

Graduation Speech at Vietnam National University 2001

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen .

I am delighted to be present today at this Graduation Ceremony, as is my wife Beverley. I have wished to be present at each of the earlier Ceremonies, but one matter or another has prevented my doing so. Today our good fortune is that we are here, and able to take part in the joy that all graduation ceremonies bring.

I have attended very many such ceremonies since my own first one, in 1959. They are, above all, the way in which the University recognises the talent and the sheer hard work of those of its students who have succeeded in meeting the high standards that the University, and our society, set.

A University degree has become the essential credential in the modern world for entry into the professions, and the professions are the human underpinning of a civilised society. It is common to talk of technology as making the difference between modern and older societies, and there is no doubt that aeroplanes, motor vehicles, computers, mobile telephones and pharmaceutical drugs are always visible indications of how some aspects of human life have changed a great deal, even in our own lifetimes.

Yet these products are only the most visible sign of that change. They too rest on a foundation of human knowledge, which we now realise to be steadily and purposefully growing. That growth of knowledge provides not only new machines, and new processes. Above all, it provides human societies with the professions. In the West there were once only three professions: law, medicine and divinity (or the study of God and man's relations with God). Now there are dozens of professions, and there will be more of them in the future, as human knowledge grows and finds further applications of use to humankind.

All professions are based on human knowledge, which has to be synthesised, distilled, tested and applied. The process of application itself leads to further changes in that knowledge, and therefore to further changes in professional practice. Along with that knowledge must go a moral attitude, which I express like this: professionals use their knowledge in the interests of those whom they serve, and more generally in the interests of humanity itself. As I say to our incoming students, the University is not here to teach you how to be rich, but how to use knowledge for the betterment of people and their society. The University of Canberra aspires to be our country's top professional school, in terms of its curriculum, the attitudes, skills and values of its teachers, the beauty and harmony of its campus, and its capacity to produce graduates who are valued in the 92 countries from which our students come.

In all countries the professions have formed organisations that regulate professional practice and work with universities to ensure that incoming professionals are properly prepared. So both the professions and the universities have a strong interest in standards and quality. No-one wants to be served by a professional who lacks the necessary knowledge, or who has poorly developed

skills that are used in professional practice. We all understand this in terms of a surgeon about to operate, for example, on our eyes; but the truth applies generally. We set high standards because the people we serve expect them.

So I am happy to tell you that you have an excellent degree from an excellent University, and there are two reasons for commenting on that excellence. The first is that you have a qualification, a senior qualification, in the field of the teaching of the English language. It is plain to me, from my knowledge of the world, that the English language is becoming the world's common language, and the possession of a common language is surely one of the essential conditions for a peaceful and harmonious world. It may well be that English is not the best language for this purpose, with its ambiguity, its multiplicity of alternatives, its lack of serious rules and its variability in accent from one country to another. But there seems no serious alternative. The national governments of China, Japan and Korea, and the Government of Taiwan, have all decided that the teaching of English to schoolchildren will begin at an early age, around the time of the child's attending primary school. If those decisions are carried out, in a generation's time there will be a very large number of people in the world who do speak English. I am sure that some such policy will also be part of the life of the people of Vietnam. And I look forward to it, as I am sure that you do. You graduates are therefore at the front of a major social change that will be of great benefit to your country and to the world.

The second reason for commenting on your qualification is that it represents the link between our University and your country. When the war in Vietnam ended, the Prime Minister of our country wanted to do something tangible, something immediate, to help in reconstruction. He asked our University to provide a system of training Vietnamese cadres in English, so that there would be a large group of people in Vietnam who not only spoke English, but who had learned it in our country, and who would have some fondness for Australia and for its way of life. Although that program has now ended, the links between the University of Canberra and Vietnam have not ended, and you graduates of today represent an important continuation of it. Long may that relationship continue, and long may there be graduates like those here today, who have an essential and civilising talent which they can use in the interests of their country and of the world.

I thank you, and wish you all well.