



# 2021 University of Canberra Graduation Address

22 April 2021, National Convention Centre

Shane Drumgold SC

I would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on today, who have never ceded custody of this land and have had an uninterrupted succession of generations for millennia, and I acknowledge the past, present and emerging elders, and all other indigenous people here today.

Congratulations Graduates. Your ceremony today follows an 800-year-old tradition dating back to the establishment of the first *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, or “community of teachers and scholars” in Europe in the 12th century.

The gowns we are wearing have evolved from the daily dress of University staff in the middle ages, which were in turn based on the dress of the world’s first scholars, the medieval clergy, and are a very important part of the ceremony, as they connect us to 800 years of history, and provide an important sense of occasion for this significant step in your lives.

The word "graduate" comes from the Latin *gradus* (as in gradual) which is also relevant today, as I am confident that you are all familiar with the concept of gradual progress. This is a most fitting term, because despite our increasingly fast paced world, the greatest things you will achieve in your lives will not be sudden, rather they will be achieved slowly, through gradual progress.

Today you become alumni or children of the University of Canberra, and as a child of the University of Canberra myself, you are now my brother and sister alumni.

May I be the first to welcome you to the family.

Despite its history, according to a 2010 Harvard study, you now join just 6.7% of the world’s population to have the privilege of holding a university degree, placing you all in a very rare and privileged minority group indeed. Because you have a degree, you will most likely earn significantly more over your lifetime than the remaining 93.3% of the world’s population.

Don’t underestimate the role that luck has played in you sitting here today. Had you been born at a different time, you may have instead enlisted in the armed forces, to fight a war on the other side of the world, and like many, never return. Had you been born elsewhere you may instead be fighting for your very survival. You are indeed fortunate to be sitting in the seat you are sitting in - at the time you are sitting in it.

Of course, many people of our place and time do not have university degrees, and you have all supplemented your good fortune with years of hard work and sacrifice to allow you the privilege of sitting here today.

I am fortunate enough to have sat where you are 3 times, and I can tell you the work is not over yet. On the contrary, it has only just begun.

Your degree brings with it a very significant burden – not just to enjoy the secure life it brings, but to use your knowledge to make the world better than it would have been, had

you not been gifted by hard work and circumstance to acquire the university degree you now have.

Your teachers have gifted you with the ability to think deeply about issues, now denying you the luxury of skimming the surface and over-simplifying issues, and with the challenges facing the world today, our future may well depend on the full depth of your intellect and the application of your skills in reason and logic.

Whilst you must be visionaries, you must also remember that some of history's worst villains were also guided by clear vision, so you must ensure your vision makes the world better for everyone.

As society's clever minority you must not just do clever things, because without good intention, clever things may be harmful. If Alexander the Great was clever enough to develop the atom bomb, it is unlikely that any of us would be sitting here today. You must work on your hearts as well as your minds because an inquisitive mind needs to be guided by a pure heart.

Given I have your minds for this 10-minutes, please allow me to reflect on what this means to me.

The basic order in our lives is not enjoyed by everyone. I grew up in a place SBS labelled "Struggle Street", the poverty-stricken Public Housing estate of Mt Druitt in Sydney's outer Western Suburbs. To a mother who was the victim of chronic domestic violence and a mentally ill father, who felt so out of place in the world that he chose to leave it. I knew universities existed, but other than our local GP, none of my family actually knew anyone who had attended one.

Due to my disruptive home life, I dropped out of school at 15 years of age and left the family home, often sleeping rough and working a series of low skilled jobs, and my life was on the same predictable trajectory as my previous generations.

I discovered my love of learning from a tattered book I found at an op shop, about a man facing execution and using logic to rationalise his refusal to seize an opportunity to escape. My obsession with Plato's Crito led to a love of knowledge and a passion for understanding.

I embraced Socrates' words from the Apology that the unexamined life is not worth living, so I examined it and have not stopped since. It is this love of learning that has led me to be standing here, addressing you, a room full of university graduates who no doubt share my passion for learning.

My curiosity has been rewarded with a seismic shift in the entire trajectory of my family line. Not only have I had the good fortune to sit where you students are sitting, I have sat where your proud partners and parents are sitting, and I have felt the well-placed pride and joy they all of you feel today.

This speaks as loud as anything to the benefits of opportunity and inclusiveness that must be a hallmark of modern Universities. Whilst we must keep an eye on our academic traditions, we are responsible for ensuring the entire Tertiary education sector grows and evolves to be accessible to the whole community, not just the privileged.

Particularly first Australians, who it should be remembered that, apart from two original Constitutional provisions expressly denying rights afforded everyone else,<sup>1</sup> are totally absent from the very DNA of our Country's Constitution and are currently amongst the most imprisoned and disadvantaged people on the face of the planet. As the privileged recipients of tertiary education, we must ensure the paths we have trodden are accessible to all who wish to follow.

This often takes ingenuity, for example, my application to the Bachelor of Laws program in the 1990s was rejected by another University located close by. To be fair, my application was also rejected by the University of Canberra, however with a crafty suggestion that I enrol in the Diploma of Justice Studies, then use the credits from my first year to gain entry to the Bachelor of Laws programme which is what I did.

Finally gaining admission to the Bachelor of Laws, I did the maximum unit load and took every summer school to complete my law degree with honours in just over 2 years. On admission to practice, I was appointed a junior prosecutor with the Office I now head, and shortly after was also recruited as an evidence and criminal law tutor at the other university that had rejected my application just over two years earlier.

I cannot explain the surreal experience of standing before a class of University students, teaching them criminal and evidence law, in a degree program they were accepted into the same year I was rejected. This is one of many experiences that has instilled in me the value of keeping one's eye on the target, regardless of the external narrative. Do not outsource your sense of agency to others, because they do not know your potential like you do and have no interest in re-writing your future.

In my experience, indicators such as the particular school or university entrance score it produced, may not always measure academic potential, rather opportunity and absence of distraction. The innovative pathways into university developed by the University of Canberra directly address this, and I am the proud product of this, and I am confident that many of you are also.

Such ingenuity cannot stop at admission to a degree program. Although academically I have managed to acquire multiple university degrees in economics and law, I was different to other students. My frequent distraction and early departure from formal schooling still left me with significant literacy and numeracy deficits, particularly in the areas of spelling and grammar. Whilst I could grasp the subject matter, I was frequently embarrassed by the basic spelling and grammatical errors that regularly appeared in my written work.

I quickly discovered that grammar and punctuation are important when one needs to distinguish a Highschool Teacher from a High Schoolteacher - or whether a legal system should be just, quick and cheap – or just – quick and cheap.

Whilst true that some attempted to embarrass me as student with an already healthy dose of imposter syndrome, I recall many of my teachers not sitting in judgement, but showing great understanding, even assisting me with coping strategies, often sharing their own

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<sup>1</sup> Sections 51(26), 127 (repealed)

experiences of conquered challenges, and I am confident that there are many conquered challenges worthy of sharing in this room today.

The genuine understanding and support I received from my University Masters made my success possible and demonstrated that the functional deficits frequently experienced by many disadvantaged and minorities can be overcome and are not necessarily indicators of potential.

As society's clever minority, this must be our aspiration. As the custodians of knowledge, we must ensure that all socio-economic groups, all genders, LGBTQI people, racial and religious minorities, refugees, people with disabilities - and even a scared 15-year-old sleeping rough have access to tertiary education so they can change the future for themselves and their future generations.

But in the words of most educated people at some point in their lives, that is tomorrow's problem. Today, I would like to finish with a Winston Churchill story that has a particular resonance for my life's journey.

Former Prime Minister of England Sir Winston Churchill was on a meet and greet with his wife Lady Clementine when they were approached by a humble chimney sweep. *"Top of the morning to you Mrs Churchill"* he said, to which she responded, *"Dear Henry, so lovely to see you, I hope you have been well."* *"Can't complain Ma'am"* he responded, before fading back into the crowd.

*"Who was that my dear"* asked the Prime Minister, to which she responded that it was her first ever boyfriend. Sir Winston proudly responded, had you married him, you would be the wife of a chimney sweep. Lady Clementine gently stroked his face and responded, *"no dear, had I married him, he would be Prime Minister of England."*

So, by the authority invested in me as your alumni big brother, I hereby give you permission to take this one day to be present in the here and the now, and just savour this moment with the people responsible for getting you here.

Make sure you take a moment to thank those who have inspired you and supported you and continue to do so throughout your life's journey. Thank those here with you today, thank those back in your home states and countries, and take a quiet moment to thank those that are no longer with you, yet remain forever present in your lives.

Congratulation my fellow alumni. Enjoy today, but tomorrow, let the work begin.

Shane Drumgold SC

22 April 2020.