

**Occasional Address  
at the Graduation Ceremony  
University of Canberra**

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**Great Hall, Parliament House**

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I congratulate all of you who have graduated today. It is the day of days, the moment when years of hard work on your part, and perhaps years of support from your family, partner, team — those for whom you are a most important person — are rewarded with the degree or diploma which takes you into a new phase in your life. What will that be, and where will it lead you?

For some of you the path is already clear. You have a job to go to, or you are already in it. Perhaps you are planning to have some time off after what may have been a period of continuous formal education for fifteen or so years. Perhaps there is some other project which had to be put aside while you completed your university study. Perhaps you are going back to your own country, to put to good use the knowledge you acquired here. Perhaps you are simply not sure where to go now, but know that you need to earn some money.

What I have to say now applies directly to those who are Australian-born, but it applies indirectly to you all, whatever your country of origin. I would like to suggest to you that those who are not sure, and even some of those who are, should give some thought to working overseas for a time, not in Britain, or in New Zealand, or in the USA, but in one of the countries to our North. It may seem an unexpected suggestion, but it is not a silly one.

I would agree that it is, however, a thought which has not been voiced much up until now. For two hundred years the paths of travel and work for Australians have been in our own country or to Britain, to Europe and, more recently, to North America. The speed of change has been very great. It is only ten years since the first international fee-paying students enrolled at the University of Canberra. It is only three years since the first of our students set off, somewhat nervously, to undertake a semester abroad at a university not in the UK or the USA but in Thailand, and without much knowledge of the language. In ten years' time the flow North will be much greater, and it will not be just the flow of students undertaking a semester abroad, but the flow of those seeking some work experience in Asian countries as well.

There are three good reasons why that flow should increase. One is almost a moral one. The future of our country is bound up with what happens in what is called 'the region', and the more Australians who actually know something about the countries in our region the better for us all — especially if they have actually worked there. There are tens of thousands of Australians working in

our region, and the great majority of them are professional people like yourselves. Just as the Australian universities are an important aspect of Australia's drive to link itself more firmly with our region, and are thus an unsung and largely unrecognised part of our foreign policy, so too are the thousands of Australian professionals who are helping in their diverse ways in the great modernising tasks that are being undertaken in Asia. The rapid modernisation of these countries, using technologies and skills that are familiar to us in the University, are the key to the peace and prosperity of our region, a matter of importance to everyone.

The pay-off for these Australians working abroad is personal, as well as financial. Those who have undertaken studies or work in Thailand, or Japan or China come back not only with a capacity in another language which they did not have before they left. They also have a better sense of themselves and their own capacity to do things, and a greater understanding of the world and of other people. These are major personal satisfactions that are hard to evaluate in money terms, even though they help to provide additional and alternative career options, too.

The second reason is connected. Job creation is likely to be slower in Australia than in many of the countries to our North, where rates of economic growth (not to mention populations) are larger than those here. University of Canberra graduates have just the skills that many of these countries are seeking. Indeed, our University, in its shape and structure, in its professional preparation courses and its emphasis on applied research and on meeting community needs, is very like the universities that are being established in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. The skills you have are the skills that are in demand everywhere.

Yes, rates of pay are usually lower, and material conditions are not always those of the average Australian home or town. But those who go will be using their skills in a direct way in a country where those skills are plainly needed right now. And that is a great boost to one's confidence.

The third reason is also connected. In the long run, to have 'Asian experience' is going to be an important extra qualification in a job market where it will be the extra items of experience and connections that one can point to which separate those who rise in the professions from those who don't. Like it or not, Australian professions and Australian businesses are going to have to forge their own links with the professions and businesses of Asia or stay parochial and small, because Australia does not have the growth potential of most of the other countries of our region. Professions and businesses can forge these links only through the knowledge and experience of Australian professionals who have already been there and done that, who have the knowledge and also the priceless connections that enable partnerships and joint ventures to commence fairly quickly.

What we do seem to have is a quickness of response to problems and a pragmatic approach to problem-solving, both of which come relatively easily in

our culture. While these are, of course, characteristics around which many of our units are designed, they are characteristics that are hard to acquire outside our culture. It is for this reason that Australian professionals are in demand in Asian countries. I have heard Japanese, Chinese, Thai and Malaysian executives all give much the same reasons for their interest in hiring Australian engineers and other professionals. The ones that I have talked to have been happy indeed in the quality of the people they have employed, and in the Australians' readiness to adjust to the new conditions of work and life.

If you don't have a career trajectory mapped out for you clearly right now, please give some thought to following graduation with an early trip North, not as a tourist but as a professional with some skills that could be put to good use. The University has recently formed a partnership with an international placement organisation whose business it is to find the right organisation overseas for the emerging professional. In addition, the University has links with more than thirty regional universities in a dozen countries, and these can be a place to start.

Above all, please do not think that all this advice may well apply to other people, but not to you. Our country may be an island, but it must not be insular in its approach to the world. Over the past two generations we have made enormous advances in our readiness to accept the new, to face the challenge of doing things differently, to have a go.

In the next 25 years our part of the world is going to experience great change, particularly in dealing with the consequences of the huge numbers of human beings who will be living in Asian countries and Asian cities. They will need all the skills in acquiring knowledge to meet a problem, and applying that knowledge in a way that provides a solution. Australia and Australians will have a major role to play. This is the next challenge. I'm sure you will be equal to it.