 years' time and that up to 40% of the workforce could be replaced by computers in the next 10 to 15 years.

However, before ripples of alarm sweep the room, let me give you some historical context. Technology has significantly disrupted patterns of employment before now. The industrial revolution saw major change to the nature of work but led to higher wages, higher employment and higher living standards across society. In an example from more recent technological change, the automation of banking with ATMs and online banking led to a loss of 50,000 bank teller jobs over the 20 years to 2005, but at the same time, the number of financial services professionals increased by about the same number, as the banking industry became more productive and innovative in the services it provided. Digital photography and design has seen the loss of about 17,000 jobs in traditional printing trades, but the growth of 35,000 graphic designer jobs.

We can expect that similar patterns could flow over the coming decades, as technology increasingly takes over the more repetitive and lower skilled jobs, freeing people to do the more creative and high-skilled work.

And this is where I come back to asking you to call upon all your experience in university and in life as you prepare to enter this next phase of your lives.

The qualities that set us apart from machines are those that involve people skills, creativity, problem solving, imagination. You may not have taken any subjects called Creativity or Relationships, but you will have learned a lot about these as you passed through your years at uni. Perhaps those creative reasons for needing an extension on your essay? Or the problem solving that helped you work out how to accomplish four essays and an exam that all coincided in the last three weeks of the semester? Or the people skills that helped you manage your personal life while still writing your thesis?

You will also emerge from the university having gained some important grounding in values. Having clear and good values will equip you for every challenge you ever face. In particular, you will have learned at this university the values of equity and diversity, the importance of respecting people from different backgrounds and lifestyles, the need to have diverse input and the equal involvement of women and men in any project or undertaking.

The world you are about to enter has many problems to solve and issues to address. Equality and diversity are not just nice-to-haves, but essential so that we get all the talent we need to address every challenge. At uni, you have shared tutorials and lectures with a very diverse community of students and you will have learned how to listen to and learn from people with different life experiences from yours. This will stand you in good stead to carry into the workforce a commitment to respect and equality as the basis for achievement.

So, as you reflect on the journey of your studies, value all your experiences at university. Hold dear to your heart and soul the struggles you had, as much as the feelings of success in your learning. All will equip you to be resilient in the workforce and ready to adapt to the changes you will undoubtedly see over the decades ahead.

I was recently part of a panel about the Future of Work where one of my fellow panellists was asked to reflect on whether his degree, now from many years ago, had turned out to be useful in his career. He replied that, while he undoubtedly used the knowledge of economics that he learned at uni, he felt his university degree had most importantly been a course in how to think, and this will doubtless be true for all of you whatever degree you are bestowed with today.

Celebrate your success, for you certainly deserve to. You have endured all manner of hardships, heartaches, harrowing exams, difficult subjects, and tortuous timetables. You have kept your sanity and your sense of humour. You have achieved a very valuable qualification that will lead you on paths you now can't imagine. And most of all, you have learned how to think. Take that with you into the creative, surprising, and undoubtedly interesting future that awaits you.