

## La Trobe University Graduation, 23 October 2009

### Occasional address by Professor Belinda Probert, Deputy Vice-Chancellor

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Graduation ceremonies are to universities what birthday are to most of us: - they come round with relentless regularity, there are unchanging and timeless elements; and those of us who have too many of them begin to feel increasingly ancient. I graduated around the same time as the Founding Cohort sitting down the front here.

At graduations, academics continue to wear their increasingly unfashionable and ill understood regalia; students continue to be young and full of promise; parents beam and babies cry. For those of us left behind as each wave of students leaves, the continuities can seem overwhelming .

But this ceremony is for this particular graduating group of students – students who are leaving us to develop their careers, their interests, their enthusiasms and their causes, their lives in a world where nothing looks stable, let alone timeless; where uncertainty and change define our experiences much more than tradition and continuity. Indeed some of you may feel that the future of this planet as we know it is endangered – through climate change; or that people’s lives are increasingly unsafe because of the fractured nature of relations between different cultures and values. The confident claims being made in recent decades about the ‘end of ideology’ or even the ‘end of history’ now look ludicrous. Rising affluence and the end of the cold war have not reduced our capacity and willingness to fight over ideas, culture, religion and beliefs.

So what can one say with certainty on such an occasion? (I checked with my children who both graduated from university within the last few years and their only advice was ‘Keep it brief – they will have heard it all before....’). I’ve chosen to say something about what I hope you may have learned here that might be of use in this complex world, but about which you may not have thought very much. And since this is a university you will have to forgive me for wanting to talk about some research.

You will all, I hope, have filled in the survey known as the Course Experience Questionnaire which is administered across all Universities and used to provide evidence to the Government of how well we have taught you. Sadly this instrument is focussed rather too much on student satisfaction with their teaching at the point of leaving the University. It is not a good way to tell whether what you have learned is in fact really useful. And when we ask industry representatives who sit on our advisory or accreditation boards we often get the views of elderly professionals who may be increasingly out of touch.

Important research has, however, been undertaken to try and identify those graduate capabilities which graduates, who are 3 to 5 years out in the workplace, and their supervisors, agree are the most important ones. The research has focussed on graduates from programs as diverse as engineering and nursing – and I think you will see the relevance to Humanities and social science and education graduates. If you don’t you can complain to me over refreshments afterwards.

The project surveys and interviews graduates in a range of occupations who were seen as high performers by their employers – the graduates seen to be making a difference compared to their peers. These graduates and their supervisors were interviewed to identify the capabilities that differentiated them.

They were given five different categories of capability with lots of sub-headings to choose between – and asked to rate them in terms of importance. The categories were:

1. Personal emotional intelligence (eg being able to remain calm under pressure; perseverance; self-knowledge of strengths and weaknesses)
2. Interpersonal emotional intelligence (eg willingness to listen to others before making a decision; being able to motivate others; working in a team constructively)
3. Intellectual capability (eg working out what is important as opposed to what isn't; the ability to set and adjust priorities; seeing patterns in complex situations; knowing there is rarely a fixed set of steps for solving problems )
4. Profession specific skills and knowledge (eg being up to date with technical expertise required)
5. Generic skills and knowledge (eg IT skills, making presentations; project management).

### **So what are the really important capabilities?**

Even in the most technically specific occupations – such as engineering and nursing, the most highly ranked capabilities were from the heading 'Interpersonal or social Emotional Intelligence'. And since I am not addressing a hall full of engineers and their parents I can say that for many the term 'emotionally intelligent engineer' would be an oxymoron – a contradiction in terms (I am thinking more, paper darts in lecture theatres, practical jokes and extreme masculinity). On more than one occasion, when having a warm exchange with our Executive Director of Buildings and Infrastructure, he has tried to defuse the conflict by reminding me that he is, after all, an engineer – drawing attention to his extremely linear approach to some things!

These interpersonal emotional skills were linked to a number of personal emotional skills and the most important of these were:

- a willingness to face and learn from errors and listen openly to feedback;
- having an understanding of one's strengths and limitations;
- being able to remain calm under pressure or when things go wrong;
- a willingness to persevere when things are not working out as anticipated; and
- being willing to take responsibility for projects, however they turn out.;
- and for nurses, not surprisingly, 'the ability to empathise and work productively with people from a wide range of backgrounds'; and 'a willingness to listen to different points of view before coming to a decision;
- being able to develop and use networks of colleagues to help me solve key workplace problems.

### **Next the participants identified some key intellectual abilities:**

- Being able to set and justify priorities;
- knowing there is never a fixed set of steps for solving workplace problems or carrying out a project;
- for nurses, ability to use previous experience to figure out what is going on when a current situation takes an unexpected turn;
- being able to set and justify priorities.

## CONCLUSION

So what successful graduates do NOT need is a linear way of thinking – their thinking needs to be contingent, and able to deal with the unexpected or unfamiliar. This is not to ignore the importance of technical expertise – without that we will hesitate to walk under a bridge or allow someone to sew up a wound. But without the other emotional capabilities this technical expertise will often not be used effectively – indeed the graduate may not know how to use it. What the study shows is the overwhelming importance of graduates being able to combine emotional intelligence with intellectual capabilities such as being able to set and justify priorities.

This is all very well, you may say – but isn't my mother (or my chromosomes) to blame for my level of emotional intelligence? Surely it can't be taught at University? Well, yes – the capabilities we call emotional intelligence CAN be learned. Which will be a relief to many parents. It may not be amenable to traditional subject based teaching – and some of you may indeed wonder about the qualification of some of your teachers on the subject of emotional intelligence.

We are in the process of reviewing our principles of curriculum design to place much greater emphasis on these kinds of skills, and the creation of opportunities for students to develop them.

But where I hope you have in fact learned a great deal (even if unconsciously) is simply by being part of La Trobe's community – on whichever campus that might have been. We know that our students do feel part of a community, they spend more time on our campuses than students at other universities. This is why we talk a lot about student engagement, student enrichment, the student experience more generally – you can learn a lot from high level university sport or drama; from being involved in student politics (though that doesn't necessarily encourage the listening to other points of view...).

And if you spent any time at all in the Agora you have probably learned more than you realise. I hope you will take away the memory that it is possible for an incredibly culturally diverse group of people to feel like a community. NOT because everyone has the same values, or the same ideas – but because at a university we are devoted to creating and developing OPEN MINDS, encouraging non-conformity, insisting on free speech, rational argument and evidence.

So if you spent enough time in the Agora, the Eagle Bar, the Union, the Sporting Fields, clubs and societies, you may well have learned some of the most important things which will help you succeed in the coming years. And these will also be some of the capabilities that we as a society need if we are to tackle the large and complex problems which we face – in a world that is full of change and uncertainty.

And if not, you can always blame your mother or your chromosomes...

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## References

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